

RELATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE: HOW RESEARCH ENABLERS BUILD CULTURES OF IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

What is new?	As financial pressures intensify and research becomes more complex and interdependent, universities are increasingly prioritising collaborative work within and beyond academia. This shift has revealed a significant gap in co-production and collaboration and a critical need for professional support in identifying stakeholders and developing and facilitating partnerships across disciplines and sectors. This paper addresses that gap by combining an evidence base grounded in academic literature with insights from practice to create a transferable framework for research-enabling staff. The framework provides the tools needed to drive the culture shift essential for universities to navigate complexity, strengthen collaboration, and remain competitive in a rapidly changing landscape.
What was the approach?	This work combines systems thinking, stakeholder theory, and qualitative, practice-based insights. The conceptual framing draws on a literature review of stakeholder theory from business and management, particularly Freeman's foundational research, alongside Meadows' concept of leverage points for systemic change, Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner's systems convening as a leadership practice, Wheatley's work on leadership in complex systems, and the UCL Co-Production Collective model for inclusive stakeholder engagement. The framing is further informed by 33 facilitated conversations conducted in summer 2024 with a diverse cross-section of the UK research ecosystem, including

	technicians, research managers, professional services staff, and others in research-enabling roles. These in-depth discussions explored power, leadership, recognition, and cultural dynamics in collaborative environments and illustrate emergent patterns that informed the theoretical framing and practical examples presented in this paper.
What is the academic impact?	Effective stakeholder engagement for co-production requires a systematic approach underpinned by the often-invisible infrastructure of research enablers. Achieving this frequently requires a culture shift within the institutions in which we operate. Universities therefore need to design and sustain systems that actively facilitate this culture shift. This paper gives evidence, a transferable framework, and applied examples to equip research enablers to participate fully in this structure by providing a framework and embedding co-production principles in theory and practice.
What is the wider impact?	Behind every successful collaboration is an invisible architecture: research enablers who build trust, connect systems, and create the cultural conditions for co-production. This research makes that architecture visible and actionable, driving a culture shift as institutions design and sustain the infrastructure needed to embed collaboration and co-production at scale.
Keywords	Stakeholders, Co-production, Collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative research is now a routine expectation across research policy, impact frameworks, and ethics guidance (e.g. UKRI, 2022; NIHR, 2021). Stakeholder engagement, partnership working, and co-production are widely treated as indicators of research quality, legitimacy, and responsibility. Across these literatures, collaboration is assumed to be relational, ongoing, and situated rather than transactional or episodic (Dewaele, 2021; Bozeman et al., 2015).

What is less well understood is how such expectations are sustained in practice.

Research systems remain organised around career structures, recognition mechanisms, and employment models that assume bounded roles, linear progression, and formal outputs as proxies for contribution. As a result, there is a persistent misalignment between how collaborative research is expected to operate and how the labour that enables it is recognised and supported.

While collaboration is promoted, much of the work that sustains it – relational coordination, translation across institutional logics, informal leadership, and interpretive judgement – remains weakly specified and poorly stabilised. This labour is commonly

categorised as ‘support’ or treated as discretionary, even though research systems depend on it to manage complexity, risk, and inclusion.

This misalignment creates a research integrity problem. Not in the sense of individual misconduct, but in whether research systems are structurally equipped to allocate responsibility, legitimacy, and risk in collaborative work.

This paper advances the argument that the issue cannot be explained by individual skill, professional identity, or organisational culture alone. It is structural. Specifically, it proposes that recognition functions as infrastructure within research systems: a governance mechanism that stabilises contribution, allocates legitimacy, and shapes how responsibility and risk are distributed between institutions and individuals.

The argument is developed through qualitative analysis of research-enabling roles, which offer visibility into how collaborative work is coordinated and maintained in practice. The analysis identifies recurring patterns of relational and interpretive labour that sustain collaboration across projects, teams, and institutional contexts.

The stakeholder, impact, and ethics literatures already establish that relational collaboration is expected within research governance. What this paper adds is an account of how those expectations are enacted in everyday work, and how current recognition arrangements fail to support the labour involved.

This positions the paper not as a critique of stakeholder or impact frameworks, but as an examination of the structural conditions required to sustain the forms of collaboration they already assume and suggests a stakeholder framework that emphasises the expertise of research enabling staff in maintaining successful research collaborations.

METHODS

This paper explores stakeholder theory from literature within business and management studies. We use arguments about this conceptualisation to support a qualitative analysis grounded in practitioner–researcher inquiry within live research environments.

