How can a strong environment foster better research? Reflections on the 60th anniversary of the University of Essex•

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Abstract
The 60th anniversary of the Department of Government at the University of Essex provides an opportunity to reflect on its many achievements and why these have been possible. This article argues that research excellence is a collective outcome that cannot be reduced to individuals. Research institutions often tend to be successful precisely because they manage to create productive environments, which can make individual scholars better and create synergies. The thesis is backed up by examples from the history of the department and more general research on the role of environments for research. The article considers possible insights with regards to present challenges to academic institutions, why productive environments can be difficult to maintain, and how we can try to nurture them.

Keywords: Research; productivity; workplace; community

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Introduction

2024 is the 60th anniversary of the University of Essex and its Department of Government. This provides an opportunity to reflect on the many achievements that have occurred during the first 60 years and why these have been possible. This can in turn also provide insights that may help respond to the many challenges academic units and institutions face at the present and concerns over the future of universities and higher education. The core message I want to advance is that research excellence is very much a collective outcome that cannot be reduced to individual inputs. Institutions that are successful in research often tend to be successful precisely because they manage to create productive research environments. A strong and productive environment is a collective good; it can make individual scholars better and greatly improve the resulting research. In this sense, a community of scholars is something more than just a collection of scholars, or just the sum of the original inputs or parts. I will focus primarily on the Department of Government at Essex and my own field of political science here, as this is what I know best and can claim some experience and expertise on. However, I think this is a general message with important wider lessons about the importance of productive and innovative research institutions, why they can be difficult to maintain, as well as how we can try to nurture them.

Government at Essex: An impressive list of achievements

You may argue that research excellence is somewhat subjective and potentially in the eye of the beholder. However, I do not think the claim that the Department of Government at Essex is renowned for excellence can be dismissed as just self-adoration. It is backed up by a number of external assessment indicators. First, the department has placed on top for politics and international relations in all national research assessment exercises in the UK from the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE) from 1992 to 2008 through the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014. It was top second in research in REF 2021. Second, if we look at citations by other researchers, then it is also clear that research in the department has high impact and visibility. John Ioannidis and his collaborators have collected a list from existing citation data to identify the 100,000 most cited scientists or scholars in the top 2% in their sub-field (see Ioannidis et al. 2019; Ioannidis 2023). Not counting people that have left the University of Essex, there are 7 current or emeritus department members in the lifetime citations list, and 10 on the list of citations in the most recent

year, 2022, which is an easier threshold to meet for younger scholars. Third, high ranks in common lists such as the Shanghai and QS subject rankings attest to the global visibility and prominence of the department. And last but not least, the Department's impact in the field was recognized by the Regius Professorship in Political Science awarded to the University of Essex 2013 by Queen Elizabeth, which is described by the palace as a "rare and prestigious award bestowed by the Sovereign to recognise exceptionally high quality research at an institution".[1] By any reasonable criteria, the Department of Government at Essex has many achievements to be proud of.

New institutions and uphill battles

These achievements are all the more remarkable since it is generally very difficult to start new academic institutions or units. A new institution will tend to have many things working against it and face an uphill battle to survive or catch up with others. For example, a new institution will lack established experience, strong ties to stakeholders, or a reputation to draw on. It cannot offer a strong brand name, historic buildings, or medieval traditions and fanfare.

You may argue that it perhaps is difficult for universities to completely go under in the UK, save for clear causes of what is considered degree fraud.[2] However, there are many examples of institutions failing elsewhere. Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen has argued that half of all colleges in the US will fail or go bankrupt in the next 10 years, and this prediction was made before the COVID-19 pandemic arguably exacerbated challenges.[3]

These challenges to setting up a new institution are to some extent borne out if we look at a list of the initial departments at University of Essex. Many departments present at the founding such as Chemistry and Physics no longer exist, even if some elements may continue to exist in other units

[1] See https://www.royal.uk/queen-awards-regius-professorships.
[2] See, e.g., https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/feb/18/uk-degree-85-fake-university-websites-taken-down-in-five-years.
[3] See, e.g., https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelhorn/2018/12/13/will-half-of-all-colleges-really-close-in-the-next-decade/. For an update on the prediction, see https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelhorn/2024/08/13/will-25-percent-of-colleges-consolidate-an-update-on-a-prediction/.

or groupings at the institution. Essex has become renowned for strengths in Government/Political Science and the social sciences more generally. There may well be important differences between the natural and social sciences, such as the costs of running labs and possibly the need for critical mass in large collaborations in the former. But this does not change the fact that the emergence of excellence in social science at Essex was clearly not something inevitable or entirely predictable – it was an improbably outcome, and it happened against odds clearly stacked against it.

