Transcript

Intro: 00:00:00
Welcome to the Research Culture Uncovered podcast, where in every episode, we explore what is research culture and what should it be. You'll hear thoughts and opinions from a range of contributors to help you change research culture into what you want it to be.

Ged Hall: 00:00:23
Hi, this is Ged Hall. For those of you who don't know me yet, I'm an Academic Development Consultant at the University of Leeds, where my specialism is research impact.

And that's what I tend to produce for the podcast. Uh, all of the episodes I do have that theme, uh, and they go into a playlist. So if you're interested in that, uh, have a look in the show notes for the playlist. All the other shown, uh, playlists are there as well too. Um, in my very first episode for the podcast, I explored the effect of research impact has had on research culture.

And I was lucky enough to be joined in that episode by the fantastic Richard, Professor Richard Holliman, or Rick as he prefers to be known, uh, from the Open University in the UK, where Rick is Professor of Engaged Research. And at the time. He was advertising a possible PhD project called, What is the impact of the UK's research impact agenda?

Now, thankfully, that project got through the Open University selection process. So today I'm joined by the successful applicant, Liz Danner. Liz has been in the research impact game for over a decade because she's a research public engagement professional who's worked at Imperial College and Queen Mary.

University, both in London and Oxford University's Gardens, Libraries, and Museums. I'm really excited to have Liz with us today to check out how her PhD is going and what she's discovered to date. So Liz, welcome to the Research Culture Uncovered podcast.

Liz Danner: 00:01:58
Well, thank you for having me. It's great to be here on the podcast and to kind of catch up on how things have progressed since you talked to Rick?

Ged Hall: 00:02:05
Yeah, yeah, it was, uh, it was a brilliant conversation with Rick and, uh, although, I guess some of our listeners might think, God, they wandered on for a bit, two old blokes having a natter together. Um, so, uh, before we kind of dive into the detail, I wonder if you could give our listeners, uh, an overview of the project and maybe some of the, um, motivations, you know, the reasons why you wanted to do it in the first place.

Liz Danner: 00:01:58
Sure. I mean, I was really intrigued by the project itself when I saw that listed. Uh, at the time I had been working in engagement for quite some time and doing a lot of training and development and sort of supporting researchers on that journey to being engaged and impactful. So when I saw kind of the questions and that it was really framed as more of a look back on kind of where we are now.
with the research engagement and impact agenda. I thought it was really interesting. And the more that I read about the project and kind of the different supervisors as well, the way that it brings together lots of different backgrounds. So we have, uh, Richard Holliman, who is a Professor of Engaged Research.

We have Tony Gladding, who does environmental research. So we have, um, insights from Dr. Betul Khalil, who's an impact specialist, uh, as well as Ann Grand, who's now based over at the NCCPE. So there's lots of kind of different. Aspects of that kind of broader system coming to play into the project. So that was really exciting.

Uh, and within that, I've now had some time to explore or I might want to go because it's quite a brave topic and I'm really looking more at professional development around impact. So how can we actually support people in that journey to develop their skills, to have that practice, uh, to eventually have those fantastic four star.

Il gearing up towards, uh, in: 2029
exploring institutional and individual priorities, practices, and professional development." So hopefully having a look at the big system and how different organisations are approaching it, but also how people are navigating that space too.

Ged Hall: 00:04:27
Brilliant. And just for, um, just for listeners out there, could you tell them what NCCPE stands for?

Liz Danner: 00:04:34
Oh, sure. Sorry. Forgot to gloss that one. It's the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement. They're based out of Bristol and have been really leading on how we actually do public engagement across the sector since around 2008.

Ged Hall: 00:04:49
So, um, in terms of those kind of research questions, so it's great to hear the kind of, um, change in the, in the working title.

Um, so just, so just interestingly, I wonder if you could take us through what the kind of, um, You know, your current draft research questions and how you're looking to explore those and I nearly always ask this of any, uh, any active researcher, what do you actually hope the impact will be?

Liz Danner: 00:05:16
Sure. So I would say that I'm kind of aiming for a cascading impact model.

With the aim of being able to co develop some actionable recommendations and towards the end of the project, I'm guessing more of my third year, but really looking at what we can do now, based on the findings, how we can actually support people within their impact and engagement. And that would hopefully change kind of how research culture is supporting people within universities.