Thirty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with research professionals working across the UK research ecosystem in the summer of 2024. Participants were employed in professional services roles spanning research development, research partnerships, research culture, research operations, knowledge exchange, programme management, research funding, doctoral education and strategic research leadership. They were drawn from a diverse range of organisational settings, including Russell Group and post-1992 universities, independent research organisations, national research partnerships and research funders. Many participants also had extensive experience of interdisciplinary, cross-sector and international collaborations involving industry, government, health services, charities and overseas research partners. This breadth of experience enabled exploration of collaboration across multiple

organisational and institutional contexts, and provided visibility into how collaborative research is coordinated and sustained in practice.

The analysis follows a reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021), focusing on recurring patterns of work rather than predefined role categories or identities. Rather than examining individual perspectives in isolation, the analysis attends to cross-cutting practices that recur across different institutional contexts, project types, and collaboration structures.

The insights presented here are informed not only by interview data but by embedded engagement in research systems, allowing attention to forms of work that are often implicit, relational, and difficult to capture through formal role descriptions.

In addition to the formal interview dataset, interpretation was informed by a wider set of contextual interviews and facilitated conversations with 28 participants, comprising 20 academics, three external stakeholders and five technicians. These conversations provided additional practice-based insight into research collaboration from academic, technical and external partner perspectives. They were used to support interpretation and reflexive sense-making but were not treated as formal analytic data and did not contribute to coding or theme development.

The focus of the analysis is therefore not on how collaboration is defined, but on how it is sustained in practice.

It is the intent of this paper that the framework can be used to support stakeholder mapping and co-production in all areas of collaborative engagement, including beyond academia.

STAKEHOLDER THEORY

'Stakeholder' is defined by an individual's potential for effect or to be affected by an action, and though there may be other, more descriptive terms that could be used, 'stakeholder' is preferred in this instance as it is broad and non-descriptive. Stakeholder theory, as originally theorised by Freeman (2010) in his seminal work, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* (originally published in 1984 and reissued in 2010) led to the classification of stakeholders into categories that allowed businesses to understand how individuals can have influence on firms. As this theory has been developed there have been additions that have expanded this to include how firms respond to influence and what relationships exist between these parties. As such, this theory has focused on two related streams: 1) defining the stakeholder concept; and 2) classifying stakeholders into categories that provide an understanding of individual stakeholder relationships (Rowley, 1997). Here we are referring to how stakeholders are related to the action of research-based interventions in an academic setting in order to co-produce outcomes with a mutual benefit. This paper extends stakeholder theory beyond corporate contexts by applying it to distributed, co-productive research systems, where influence is not centrally held but relationally negotiated across roles.

Stakeholder theory is a traditionally top-down approach to identifying and engaging with stakeholders. Businesses often use normative approaches to stakeholder interactions, but Stuerer (2006) breaks down the slowly diverging stakeholder theories in order to argue that there is a gap that does not allow for these to be appropriated in a non-corporate setting. In the way 'stakeholder' is traditionally theorised, the relationship between business and 'stakeholder' is presented as transactional and to the sole benefit of the business, "the corporate perspective focuses on how corporations deal with stakeholders, the stakeholder perspective analyses how stakeholders try to influence corporations". In each case the outcome of influence is centred around the corporation. This limitation is particularly pronounced in academic settings, where value creation is not owned by a single entity but emerges through collaborative, cross-role contribution. Stuerer offers a third option referred to as the 'conceptual perspective', which looks at how relationships between stakeholders can be driven by concepts such as 'the common good' or 'sustainable development'. It is within this third option that we find how academia can establish itself as a stakeholder engaging business as it relies on reciprocal influence in order to have impact. This conceptual perspective aligns closely with co-production models in research, where legitimacy and impact depend on mutual rather than hierarchical influence.

Some researchers try to define 'stakeholder' acutely in order to discredit stakeholder theory, critiquing the framework identified by Freeman (2010) and attempting to map out alternatives that are more descriptive and foster different approaches to engagement. Miles (2012) found, in an analysis of 435 different definitions from 493 articles, a new definition every 1.13 articles that were published. Though this highlights a contest to the theory, it also suggests that an alternative may never be agreed and therefore no new single term should be sought. Miles argues that the processes of constantly redefining the term and its definition is counterproductive and that attempts at disaggregation only further highlight commonality across all the interpretations (Miles, 2012). Despite the discourse on stakeholder theory more widely across the sector, one thing is understood: 'stakeholder' is a term that has morphed and infiltrated industries beyond those Freeman initially sought to define in 1984. It has become ubiquitous to the language of collaboration and engagement within all industries opening it up to be defined as needed. In this context, definitional flexibility is treated as a strength rather than a limitation, enabling the concept to travel across sectors and support interdisciplinary collaboration.