Successful new institutions: some possible explanations that do not seem to apply

Some possible explanations why new institutions can succeed are clearly not applicable for the Department of Government or the University of Essex. Some institutions have benefitted from generous benefactors - in the case of railroad and canal tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt even giving his name to a university.[4] Some institutions may be blessed with a spectacular location, as my previous employer University of California San Diego (UCSD), founded just a few years earlier than Essex in 1960.[5] It is easier to get people to join a new University of California campus by the shores of the Pacific Ocean than an institution sited somewhere in the smog East of Los Angeles. Some upstarting institutions may offer exceptional pay and resources. I would be very surprised if this was the case for Essex at the founding, and public data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency do not bear out any pay premium at the present compared to other academic institutions.[6]

The role of great individuals is an important often cited explanation for the success of a new institution. I do not wish to downplay the work of the founding professor of Government at Essex Jean Blondel in any way. He was clearly an important entrepreneur and invested much personal effort in building the department.[7]

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[4] https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03177-0

[5] However, UCSD was set up in close connection with the much older Scrips Institution of Oceanography, affiliated with the University of California system since 1912. See https://scripps.ucsd.edu/about/history.

[6] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/.

[7] This is borne out by statements by former colleagues, for example, in the obituary written by Ivor Crewe in *The Guardian* (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jan/18/jean-blondel-obituary) and the earlier retrospective by Ian Budge (2006).

However, if it was primarily a case that recruiting special people to the Department of Government at Essex was the key pathway to excellence, then one would expect that the performance of the department also could be clearly attributed to attracting great and accomplished individuals to come to Essex. This is not really born out if we look at many plausible measures of achievement and career trajectories. Take for example the Ioannidis et al. list of the most cited researchers globally we saw above. Most of the people from the Department of Government Essex included on this list are indeed not prominent external recruits, or at least not individuals who were clearly globally prominent at the time when recruited. Many are what we may call "internal products", including some people who have spent most of their career at Essex, first as doctoral students and then later as staff, such as the first Regius Professor of Political Science David Sanders. Many others are individuals who were recruited to Essex when still relatively junior and not so distinguished scholars. I would place myself in this category when I arrived at Essex as an untenured 34-year old scholar in 2005.

When we rule out some of the obvious explanations for outcomes, we often end up with what historian Niall Ferguson (2011) call "secret sauce explanations" of complex things such as the rise of Western civilization. That is, there must be something in the water or a "secret sauce" that can account for the observed variation in outcomes. Fergusson's aim is not to promote secret sauce type explanations per se but rather to demystify, and he argues that Western Civilization can be traced back to six identifiable "killer apps".

With regards to why the Department of Government at Essex has done well despite odds stacked against it we can in my view also do more to examine causes and origins based on what we can observe and what we know from existing research on scientific research, innovation, and productivity. I will argue that a key to success here is really a single killer app, quite simply how a productive research environment at an institution can make otherwise perhaps ordinary individuals better researchers and generate important synergies.[8]

[8] To be clear, my argument here is that strong research environments can help foster research productivity, and that the experiences from Essex can help illustrate more general mechanisms

Stronger institutions and better individuals - mechanisms

To make a convincing claim that a productive environment can make individuals better scholars and have synergetic effects I need to point to some actual mechanisms and more detailed illustrations of how this happens. I can gain some initial appreciation of the mechanisms through introspection on my own career. I have definitely learned a tremendous amount from my experience working in larger research groups and productive environments. As a PhD student, I had the great fortunate to work in an interdisciplinary Program on Political and Economic Change at the Institute of Behavior Science at the University of Colorado. I have also learned much from colleagues and students as an academic staff member at UCSD and Essex. Political Scientist Gary King (2006: 121) at Harvard University has a very perceptive statement that I think hints at important mechanisms on the importance of colleagues and the workplace, noting that "academics work in institutions not because they like their colleagues so much, but because their work is better as a result."[9] As academics, we enjoy going to the office when we hear stimulating things and learn new things from interactions with our colleagues. And our research becomes better when we are inspired by others and our colleagues ask us probing and challenging questions. We may not enjoy it all the time, or always agree with their concerns or criticisms, but forcing us to defend our approaches better and clarifying the basis for our conclusions ultimately leads to better research. And research is rarely an individual activity. Indeed, we can often do much better research when we collaborate with others and different people can bring not just more time but also different skills to a project.

