



MRC Cognition
and Brain
Sciences Unit



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

A T E R M L Y N E W S L E T T E R

Research Culture Digest

Easter Term 2026

Leanne Al-Mrayat, Arina Aladysheva, Rudy Kirchner

IN THIS EDITION

- 01** University Research Culture Celebrations
- 02** RCWLTS, expectations at and of work (Zhang and Burchell)
- 03** Research Culture Festival: Lego, Robot Club, and courageous conversations
- 04** Research culture and grant applications
- 05** Volunteers needed for the December workshop
- 07** Conferences spotlight (ReproducibiliTea and ReBound)

Dear all,

We hope Easter Term has treated you kindly! It has been a busy few months for research culture at the Unit, so for this edition we wanted to share some highlights from the term, celebrate a few colleagues, and flag a handful of opportunities coming up.



CELEBRATION

The Unit's nominees at the University Research Culture Celebration 2026

01

CELEBRATION

University Research Culture Celebration

The University's Research Culture Celebration recognises people nominated by their colleagues for outstanding contributions to research culture. The Unit had a remarkable year, with eight nominees: **Hugo Fleming, Saskia Frisby, Helena Gellersen, Ajay Halai, Lydia Hickman, Tamar Makin, Tammar Truzman, and Rebecca Williams**. Congratulations to all of them and thank you to the colleagues who took the time to put their names forward!

Half of our nominees made it to the evening itself, held in the company of colleagues from across the University. At Kettle's Yard, the celebration gave nominees a chance to connect, with the calm gallery spaces open to enjoy through the evening. Rebecca felt the venue created a welcoming space that fit the theme perfectly.

The most memorable part, she said, was how the most-nominated people opened their speeches. Many began by saying they "**were not experts**," then described the different things they had tried to build a healthier culture in their teams. To Rebecca, that was the essence of research culture, sharing ideas and strategies that worked rather than handing down instructions.

Asked what an evening like this signifies, she called it a **positive step**. Recognising the people and teams who put time and money into research culture, and seeing that recognition at a university level, suggests the work is being treated as something that matters. Beyond the recognition, celebrations like these give people a chance to exchange ideas and highlight the areas still worth working on.

02

WORK-LIFE-TALK SERIES

Expectations

Most disagreements at work aren't really disagreements. They're two people who expected different things and never said so. And some expectations nobody set at all, like the five-day work week, which (it seems) we've simply inherited. This term's session took on both kinds, with a chemist and a sociologist, respectively.

Dr Jenny Zhang (Chemistry) made the case for writing expectations down. A mutual expectations document sets out what a supervisor and a researcher can each expect of the other, and her argument was that most group problems come from misalignment rather than from conflict. Her line of the day: common sense is not common, and fairness does not mean the same thing to all. Therefore, lay it out.

Professor Brendan Burchell (Sociology) asked why the five-day work week feels inevitable, given that it is a two century old invention never designed around evidence. He presented a two-year trial at South Cambridgeshire District Council in which cutting hours by a fifth resulted in less procrastination, 25% rise in hourly productivity, and an increase in all wellbeing metrics. Academia is the trickier case, however, since nobody wants to be the only person in a competitive field working less, which made for a fantastic discussion at the end.

Both talks are written up in full, with the recording, on our [webpage](#). Our thanks to Jenny and Brendan!



RCWLTS

Colleagues from across the University at this term's events

03

FESTIVAL

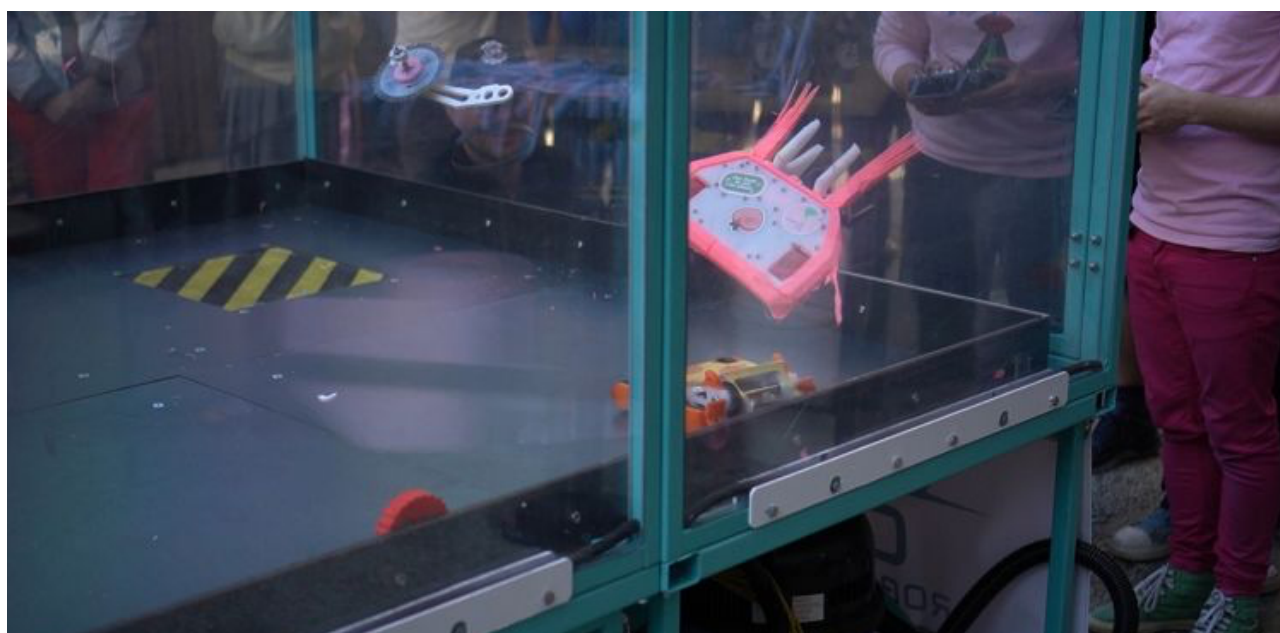
Three blogs from the Research Culture Festival