SYSTEMS OF CO-PRODUCTION AND COLLABORATION

From a systems perspective, stakeholder engagement is not just about naming roles. It is about seeing how influence, trust, and power move across the system. This reframing shifts the focus from static stakeholder identification to dynamic relational processes, which is critical in complex research environments. Research enablers often sit at points of quiet influence. They connect people who would not otherwise work together. Donella Meadows (1999) calls these leverage points: places where a small shift can lead to big change. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2021) describe these people as

systems conveners. This highlights the often under recognised strategic role of research enablers as actors who shape system behaviour rather than simply support it. They bring different voices into the same room and help them find ways to work together. These enablers do more than manage projects. They shape the culture that makes collaboration possible. From a systems perspective, stakeholder engagement is not simply about identifying roles, but about mapping the flows of influence, legitimacy, and trust. Research enablers often sit at key leverage points, integrating and connecting parts of the system that would not otherwise interact (Meadows, 1999; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021).

Stakeholder engagement in the academic setting is essential in impactful collaboration. Whereas in a business setting stakeholders can include organisation or people such as suppliers, customers and employees; research stakeholders are more often focused on the beneficiaries of research and therefore are more open to an integrated co-production of activities that is not likely suitable in the alternative business-customer relationship. Co-creation of research with stakeholders has multiple benefits to address societal issues by involving a wide range of participants not only in the planning of research activities but also in their design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Zingraff-Hamed et al., 2020). To ensure this process can deal with risks such as conflicts of interest, interpersonal relationships, conflicting schedules and expectations it is essential that there is a stakeholder framework of engagement held up throughout the workplace research culture within an organisation.

Spriggs et al. (2019) discuss in their chapter the importance of research administrators (a type of research enabler) in shifting research culture within an institution. This is particularly true in instances where the end goal of research is to have an impact on complex problems. They use the theory of social constructivism to argue the approach to complex problems requires an emphasis on collaboration and communication. They define a complex problem as having no direct correlation between action and consequence, meaning that no one intervention will work in the same way each time, therefore the intervention may not be scalable. This is usually the case in human-centred challenges. This can be applied to collaboration and co-production as each team will approach and benefit from different ways of working together. But collaborative research needs more than structure. It also needs emotional resilience. Working in complex systems can feel confusing and unsteady. Research enablers often help teams stay calm and focused when things are unclear. As Margaret Wheatley (2006) writes, "In organizations, we keep trying to impose control, when what we need is coherence". Enablers create that sense of coherence. They hold the space that lets people stay in motion when the path is not clear. This suggests that effective collaboration is not achieved through increased control, but through the cultivation of shared coherence across actors.

These human-centred activities are what Spriggs et al. (2019) call *open systems* because they rely on human activity interacting with its environment to create a holistic, self-perpetuating system response to the context that results in an outcome larger than the

sum of its parts. Social constructivism is about applying understanding of the viewer within the social context in order to fully appreciate how knowledge can increase the impact of an intervention. Ambiguity and uncertainty arise over time as actors have different views on approach to a problem and views may change over time (though this may be a result of learning) (Spriggs et al., 2019, p76). Simply, humans make things complex as, when simple or complicated problems are placed in a social context, complexity is revealed. To address this in the research-enabling context we need to embrace these complexities. Research enablers can shift research culture within their institutions and support more effective collaborations in ways that researchers themselves may not be equipped to do. This can be through 1) facilitating and sharing knowledge; 2) facilitating collaboration; and 3) adaptive management of the change process. Additionally, shifting research culture requires all research-enabling staff to become aware of the content and meaning of competing approaches to collaboration and science so that they can form a more integrated understanding of how to more effectively facilitate collaboration (Spriggs et al., 2019). These functions position research enablers as key agents of cultural and operational change within research systems.

WHERE DO WE START?