I have in many ways learned this the hard way myself. I spent two years in my first job at the University of Glasgow as a lecturer in social science methodology, unaffiliated with any

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whereby productive environments increase the quality of research outputs. I do not seek to deny that other issues can also influence research productivity, including funding, but my focus here is to understand the specific role of research environments. Although the discussion here is inspired by experiences from the Department of Government at the University of Essex, the argument presented is more general, and I also consider a range of broader evidence.

[9] Gary King gave the first external Regius Lecture in Political Science at the University of Essex in 2015 (see https://www1.essex.ac.uk/news/event.aspx?e_id=9352).

department, directly under the social sciences graduate school. I had very limited teaching obligations and a great deal of time to devote to my own research, which is something typically valued by academics. However, I also lacked strong social and intellectual ties at the workplace. This in turn motivated me to move, no matter how much I liked having a low teaching load and living in Glasgow itself.

Indeed, I explicitly noted the importance of colleagues and collaborators when I gave my first Regius Lecture in Political Science in 2018 after taking up the post. I said that "if I have accomplished anything as a political scientist, then this is also to a large extent because I have been fortunate to have excellent collaborators", and I invoked the famous quote from Isaac Newton that if he had seen further than others in his work then it was by "standing on the shoulders of giants" (Gleditsch 2019: 99).[10] But the need for colleagues is not limited to young scholars, and everybody can always learn something from others. As I get older, I may have useful past experience that I can bring to a research project. But in equilibrium, early career researchers should also have many new skills and insights that older people like myself may not have, or at least not have a comparative advantage in. As such, my work can be better from interacting with other colleagues with different strengths and skills and being continuously challenged.

The importance of interactions at the institution for the success of the Department of Government University of Essex is brought out clearly in my colleague Ian Budge (2006: 313)'s retrospective on Jean Blondel:

> In six years, the Department went from being a one-man initiative to an institution grouping teachers and researchers who stood in the first rank internationally. The consolidation enabled the Department to survive and indeed flourish in spite of a series of misfortunes that hit the University from the mid 1960s. As a result of its strong institutional basis and collective morale the Department not only survived but consolidated its teaching and research during these years.

[10] This original quote appears in Newton's 1675 letter to Robert Hooke, available in digital form at https://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/objects/9792.

> During the years from 1964 to 1970, [Blondel] practically lived in the Department. He visited every office daily to enquire what the colleague was doing; he telephoned and visited at the weekends with whatever was uppermost in his mind, capitalising when it suited him on the fiction that, being a foreigner, he had little knowledge of British academic conventions. Occasionally, these tactics misfired – but they usually worked.

Social capital and research environments as collective goods

At this point I would like to try to step away from introspection and anecdotes from Essex and detour to more general social science theory and comparative insights. The sociologist James Coleman (1988) has done important work on the concept of social capital, which he saw as a key component in integrating macro-level phenomena and individual behavior. This has some interesting similarities with the notion of productive research institutions (see Pelz and Andrews 1966).

By social capital, Coleman means something like the web of social relations.[11] One example in his original 1988 article is dissident networks in South Korea. He notes that these often originate from people with existing ties, who have attended the same schools, come from the same cities, or worship in the same churches. The term capital is warranted as social capital is productive, just like physical capital. It goes beyond just social structure and the term highlights how social capital arising in networks and ties is a resource to individuals, and something that can help them achieve things they otherwise cannot do. For example, dissident networks can allow individuals to go from individual grievances to collective organized revolt, and more productive efforts for putting pressure on a government and make effective demands for reforms.

Social capital hinges on individual relations. Individuals chose to engage with social networks as long as the benefits of doing so exceed the costs. For example, an individual seeking to overthrow the government may engage with a dissident network if they think that this is likely to further their

[11] According to Coleman (1988: S98), social capital "inheres in the structure of relations between actors".

aims. But if the dissident network becomes perceived as inefficient over time or offering declining returns, then rational individuals will be more likely to abandon it.

We can think of a strong research environment as a form of social capital – it is a collective good, with important private benefits that leads people to engage and invest in it. Individual members derive value from a research environment when their work benefits from it, and they receive some positive rewards from interaction with the collective unit. Individuals have many competing interests. A purely individual perspective suggests that researchers will only look out for their own narrow interests. Economist Mancur Olson (1965) has alerted us to how shared interests in general do not suffice for collective action – individuals have strong incentives to free ride on the efforts of others and not devote any individual effort if they only seek to maximize their own narrow private interests. But this disregards the role of private benefits that are reaped from an existing collective environment, and how this can potentially counteract other incentives and the inclination to focus exclusively on yourself. If people work in an environment that they value and that has benefits to them, then they may act in different ways than they would otherwise. They may choose to invest in and actively contribute to the environment if they think it has sufficient added value.