Which would then enable universities to provide more and better engagement and research impacts. In the future, and so on the questions themselves are really looking at how. Universities are prioritising engagement and impact processes and training and that career progression. Over time, so reflecting back from around the introduction of the 1st REF.

Around: 2010
So kind of pulling apart the, uh, the organisational aspects as well as the individual aspects to see how that actually fits into what people really do on the ground.

**Ged Hall: 00:06:44**
So Liz, you've got your, your research questions and you told us about those, but what, what's the methodology? Go on, dive in and be a researcher nerd.

**Liz Danner: 00:06:54**
Yeah, so it's been, I was thinking a little bit about how to triangulate my approach so that I can get different aspects of what's happening and being kind of having a background in much more desktop based research, I immediately kind of reached for the documents. So I'm looking at. Actually, uh, pulling together those, hopefully, uh, three ish different case studies to get different types of university, and then comparing how those, how each of those three universities really evolved in their understanding and application of engagement and impact over time.

So within that, I kind of started with really understanding the landscape of UK universities and kind of how that history developed, how I might begin to kind of categorise them to get a nice spread of sort of location and age and how intense it is. With the idea being that those that are more research intensive will probably spend more time thinking about impact because it's so closely tied into research funding proposals.

**lic Engagement, going back to: 2008**
So, how different funding schemes might have actually been applied within those universities will be another kind of question that I'll dig out over time. But once I kind of had an idea of those different types of universities, then really diving into strategy documents and. What they have on paper, what they plan to do, what the priorities are, uh, and hopefully diving more into those really more detailed action plans.

So whatever I can kind of find publicly available and hopefully digging out some of those KPIs, so key performance indicators. To understand actually how they're measuring, you know, if they've done what they said they were going to do, um, and all of that is just kind of what people say on paper, and I completely understand that may not be the same as what's on the ground, because understandably, when you're writing a copy, it's a little bit gloss, it's a little bit shinier than maybe the day to day, uh, so I'm also looking to actually talk to people and to interview, uh, University staff from both professional services side of things.

So impact managers, public engagement professionals, um, administration staff that are supporting creating those impact case studies and also leading those engagement activities on the ground and kind of upskilling staff, but also the researchers themselves. So talking to research staff. research students, uh, potentially sort of heads of department that have that strategic overview of how actually everything fits together to see, you know, what's really happening.

So, from a day to day basis, how does their job actually work? How does impact benefit into what they do? Uh, but also possibly understanding how people have shaped their careers. And how does this really fit into your motivation to work within university to work within research? And how do you kind of navigate those different choices to take this training or that training?

How it's actually rewarded within your institution? Did you have to change institutions to be actually get somebody to recognise what you're doing? All of those kind of questions. And clearly, I have a lot of questions in my head, and I'm still kind of in the process of really focusing them down and figuring out.
Kind of the overall direction where that’s going to go, but that’s kind of the feeling I have in terms of really understanding what works and that personal experience as well. In terms of how people kind of shape what they do, and hopefully by understanding, you know, where people are now to be able to then put forward better recommendations of what we can do collectively moving forward.

**Ged Hall: 00:11:20**
Yeah. Brilliant. And, and it, because of that kind of move towards how it’s, um, how the sector is supporting people and how individual organisations within the sector are supporting people, it’s, it sounds like it’ll be a lot of actionable, um, recommendations for me personally. So yeah, really looking forward to that.

It feels like almost a PhD has been written to really help my job.

**Liz Danner: 00:11:46**
Well, hopefully, I mean, that’s the aim for it to be quite practical.

**Ged Hall: 00:11:50**
Yeah, that’s fantastic. Now, um, I kind of came into, um, the researcher developer world, um, sort of helping, helping postgraduate researchers. So, um, and I, Years and years ago, I met my, uh, one of my co hosts on, on the podcast, Tony Bromley.

So he’d be really disappointed if I didn't ask this question, but, uh, how are you finding the PhD process so far? And, and don’t worry, Rick and all your other supervisors aren't listening at the moment. I'll tell them to, to hold their ears, uh, ears closed.

**Liz Danner: 00:12:25**
Yeah. I mean, it’s been, it’s been a big change. I would say more than I expected moving from being on the professional services side, supporting people to actually doing. The research myself, and it has made me so much more empathetic to the pressures that I think in academics and, uh, research students are under. Uh, so it’s definitely given me so much better perspective on what that really looks like. And the best advice that I've gotten so far has been from Helen Bowes-Catton, who's one of, delivers a lot of training within the Graduate School.