It is important to acknowledge at this point that not all research requires co-production and therefore knowing your academic audience is important. Universities can only do so much to govern how research is done, and it cannot be controlled through directives. The most effective way to influence research, and encourage co-production, is for universities to create and support a system that focuses on facilitating a culture shift. In her article *How do universities' organisational characteristics, management strategies, and culture influence research collaboration? A literature review and research agenda*, Sarah-Rebecca Kienast (2023) explores the depth of literature addressing the topic of research collaboration and influence. She suggests the literature broadly addresses structural measures universities can use to create connections between researchers by putting in place intra-organisational structures that are designed to facilitate cross-disciplinary science. This includes incentive strategies that rely on administrators in promoting and facilitating connections, as well as a funding strategy supported by research enablers to provide pre- and post-award support that focuses on networking and project management.

Creating this structure of support and influence in academic research culture requires top-down, mission-driven, organisational initiatives to create process and strategy behind engagement (Kienast, 2023). Through this, administrators and research enablers drive forward a research culture that values collaboration and stakeholder engagement widely. This reflects a shift from directive to facilitative models of organisational change within research environments. Though this may not filter into the subcultures within a department, there will always be institutional-level systems with which individual researchers can engage, and it is through these researchers that subculture shift eventually takes hold. There will always be early adopters whose research is more

inclined towards collaborative methods, but initial engagement may be a barrier. Enablers, supported by these internal systems, can broker relationship building by developing networks with challenge-driven actors. They can hold databases and contact details of stakeholders and develop tools for researchers to map their own stakeholder requirements.

ANALYTIC PATTERNS: HOW COLLABORATION IS SUSTAINED IN PRACTICE

Analysis of 33 semi-structured interviews with professional services staff working across research-enabling roles within UK higher education institutions identifies a set of recurring patterns of work that sustain collaborative research across contexts. These patterns cut across roles, projects, and institutional settings, and make visible forms of labour that are essential to collaboration but remain weakly recognised within formal structures. Here we highlight four key takeaways from these interviews.

1. Relational coordination as system-sustaining labour

Collaborative research depends on ongoing relational work that maintains trust, alignment, and continuity over time. This includes managing expectations between partners, maintaining communication across organisational boundaries, and responding to shifts in project dynamics.

This work is not episodic but continuous. It often takes place outside formal structures and is rarely captured in project plans or outputs. Yet it is essential for preventing breakdown, maintaining engagement, and enabling collaboration to function under conditions of uncertainty.

2. Informal leadership without authority

A second pattern concerns forms of leadership enacted without formal authority. Individuals in research-enabling roles frequently intervene to stabilise collaborations, reframe problems, or create conditions for trust and alignment. This leadership is enacted through relational judgement, timing, and interpretation rather than positional power. This helps explain why standardised approaches to collaboration often fail in practice, as they do not account for context-dependent interpretation and interaction.

The following vignette illustrates this recurring pattern:

When the collaboration was announced, it appeared well-structured: multiple partners, a shared goal, and strong institutional backing. However, tensions emerged early. Communication gaps, unclear roles, and uneven participation created strain.

A research facilitator, not formally recognised within the leadership structure, identified these dynamics and intervened informally, through conversations, reframing meeting structures, and creating space for alignment. These actions were not visible within formal outputs but were critical in stabilising the collaboration and enabling it to continue.

Such interventions are widely relied upon but remain structurally unrecognised.

3. Translation and interpretive judgement across stakeholder logics

Collaborative research involves navigating multiple institutional, disciplinary, and stakeholder logics (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021). Research-enabling staff frequently act as translators between these contexts, interpreting expectations, aligning priorities, and mediating differences in language, timelines, and values. This work requires interpretive judgement rather than procedural application and often involves anticipating issues before they become visible. It is both cognitive and relational, and central to enabling collaboration across boundaries.

4. Misalignment between contribution and recognition

Across these patterns, a consistent tension emerges between the work that sustains collaboration and the structures through which contribution is recognised. Relational coordination, informal leadership, and translation work are essential to the functioning of collaborative research, yet they are rarely formalised within role definitions, career progression, or evaluation frameworks. As a result, these forms of labour are often treated as discretionary or invisible, even when they are system critical. This misalignment reflects a structural gap between how collaborative research is expected to operate and how research systems are designed to recognise and support contribution.

RECOGNITION AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Taken together, these patterns suggest that collaborative research systems depend on forms of labour that are not adequately stabilised through existing structures. This paper proposes that recognition should be understood not as symbolic reward or end-stage acknowledgement, but as infrastructure: a system-level mechanism that stabilises contribution, allocates legitimacy, and governs how responsibility and risk are distributed. In this sense, recognition functions as a form of governance.