In economics, the concept of a sunshine tax highlights cases where people may be willing to pay more for services and accept lower pay if the weather is sufficiently nice (Dixon and Sherman 1990: 36). There is some evidence of this in places like San Diego, which is generally less affordable than many other US cities, without substantially higher wages or realized income to offset the higher costs of living.[12] Many academics care about their salary but also their prestige, or what others think of them. Sometimes this is measured by the prestige of the institution to which they are affiliated (e.g., Cook 2022), which to some extent can be detached from the actual working conditions, research performance, or even pay. Many scholars appear to accept lower wages or higher workloads in exchange for the privilege of working at more prestigious institutions.[13] But

[12] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/us/why-is-san-diego-the-most-expensive-us-city-check-criteria-and-rankings-of-other-places/articleshow/104781417.cms?from=mdr.
[13] https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/sep/26/academics-anonymous-early-career-academics-work-less-prestigious-universities.

in other cases, academics may be willing to trade off differences in pay and prestige (at least in the eye of the general public) if the research environment is sufficiently interesting.

An individualist perspective would argue that individual incentives will always dominate, and there is often an assumption that these can be reduced to financial incentives or things that can be measured in terms of a clear monetary value. If we want academics to do well, then we should simply give them greatest possible rewards for doing well (i.e., pay increases, bonuses etc.) and use sanctions to punish them for not doing well (i.e., deny promotion, remove travel support, increase workload etc.). The famous quote that it is better to be feared than to be loved, for example, has been explicitly endorsed by some political leaders such as Singaporean strongman Lee Kwan Yew.[14] But contra this emphasis on fear over love, many studies of human cooperation and successful endeavors indicate that group solidary is one of the greatest asset and key to success.

In his work on the rise and decline of empires, the 14th century Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun highlighted the role of "assabiyah", by which he meant the ties or bonds between members of a group or tribe. We look out for and help individuals in the group; this in turn makes the group stronger and successful in combat and building empires (e.g., Khaldun 2015). The famous *American Soldier* study likewise concluded that individual soldiers are not motivated to fight in combat by abstract ideas and ideology or patriotism, but rather the bonds formed between them (Stouffer 1949). Academia is not warfare, but there is an important parallel in how stronger environments can be productive – individuals receive returns from the group, they feel valued, and they come to identify with the group and act in ways that help strengthen the group.

[14] Lee Kwan Yew is quoted as saying "Between being loved and being feared, I have always believed Machiavelli was right. If nobody is afraid of me, I'm meaningless", see https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/23/lee-kuan-yew-the-best-quotes-from-singapores-founding-father. Some scholars argue that the attribution of this quote to Machiavelli is incorrect or misleading, as Machiavelli explicitly said that it was better to be *both* loved and feared, and the quote was intended to refer to special cases where one could not have both. See https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/no-machiavelli-did-not-say-its-better-to-be-feared-than-loved.

I do not have a formal estimate of what such a premium for working at an interesting institution would amount to at Essex or how to precisely measure its assabiyah. However, there are good reasons to think they are substantial and important. I for one have decided not to pursue opportunities to move in the past when I felt that Essex was an interesting place to work and a group I could identify with.

Strong and productive research environments

Common social science concepts such as social capital often see multiple distinct definitions and many are criticized for circularity, that is, using terms defined as parts of the description or assuming terms described to be known (see Adler and Kwon 2002; Garcia 2024). The concept of a strong research environment also faces similar potential challenges. However, at least in my view, a useful tentative definition could be based around interaction and the counterfactual productivity or research output that we would expect absent the environment. That is, we have a strong or productive research environment in cases where a cluster of connected individuals interact regularly in ways that increase and generate high quality research output, with the added value of the environment emerging as the surplus relative to what would be expected given only individual inputs and no interaction or community.

This definition of strong or productive research environments is conceptually clear, but not necessarily straightforward to operationalize empirically. In many cases it may difficult to consistently measure interactions within institutions, at least comparatively, although it should be at least possible to identify whether interactions are present absent and assess their volume qualitatively. The added value is furthermore defined relatively to a counterfactual, where people could differ on estimates of the baseline for comparison and what might happen absent the actual observed environment.

Still, the above conceptual definition highlights many interesting implications and suggests useful contrasting counterexamples to a productive research environment. The frequency and quality of interactions is clearly central to the concept. Just adding individuals together in a list and nominally calling them a unit or department does not create an environment without fostering actual

interaction (i.e., we have a collection rather than a community of scholars). Environments need to foster repeated interaction, and they need to generate outcomes resulting from these interactions that would not otherwise take place. Moreover, the quality of interactions and their specific consequences is key to environments being seen as strong or to have productive outcomes.