And during the introduction, uh, her advice was not to compare your insides to other people's outsides. Basically recognising that there’s going to be lots of ups and downs within your research, and that there will be times when it’s very exciting. And, you know, like for me, I found like the resource that I was trying to find, or, oh look, I found this documentation.

This is great. And then you suddenly realise, oh, wait, this has led me to five more documents I need to go find. So it's a lot of kind of, yeah, it's much more variable, I guess, that I might have expected in that way. Uh, but still really exciting to be doing something completely new.

**Ged Hall: 00:13:37**
Yeah, absolutely. You know, that, uh, that ups and downs took me back to one of my, uh, one of my key ups.

So. I mean, I was an experimentalist and, uh, so trying to get a signal from a, from a laser based experiment. So I've been working on the experiment for about six months. So I was kind of six
months into my PhD and so far, nothing yet had worked and, uh, it was Friday afternoon and I was kind of going, I just want to go to the pub.

Um, You know, still nothing had worked and then all of a sudden, this shows how old I am, the little pen on the paper trace kind of went and it, and it shot up. I was like, signal, and I shouted at my supervisor. He came running in and he went, Oh, I'm, I'm, I'm an absolute fiend at maximising signal. Just, just watch me and how I do it.

And he got hold of one of, you know, his lasers. So the, he got hold of one of the, the adjustments for the mirrors and he tweaked it and it disappeared. Oh no. And it was like the up and the down instantaneously. And needless to say, in that moment, I hated him. And I never let him touch my experiment ever again.

Yeah. Yeah. So yeah, I just had to get that out there. Probably a bit of therapy going back to my PhD process. Um, so kind of going, going in, in terms of that, in terms of adjusting the PhD process for people going through it so that it is more engaged, which is, you know, kind of zoning in on your, on your projects again.

What could people like me, you know, people in research developer roles do to help and how might we encourage supervisors to also help with that?

Liz Danner: 00:15:45
Definitely. Definitely. And I mean, We, uh, Rick and I, uh, brought this to Engage back in December. We're part of looking at how to support an Engaged PhD journey and looking at kind of the different steps along the way.

And one of the things that I've seen both as a trainer and as a student is really just having somebody who's that advocate for you is so valuable. So someone who understands it, who can help you to identify opportunities as they come up. Uh, and also bring you in to make sure they fit into your research project because, you know, we're all time poor and that way, but really having both that support and that advocacy to make time for that skill development and thinking about how that could fit.

So it might fit into the Researcher Development Framework or the RDF, which is a whole section of engagement, influence and impact. It could fit into your research methods. If you're actually going out and say, talking to people and having them shape your questions or input into your research, or it might just be something that you as a person or as a student want to do.

So, I've definitely had kind of students ask me about that before and it's like, well, think about whether it really fits into your research work. And if it does, great. If not, we all have leave days, so you can always do that as a side hustle as well. If you wanted, you know, it doesn't quite fit into your research now, but it is important for you in the future.

There are ways for making time for it. But just kind of being really realistic about the time commands on both sides that, you know, it does take time to kind of develop those relationships and make that work. So that little note of caution there, I guess.

Ged Hall: 00:17:27
Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Um, now you mentioned, uh, presenting that at Engage, which is the NCCC, uh, how many C's?
Two C's. PE, their annual conference. And, uh, and you, you're presenting about again this year with. Uh, with some latest findings and you'll also be doing one at the European Science Engagement Conference as well in, in Tbilisi in Georgia. So what are you going to be discussing at those, uh, those conferences this summer?

Uh, and how can people stay in the loop with the work as it develops?

Liz Danner: 00:18:03
Yeah. So I'm really excited to be able to present kind of where I'm at so far in my research, uh, both here in the UK and very exciting now in Tbilisi as well. And I'll be kind of giving an overview of where the research is so far. And so a lot of what I've done so far is kind of mapping out the UK landscape. So thinking about the different types of universities that are out there and how that might influence how they actually think about research impact and how it might fit into the work that they do. So I'm looking at kind of those in the red brick category. So Russell Group, very high quality research. d have been formed around the: 1960
But often kind of different focuses. So they might be more of a civic university really embedded in that kind of an aspect of local impact rather than global impact. And so really thinking how those play out within those different types of university, uh, and how that might have changed over time. So kind of looking at each of the different cycles of the Research Excellence Framework in 2014, 2021, and the one we're working towards now in hopefully, 2029.