When recognition arrangements align with the realities of collaborative work, they provide continuity, clarity, and shared accountability. When they do not, systems become dependent on informal labour and personal responsibility. Under these conditions, the burden of sustaining collaboration shifts onto individuals. Responsibility for managing complexity, maintaining relationships, and mitigating risk becomes individualised, rather than structurally supported. This has implications not only for workforce sustainability, but for research integrity. If responsibility is assumed but not structurally allocated, systems rely on discretionary effort to maintain ethical and collaborative practice.

While this analysis is grounded in UK-based data, the dynamics it identifies are not specific to a single national context. Contemporary collaboration literature increasingly frames collaboration as relational, processual, and sustained over time (Bozeman et al., 2015; Dewaele, 2021). What the present analysis adds is an account of how that work is held together in practice, and how recognition structures shape its sustainability.

However, the analysis presented here suggests that such tools operate within broader structural conditions. Without alignment between collaborative expectations and recognition systems, the work required to sustain stakeholder relationships continues to rely on informal effort. To support researchers and research enablers in applying co-production principles, stakeholder identification must be understood not only as procedural, but relational. The following pre-mapping framework provides a structure for considering who to involve, when and how, while attending to power, purpose, and inclusion of those supporting this process.

PRE-MAPPING EXERCISE – STAKEHOLDER FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATION

Stakeholder mapping can be a daunting process and identifying stakeholders can be complicated, especially when working through a co-production approach if you have not thought about the three levels of stakeholder engagement. In co-produced research, stakeholders are not only identified but involved from the start, shaping questions, decisions, and ways of working. Mapping is not just about who is in the room, but how they are involved and what kind of relationships will support the work. Figure 1 sets out a brief reference for researchers and research enablers to follow when they are deciding to collaborate.

Stakeholder pre-mapping questionnaire			
	Partners	Participants	Stakeholders
Questions to answer	Who do you need? What expertise is required to have impact	Consider your research methods. Are you extracting data or are you using participatory research methods?	Who will be interested in the research? Do they fall under a previous category?
When to connect	Connect and reach out to partners early-on. Research should be co-developed where possible.	Must connect early on but consider level of involvement. Consider if participant groups have the capacity for engagement at the level you require.	Connection can happen once research is underway or concluded

Figure 1: Stakeholder pre-mapping questionnaire

Level 1 – *partners*. Who will the partners be and what is their stake in the research? This process can be straightforward; researchers may already have contacts within their field with whom they already feel comfortable collaborating, for example. Start with who you know and consider what value or expertise they can bring to the research question, think within and outside your discipline – are there gaps in your knowledge that can only be filled by someone with complementary expertise? Additionally, you may ask yourself, “Are there individuals or groups with lived experience or local knowledge who should be involved in shaping the research question itself?” Could this be an opportunity to share ownership of the project direction, rather than simply invite input at a later stage?

Level 2 – who will the *participants* be? How can you engage with this group and does engagement possibly require you to partner with an organisation or individual who can provide you access to this group? How can you as a researcher ensure that engagement is equitable and fair? This activity may cause you to consider the first level again, as it may highlight areas where you would require more investment from a particular individual or group.

In a co-production context, participants are not only research subjects, but they can also be active contributors to design, delivery, and interpretation. How might you build relationships that support ongoing involvement and reciprocal learning?

Level 3 – *stakeholders*. This level has two sublevels: 1) People who need to be involved at some point in the research either in the planning or in the dissemination phase; and 2) people in the periphery, beneficiaries of your intervention or the outcomes of the research. Consider who will benefit from your research (works for applied and theoretical research) – could be policy makers, educators, businesses, marginalised groups etc. and identify whether their direct involvement is required for impact.

Where appropriate, co-production encourages us to ask whether beneficiaries should be engaged earlier, not only to shape impact but to define what impact looks like. Whose voices are often left out of planning and dissemination, and what would it mean to bring them in?

Stakeholder engagement does not occur in isolation. It is shaped by the broader research environment including institutional incentives, management strategies, and organisational culture. This next section explores how research enablers can influence these conditions to support meaningful, sustainable collaboration.

Institutional partnership and research enablers, facilitators and managers can all help researchers in thinking about and responding to these questions. But there are more, broader questions we should be asking of all categories: Where will the research be taking place? Does your work involve marginalised groups and would your research benefit from lived experience? Consider your dissemination strategy, would the impact of this research be amplified by engaging with a certain person, group or sharing across specific networks or platforms? Research enablers are not only positioned within the institutional structure to help researchers think about and respond to these questions but also to facilitate and broker engagements between academics and potential collaborators as well as provide resources to individuals that they can pull on when establishing relationships.