The emphasis on cohesion in the discussion above might lead us to conflate a strong research environment with one that is "good" in the sense that participants in the community feel comfortable or welcome. In a provocative analysis, Gambetta and Origgi (2013) argue that under some circumstances, academics may actually prefer lower quality offerings over higher quality alternatives, if this help make individuals look relatively better in comparison to their peers or colleagues. They cite a number of examples suggesting evidence of a preference for low quality in Italian academia, including active efforts to undermine recruitment of productive scholars or lack or responses or even active criticisms when scholars call out weaknesses in academic work or cases of misconduct or at least poor professional practices. In such settings the environment arguable induces mediocrity and negative norms, such as doing the minimum required, rather than incentivizing strong research performance.

People may perhaps legitimately differ on what should be regarded as "good research" or "high productivity", but there is clearly a risk of applying overly lax standards if researchers and institutions are left entirely to themselves to evaluate their productivity or output. Greater competition within institutions can help increase the quality of research in much the same way as competition between institutions can foster productivity and innovation (e.g., Hagstrom 1974; Merton 1957). A strong and productive environment should ideally have a suitable mix of competitive and supporting/encouraging forces.

In some case, the balance is clearly not right, and environments can become so competitive that efforts by individuals to get ahead will undermine the productivity of others and scientific research (see, e.g., Carson et al. 2013; Hall 2023). In other cases, institutions see so much internal conflict in interactions among member that they become *less* productive than expected; individuals engage more in internal debate or controversy than in scientific research. Excessive conflicts have in some

cases completely undermined academic institutions and nearly killed of entire disciplines (see e.g., Kropp 2015 for a discussion of sociology in Denmark).

Public value of strong research environments and collaboration

Strong collective environments are not just a benefit to the individual researchers. The traditional view of science, at least in much of humanities and social sciences, tended to emphasize the ideal of the erudite hermit scholar, working on a magnus opus in isolation until this eventually is revealed to the world. This reflects in part how the first Universities grew out of monasteries.

But modern science is very much a social endeavor, and the science frontier is increasingly dominated by collaboration. Gary King (2014: 165) notes how "[s]ocial scientists are now transitioning from working primarily on their own … [to] highly collaborative, interdisciplinary, larger scale, lab-style research teams". The larger collaborations that have characterized research in the Department of Government at the University of Essex such as the British Election Studies and some of the larger collaborative projects on conflict such as the European Collaborative Research Project on "Disaggregating Civil Wars" have in this sense in many ways been ahead of the curve.

We see a dramatic increase in coauthorship, including in the social sciences and humanities, even if remains lower than in medicine and the natural sciences. According to one set of estimates, articles on average would have had fewer than 1.5 authors when I finished my PhD in 1999 but are closer to 2.5 authors, and estimates for leading political science journals indicate an even more dramatic increases in the prevalence of coauthored research (Thelwall and Maflahi 2022; Metz and Jäckle 2017, see also Fortunato et al. 2018). Again, we coauthor not because we like our coauthors so much, but because it makes our research is better. If we think science has public value, then more collaboration also brings the promise of more research and research of increased quality.

The emphasis on collaboration and collective outcomes is not just apparent in how scientists work - it is also something outsiders explicitly try to value and target. When the plans for the original

RAE was discussed, it was suggested that institutions should demonstrate excellence in research by just submitting some examples of their best research (Sawyers 2014). That is, we could assess the quality of institutions by just adding up individual pieces of research. Over time new indicators have been added that are intended to reflect the so-called research environment. One might question how these are defined and how easy it is to measure the quality of the research environment, but it is an explicit target in determining excellence and allocating funding in the UK Research Excellence Framework. Indeed, under current proposals for the next iteration of the REF, the weight of collective inputs will be even higher; the weight of individual research outputs (i.e., articles or books) may be reduced further down to 50%, and as much as 25% percent would be based on "people, culture, and environment".[15] This is in addition to the weight assigned to research impact case studies (i.e., demonstrating impact of research beyond academia), which often tend to follow from larger collaborative ventures, and in most cases definitely will require some enduring collective research environment.

Physical or virtual/digital institutions

I have emphasized institutions in a traditional physical sense – that is, academic departments have a spatial location, researchers have offices where they can work, people meet in corridors and shared common rooms, and have conversations by the coffee machine, boiler, or water tank. Some skeptics may argue that this is a narrow minded and old-fashioned view of academic work and how research can be conducted. With the advent of digital technologies, could we not move out of the physical buildings (and legacies of the monasteries) and collaborate online with people anywhere? And could we not just create virtual departments and bring people together as and when needed on online videoconferencing?