So we'll see how that goes, but that's the plan at the moment. Um, and also I would say that if you're interested in kind of keeping up with my work, I have information on my Open University profile page, and I'm very happy for people to email me, and I'll link that all in the show notes.

Ged Hall: 00:19:50
So any, any kind of final words that you want to say in terms of, um, you know, things that you found really interesting?

Any, uh, any kind of hope that, that, you know, you wanna thank the supervisors for or anybody else that, at the OU that you've met? Uh, so far, the Open University?

Liz Danner: 00:20:12
Yeah. I mean, I would say like overall it's been really lovely joining the Open University. It's been very welcoming within, uh, my faculty and my department.

And it's been really exciting to get to dive into the different, um, well, really diving into kind of the history of research impact to the UK and how that's changed over time. And it's been super exciting to see how much our understanding of engagement and impact has changed. within that time frame, uh, roughly when I've been actually in the UK myself.

So it's quite exciting to see that change. Uh, and yeah, been really fantastic to work with all my different supervisors. So just to thank everybody again, um, and that I'm being supported by Professor Richard Holliman, Professor Tony Gladding, Dr. Betul Khalil, and Dr. Ann Grant. And, um, I thank them all for all their wonderful support and insights as I'm Shaping my questions and hopefully getting things focused along the way.

Ged Hall: 00:21:15
Yeah, brilliant. And, and kind of final question before I kind of wrap up, um, where, where do you hope you'll be post the PhD? What's, what are your aspirations?
**Liz Danner: 00:21:29**
Sure. I mean, I'm, I'm pretty open, I would say, to where I'm going next. I was keen to do a PhD because it seemed like a really good way to, you know, build my research skills and also to be able to kind of expand more in my teaching and training practice.

So I had the opportunity to support undergraduate students when I was at Imperial College and really loved working with students and really loved kind of building that knowledge and professionalism in terms of teaching practice. And I felt like having the time to kind of do a PhD and build that research base would make me a better teacher.

So I might, you know, go back into lecturing or training in that space, um, or potentially do more research as well. I think I would love a hybrid role if that's available to do a bit of research and a bit of teaching as well, which I know is possibly less common. In the impact engagement space, uh, there's not, I think, as many people that do a bit of both, but it'd be an exciting idea.

**Ged Hall: 00:22:35**
Yeah, one of the, one of the guys that, um, I've collaborated with, we've never actually met in person because he's Australian. Um, so we've, we've, you know, Zoomed and Teamed, if that's the right verb, um, but Wade Kelly. Um, so. I've kind of followed Wade, um, through various social media platforms. And as I said, kind of when the pandemic kicked in, we were in various meetings together, but I just, uh, I know recently he kind of moved to universities, uh, in Australia, and I believe he's now kind of moving into that kind of almost hybrid.

Role that you're talking about. And I did say I wanted to try and get a sense of what his role is. And he did say, you'll have to wait until I've done it for a bit to kind of, to kind of really, really test out what, what it is that I'm doing and how the, how that kind of hybridisation, uh, is really working. So, yeah, so for you, I'm kind of saying watch out for maybe an episode coming, coming in the future. Yeah. So Liz, it's been lovely to catch up and I think we'll, um, you know, as I said, for me, it's a, it's a PhD that kind of speaks directly to my role. So it has, you know, if you were kind of using horrible research language, it's, it feels very applied for me.

So, so yeah, it'll be lovely to kind of catch up again, uh, hear how things are going and maybe even be a case, study, you never know. Um, yeah, making, making that pitch. Um, but if, uh, quick wink, um, but I'll leave you to say goodbye to, to our listeners and to thank them and, uh, yeah, over to you.

**Liz Danner: 00:24:28**
Great. Well, thank you again for having me and look forward to sharing findings as only one together.

**Intro: 00:24:36**
Thanks for listening to the Research Culture Uncovered podcast. Please subscribe so you never miss out on our brand new episodes. And if you're enjoying the discussions, give us some love by dropping a five star rating and written review as it helps other research culturists find us. And please share with a friend and show them how to subscribe.

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