These questions take on added significance in a co-production approach. They are not only practical but relational. Co-production asks us to move beyond consultation and consider how power, trust, and ownership are shared. Research enablers can support this by helping teams reflect on whose knowledge counts, who is missing, and how inclusive relationships can be built over time. Ultimately, enabling collaboration is not just about process or theory. It's about how we show up in systems, in relationships,

and in complexity. When we value the emotional, intuitive, and strategic intelligence of research enablers, we begin to create cultures where collaboration can truly thrive.

STAKEHOLDER AND IMPACT FRAMEWORKS: EXPECTATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Stakeholder and impact literatures provide a well-established account of what collaborative research is expected to involve (Freeman, 2010; Kienast, 2023). Across these frameworks, collaboration is assumed to be relational, ongoing, and based on reciprocal engagement. Co-production approaches further emphasise shared ownership, distributed authority, and sustained involvement across the research lifecycle (UCL Co-Production Collective, n.d.). These frameworks therefore establish a normative baseline for collaborative research. However, they also imply forms of work that are rarely specified. These structural mechanisms rely on the presence and effectiveness of research enablers to translate strategy into practice.

They assume:

- Ongoing relational coordination;
- Translation across contexts;
- Continuity of engagement over time;
- Distributed responsibility for maintaining relationships.

Yet they provide limited specification of how this work is structurally supported, who is responsible for it, or how it is recognised. This creates a gap between expectation and implementation. The applied stakeholder and co-production framework developed in this paper can be understood as an attempt to make some of this implicit work more visible and actionable. It provides tools for identifying relationships, structuring engagement, and supporting collaboration in practice.

CONCLUSION

By analysing the existing literature and placing it in the context of practice-based research we have attempted to highlight the implications of structural and procedural requirements for research-enabling staff relative to collaboration and stakeholder mapping, identifying their strategic role in research practice, ethics, and impact. This analysis has implications across multiple domains of research systems. For research practice, it highlights that collaboration depends on forms of labour that are often unacknowledged but essential. Making this work visible is a prerequisite for designing systems that can support it. For research ethics and integrity, it raises questions about how responsibility is allocated. If collaborative relationships are ongoing and relational, then ethical responsibility cannot be fully contained within formal procedures or individual roles.

For workforce sustainability, it suggests that current systems rely on individual resilience to sustain collaborative work. This creates risk for individuals and fragility within

systems. Taken together, these implications point to the need to treat recognition as a matter of system design rather than discretionary reward.

When we start to look at the practice of collaboration and co-production, we start to see how the work of research enablers absorbs strain within the academic system by legitimising and creating authority within the processes we develop to maintain continuity. This act is necessary for the ease and development of transformational research but is largely unnoticed within formal research governance and evaluation structures. The case study highlights how these invisible actions, driven by necessity, are often the foundation of why collaborations work, whilst identifying their fragility without the infrastructure created by research enabling staff. The stakeholder framework is an attempt to create a tool that supports systemic process within co-production, which is shareable and can be repurposed within and outside of the academic collaborative research setting, in order to make the work research enablers do to support these systems identifiable and easy to replicate.

Collaborative research is widely recognised as essential to addressing complex challenges. The literature is clear on what such collaboration should involve: ongoing, relational, and ethically-situated engagement across stakeholders. What remains less developed is how research systems support this in practice.

This paper has shown that collaborative research depends on forms of relational and interpretive labour that are essential but weakly recognised within existing structures. The resulting misalignment shifts responsibility and risk onto individuals, undermining both sustainability and integrity. Reframing recognition as infrastructure offers a way of addressing this gap and reinforces the argument that research culture change is enacted through the initiative of research enablers, not solely through formal policy or strategy. It positions recognition as a core mechanism through which contribution is stabilised, legitimacy is allocated, and responsibility is distributed.

If collaborative research is to be taken seriously, then the systems that support it must be designed accordingly.

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Accepting Editor: Craig Aaen-Stockdale | Received: 11 August 2025 | Accepted: 16 June 2026

Cite as: Bryant, H. E., & Kay, A. (2026). Relational Infrastructure: How Research Enablers Build Cultures of Impact. *Journal of Research Management and Administration*, 5(1), 2026072001.

<https://doi.org/10.18552/jorma.v5i1.1351>

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