I think the answer is "no". Digital communications clearly offer a number of opportunities to talk to other people across large physical distances. I have used these extensively and productively since long before COVID. However, these collaborations often tend to work well because people already know each other. I have benefitted the most in collaborations with colleagues elsewhere

[15] See https://www.ukri.org/news/early-decisions-made-for-ref-2028/

when we could spend a substantial amount of time together, in the same location, at some point. Virtual contacts do not adequately substitute for daily interaction, and it is actually very hard to establish new contacts with people you only meet online. Once people could meet in person again after COVID, they also quickly tended to lose the appetite for online meetings.

In the private sector, people are increasingly called back to the office, including employees in the company Zoom that for many has become synonymous with online meetings.[16] There is also research and evidence on how placing people together in the same location makes them more likely to collaborate and how physical outlay can change collaboration patterns. An interesting study examined the effects of physical location on research collaboration, using plausibly exogenous changes when researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) were moved around on campus due to building renovations (Salazar Miranda and Claudel 2021). They present evidence suggesting that when researchers are moved into the same building, they also gradually become more likely to collaborate. Conversely, we can break up existing environments, and sending people into to exile at home or in distant locations even if nominally on campus is likely to generate separateness and isolation from an environment. Unplanned meetings and encounters in the workplace are often an important first start for discussions and collaboration. But first casual encounters and discussions are much less likely to transform into sustained dialogue and collaboration if people do not meet repeatedly or on a regular basis. Duede et al. (2024) present evidence that influence and familiarity is strongly associated with geographical distance, and that institutions in particular provide very important opportunities for sustained and diverse interactions which in turn influence what researchers know and their subsequent published research.

We can also get some appreciation of the added value of a genuine environment when we look at cases where individual or purely private incentives are taken to an extreme. In an effort to move up on international university rankings based on citation data, some institutions around the world have offered a great deal of money to individual scientists for adding a second affiliation in their publications. For example, some universities in Saudia Arabia have reportedly offered highly cited

[16] See https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/10/05/zoom-return-to-office-hybrid-remote-work/.

individuals as much as USD$75,000 per year to add an affiliation, without any requirement that people will actually spend any time at the institution they appear to be affiliated to.[17] We all know that individual financial incentives often work; many people have taken up this offer, and some Saudi universities have climbed notably up the Shanghai rankings after signing contracts with with highly cited researchers.[18]

But there are also clear limitations to what such a strategy can achieve. Adding a lot of essentially phantom staff that are never there to the employee roster an institution is unlikely to do anything to construct a good research environment. They will likely not collaborate in any meaningful way, train new scholars, or interact with their apparent colleagues. Money alone is thus a weak motivator for building durable environments or assabyiah, and at least some Saudi scholars seem to raise objections to these practices.[19] Ultimately the strategy may not even work well for sustained improvement in University rankings, at least in the longer run. Following increased scrutiny into these issues many people have proceeded to discontinue such affiliations. It seems as if some institutions are likely to see a fall in rankings and possibly face formal sanctions for practices that may be considered abuse of the terms of the ranking exercise, or false or questionable information reported.[20]

Challenges to research environments

At this point I hope I have convinced you of the key value of strong research environments for innovation and scientific production. But I have also hinted at many vulnerabilities of maintaining strong and productive research environments. There is no natural law that institutions that have been good in the past must do well in the future.

[17] https://english.elpais.com/science-tech/2023-04-18/saudi-arabia-pays-spanish-scientists-to-pump-up-global-university-rankings.html.
[18] https://www.sirisacademic.com/blog/a-turning-point-for-saudi-arabian-affiliations-in-the-2023-highly-cited-researchers-list-from-clarivate.
[19] https://english.elpais.com/science-tech/2023-05-04/saudi-scientist-tells-colleagues-stop-this-academic-fraud.html.
[20] https://english.elpais.com/science-tech/2023-11-25/the-list-of-the-worlds-most-cited-scientists-excludes-1000-researchers-over-fraudulent-practices.html.

Environments can fall apart when individuals stop engaging with them. Why this happens is a function of both push and pull factors, both internal and more external. One the one hand we live in a more global academic environment, with much greater mobility and many more opportunities to move to other institutions. When you have a group of productive scholars, many of whom have international backgrounds and ties, then it is more likely that many people will have opportunities elsewhere and that they also will take advantage of these. A stronger and productive environment can to some extent help counteract attrition, but if the environment itself is weakening then people are more likely to leave.