Several of us went along to this year's programme of research culture events. It was broad enough that almost no two of us saw the same thing, which turned out to be useful. Three write-ups are now on our webpage:

The serious business of playing with Lego, by Dr Rebecca Williams. Asked to build a model of toxic research culture, Rebecca produced a small prison-like cell with one figure in the middle and eyes pointing everywhere except at each other. Her point is that she would never have said it that plainly in a seminar. Because everyone was looking at the Lego rather than at her, she felt safely decentred enough to be honest. Full sessions are now free to labs across the University.

Robot Club, by Rudy Kirchner. Good research culture, it turns out, can look like a 1.5kg robot limping across an arena while half the department cheers. DeuxBrie, built by Alastair Robinson and Lewis Reeves, took the title. But the best part of the day happened around the arena, where professors, postdocs, students, and professional services staff who normally just nod in the corridor spent an afternoon building things together. Collaboration and belonging are hard to define, but for one afternoon here you could simply watch them happen.

Courageous peer-to-peer conversations, by Dr Rebecca Williams. Two actors played out the same difficult conversation between colleagues three times over. The first attempt died on a non-apology of the "I'm sorry you felt that way" variety, the second survived the apology and then collapsed into blame, and the third worked because both people stopped defending and started listening. Watching exactly where the first two went wrong was more instructive than any amount of general advice about communication.



FESTIVAL

Semi-finals of the Robot club during the Research Culture festival

04

RESOURCE

Research culture and grant applications

The University's Research Culture Team, working with the Research Strategy Office, has produced a guide to assist with writing research culture sections of grant applications. It is short, concrete, and shows what a good answer looks like. You can find it [here](#).

05 · OPPORTUNITY

Volunteers needed

Communication and Research Culture Workshop · 8th and 9th of December 2026

Looking for a way to get more involved with research culture at the Unit? We are organising the Communication and Research Culture Workshop, taking place on the 8th and 9th of December. This University-wide event will bring together colleagues from all career stages and departments to connect, share ideas, and explore what *actually* improves research culture in practice.

We are looking for volunteers to help bring it to life. If you would like to be involved, email the workshop team at rcworkshop@mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk.

06

READING

ECR job applications, and creative non-fiction

The Action Research on Research Culture team (ARRC), a regular guest in this digest, has published a substantial Easter update. Three things in it might stand out for people in our unit.

[A Narrative CV Guidance Resource](#) for STEM postdocs, with worked examples. More useful than it sounds if you have ever stared at that section of an application wondering what tone to take.

A [preprint](#) asking whether academic redeployment for early career researchers is actually feasible, which appears to be the first attempt to test the idea empirically rather than simply assert it.

And a [mixed-methods study](#) of how ECRs weigh intrinsic motivation against job security, salary, and where they are expected to live. The findings will not astonish anyone currently on a fixed-term contract, but it helps to have them written down.

For something lighter, a newly published [collection](#) of creative non-fiction offers a window into the professional lives of academics at Cambridge. Poetry, drama, short stories, and the occasional cry for help. Highly recommended.



READING

From the Action Research on Research Culture Easter update

07

DIARY

Conference spotlight

25 SEPTEMBER
2026

ONLINE

Spilling the ReproducibiliTea: A Decade On & Decades Ahead

ReproducibiliTea, the journal-club network founded by our own Prof. Amy Orben, is hosting its first international conference. Speakers include Monya Baker, author of the landmark Nature survey on reproducibility, alongside people from Retraction Watch, Octopus, and the African Reproducibility Network. The talks are aimed squarely at ECRs and cover plenty of ground relevant to research culture. We are also delighted that Arina Aladysheva, an MPhil student at the CBU and a member of the WGRC, is one of the organisers. Grab your favourite cup and register [here](#).

12-13 OCTOBER
2026

BERLIN

ReBound: Research Culture Beyond Boundaries

Looking a little further ahead, registration is now open for ReBound, co-organised by ARRC with the Berlin University Alliance, the Einstein Foundation Berlin, and CWTS Leiden. It brings researchers together with research governance and policy actors to identify practical ways of strengthening research culture. [Register here](#).

STAYING IN TOUCH

For news from the rest of the University, the central Research Culture Team (Liz, Kate, and Marie) can be reached at researchculture@admin.cam.ac.uk. **Congratulations again to everyone named above and thank you to everyone who has kept research culture going this term!**

Leanne, Arina & Rudy · on behalf of the Working Group on Research Culture