Beyond individual exit, the productiveness of the environment can also decline. For example, Ibn Kaldun and his more contemporary disciple Peter Turchin argues that the success of empires often generates the seed of their downfall (Kaldun 2015; Turchin 2006). Empires expand when they have great collective solidarity, and people are motivated to fight for the group. But with larger empires comes greater accumulation and more inequality, and solidarity starts to wane, leading to a decline in assabyiah and weakened empires.

Finally, we can have external challenges to environments, such as changes in the funding landscape or requirements for what institutions should and cannot do imposed by others. Greater collective solidarity can be a resource to meet such challenges or to be more resilient, but the challenges can also degrade the environment and trigger a downwards spiral.

The scale of possible challenges to academic environments and their vulnerability were laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic, in ways that I think many institutions have not fully recovered from. In March 2020, we were ordered to work from home, and physically prevented from going to the office. Although it was possible to move many activities and events online, the collective environment clearly suffered. We could no longer meet colleagues outside scheduled digital meetings. For a long time, I had a substantial number of new colleagues that I had never met in person.

I also think it has become clear that working from home rather than the office has many limitations. Using digital data on work from companies, for example, economists have found evidence indicating that working from home appears to lead to a decline in productivity, with less work done overall, despite more hours worked (Gibbs et al. 2023). The decline tends to be larger the more tasks require collaboration. Working from home also appears to be associated with a higher rate of muscuskelotal pain and problems (e.g., Radulović et al. 2021) and higher prevalence of mental health problems.[21]

The changes induced by COVID 19 affected institutions everywhere, and many have faced major subsequent challenges in restoring or recreating institutional culture as the original restrictions wane. In some cases, institutions have tried to create informal or formal expectations stipulating how colleagues should work a substantial amount of their time at the institution or designate clear "at work days" to allow for planning in person physical meetings and activities. But research environments also face challenges from concerns over whether researchers need to have access to workplace office space.[22] Some institutions have actively embraced the idea that the people can do without traditional offices. Staff may be sent to work from home, or be expected to share office space if they wish to work on campus. In many cases academic staff may not be entitled to any fixed office space at all, and will instead be offered hot desking and perhaps a personal locker as a replacement for the traditional office.

At many Universities - including the University of Essex - there seems to be some enthusiasm for the potential cost savings through office sharing and encouraging remote working. Many employees on academic contracts no longer have individual offices on campus, and this in turn often makes academics more likely to work from home, even if they may have access to shared

[21] https://communities.springernature.com/posts/the-poisoned-chalice-is-our-passion-for-remote-work-negatively-impacting-our-mental-health.

[22] When I started my first job as lecturer in 1999 there was a clear expectation that tenure track academic job offers would be provided with an office to work, to the point that nobody would be likely to inquire about this. The move towards exploring open space offices in academia predate the pandemic (see, e.g., https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/nov/24/open-plan-academia-university-staff-office), but the pandemic accelerated such efforts notably.

offices or desk space. A discussion paper on "Smart Working at Essex" circulated in 2021 essentially asserted that the traditional office was now passé, and proposed possible arrangements for a future where people should not have traditional physical offices and be encouraged to work remotely from different places, and the University could then use the space freed up for other purposes.

Office space can be costly, and sending people to work from home *could* potentially save money. Some academics may also enjoy flexible working, no longer needing to commute or to come to campus at all, working instead in peace and quiet in the comfort of their home, and in some cases living several hours from campus or even if different countries. Others have suggested that institutions can benefit from remote working by recruiting global talent wherever it is in the world, without any requirements for relocation.[23] But I think it is illusory to think that that such savings or apparent benefits will come without any costs. Surveys that I have conducted with people currently asked to share offices at the University of Essex indicate that many respondents tend to strongly dislike it, and they are often concerned about their ability to meet expectations for research and privacy in meetings with students or discussions on teaching. When research support staff are working from home and can only be contacted by generic emails to the office it is no longer possible to walk over to their office or pick up the phone to try to resolve issues, often resulting in substantial delays. Under working from home, academics and staff know much less than they used to about what happens in other parts of the institution. If this is a prototype, then it seems hard to describe it as successful.

If a strong research environment is in part based on meeting people at work, then increased working from home and more isolation is likely unhelpful and will increase the challenges in achieving a productive environment even more. Individuals will derive less value from the environment and we have less assabiyah. There is a risk that we end up with a Potemkin university, where people drive in to teach and then drive home again, and there is little "there" at the institution, beyond the apparent facade. Such an institution would be unlikely to attract researchers

[23] See, e.g., https://www.theglobalrecruiter.com/evolution-of-global-recruitment-with-the-rise-of-remote-work/

and students. The University of Essex no longer has a running club, for example, because it is now impossible to find a day when a sufficient number of people are physically on campus. And there are likely important inequities arising from work from home and restrictions on office provision. Not everybody has adequate home office and working from home, and hierarchies and differential treatment often tend to lurk in the background when we do not have uniform provision.

The funding environment for universities is challenging in many countries and settings, and institutions are increasingly expected to do more with less.[24] But if we think that productive environments have a value then we should also take an interest in investing and nurturing them.

Future outlook and what can be done?

At this point I would like to switch from the past and the current to look at the future outlook. As we all know, prediction is difficult, especially about the future, even though it is difficult to see how one could discuss policy without attention to prediction and its challenges (see Gleditsch 2022). I also have no formal role in administration at the University of Essex or responsibility for budgets, so my perspective here is that of an opinionator rather than a decisionmaker or advisor. Still, I think there several important lessons about research environment that emerge from the material reviewed here and the prior discussion.

The first is that strong environments are not a one-off project that need to be built, but rather ongoing projects that need to be continuously maintained. In order to do this, research units will need to innovate. What was innovative at the outset of the founding of Essex in 1964 and made the Department of Government distinctive such as survey research and the use of quantitative methods has now arguably become mainstream. This is a very good thing for science and political science research, at least in my view, but it also makes Essex less distinctive and highlights the need for continual capacity of innovation and regeneration. The only way to thrive is to innovate – it really is that simple (e.g., Tabarrok 2011).

[24] See, e.g., https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/vice-chancellors-fear-uk-sector-hurtling-financial-crisis; https://www.ft.com/content/0529e1b9-2822-4949-8fbc-d4afa6e999a0.

Innovation in turn requires some autonomy. Strong academic research environments are unlikely to come about through centralized planning, and external management consultants are rarely the most helpful source of insights for how to build or maintain them (see also Manville et al. 2015). The Department of Government at Essex could do unusual things in the past in part because they had some autonomy and could make decisions that differed from others. Not everything will work out, but some things may. And autonomy can be paired with responsibility for evaluating what is working well and not so well. External benchmarking is useful as a reality check on complacency and overly generous self-assessment.

A focus on the role of the environment also highlights how bigger is not always better. [25] In the latest REF, the Department of Government at Essex faced strong challenges from smaller and cohesive research-intensive departments that in some ways looked more like Essex did in the past. Rapid growth is challenging. Integrating people will take some time. Once you get above a certain size, then an academic department is less likely to work as a single unit and more likely to enter into divisions or subgroups. This does not mean that you cannot have collective solidarity or cohesion, but it raises new challenges, and you may get increased competition between groups.

A final point is that fostering research environments does not need to be all about the money, at least not a lot of money. There is possibly apocryphal rumor that New Labour held brainstorming sessions before assuming power in the UK in 1997 to see what sort of reforms could be offered that would be popular but not cost a lot of money. Treating people decently and with respect can often go a long way toward making them feel valued, bring out the best of researchers, and help generate assabiyia. Spreading fear is not a good motivator and will tend to undermine rather than

[25] There has been a substantial growth in non-academic management and administrative requirements in many UK universities. There also appears to be some evidence that administration grows when resources are available in ways that cannot easily be accounted for by the fundamentals that administration is supposed to assist, such as research income (see Wolf and Jenkins 2021). In the US, there is concern over "administrative bloat", and some universities appear to have more administrative staff than students on campus. See, e.g., https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulweinstein/2023/08/28/administrative-bloat-at-us-colleges-is-skyrocketing/?sh=6d825d0841d2 and https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/PPI_College_Admin_Bloat.pdf.

foster collective solidarity. Many researchers can often be very generous to others. I can offer two personal anecdotes from people mentioned previously. For example, Mancur Olson may have emphasized the role of narrow financial private incentives, but he actually returned his own royalties to students when he assigned his books on the reading list, and also invited all the students in his graduate seminar to a special lecture on the economics of Stalinism at his house, with catering. One of my first encounters with Gary King was at a poster presentation at the American Political Science Association after my first year as a PhD student in 1996. NSF program officer Frank Scioli stopped by the presentation asked if I was a faculty member, to which I replied that "I am just a graduate student". Gary King then responded to this "nobody is just a graduate student", and the comment has stuck with me since then. Small acts and gestures can set an example, inspire, and help make a difference.

Evaluating the future is hard, and past performance does not guarantee future success. However, I strongly think understanding better the role of collective research environment can help us appreciate important mechanisms that are central to research productivity and innovation, and hopefully also inspire action to try to find ways to nurture a productive environment in the future.

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