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EMPOWERING RESEARCH MANAGEMENT PRACTITIONERS AS KNOWLEDGE PRODUCERS: A NARRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Research management practitioners occupy critical positions at the intersection of academic research institutions and implementation contexts. This narrative literature review synthesises contemporary evidence on knowledge production, knowledge brokerage, capacity building, and organisational change to propose a conceptual framework for empowering practitioners as knowledge producers. Conducted through structured searches of peer-reviewed literature published between 2018 and 2025, the review reveals an emerging recognition of practitioner expertise in research translation, although this recognition operates alongside persistent structural barriers to practitioner voice in research governance. The review identifies multiple evidence-based strategies for capacity building, although comparative effectiveness research remains limited, and organisational culture emerges as a critical enabling factor for practitioner contributions. A four pillar, interconnected framework was proposed as essential for practitioner empowerment, comprising institutional knowledge systems and sharing cultures, collaborative governance and partnership structures, systematic capacity building and professional development, and continuous feedback and adaptive learning. A central finding is that practitioner empowerment requires simultaneous attention to individual skill development and systemic organisational change. Key limitations include the geographic concentration of reviewed literature in higher education, health sectors, and environmental management, the absence of longitudinal evidence on the sustained impacts of interventions, and the absence of empirical validation of the proposed framework across diverse organisational contexts. This narrative review contributes to emerging scholarship on democratising knowledge production while highlighting evidence gaps that require future research.

KEYWORDS: Capacity Building, Knowledge Brokerage, Knowledge Brokers, Knowledge Production, Research Management, Research-Practice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The gap between research generation and practical implementation represents a persistent challenge across multiple sectors including healthcare, education, environmental management, and public policy (Fundin et al., 2018: Theobald et al., 2018; Agostinho et al., 2020; Agbede & Dzwairo, 2022). Despite increased investment in research infrastructure, the translation of research findings into evidence-informed practice remains incomplete (Valmeekanathan et al., 2021). Research management practitioners occupy unique positions within this landscape, yet their potential as knowledge producers remains largely unrecognised and underutilised. Contemporary literature increasingly acknowledges that practitioners possess valuable expertise regarding stakeholder needs, implementation contexts, and translation of complex academic findings into actionable insights (York et al., 2025). This recognition represents a significant shift from historical models that positioned practitioners primarily as administrative support functions.

Research management, historically defined as institutional support for compliance and administrative functions, is increasingly understood as encompassing strategic engagement with research agendas, stakeholder partnership development, and knowledge translation activities (Santos et al., 2025). Contemporary scholarship in this field recognises that effective research management requires understanding not only research processes but also implementation contexts, organisational cultures, and power dynamics influencing research utilisation (Bahtilla & Huang, 2024; Lekena, 2024). Knowledge brokerage, a related concept describing intermediary roles facilitating information exchange between researchers and practitioners has emerged as a promising approach to bridging research-practice gaps (Rycroft-Smith, 2022; Rechsteiner et al., 2024). Yet recent scholarship also identifies inherent tensions and challenges in brokerage roles, including questions about knowledge legitimacy, broker positioning, and sustainability of intermediary roles (Chew et al., 2022; Feser, 2023).

This narrative literature review examines recent scholarship (2018-2025) on empowering research management practitioners as active knowledge producers. The review addresses three primary questions: (1) What does contemporary evidence reveal about the roles and potential contributions of research management practitioners to knowledge production? (2) What structural, cultural, and resource barriers limit practitioner agency in knowledge creation and dissemination? (3) What evidence-based strategies can organisations implement to enhance practitioner engagement in knowledge production, and what gaps exist in the evidence base?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research Design and Approach

This paper employs a narrative literature review methodology. Narrative reviews, distinct from systematic reviews, provide comprehensive overviews of a topic area through structured qualitative synthesis of literature (Grant and Booth, 2009). This approach was selected because: (1) the topic integrates insights from multiple theoretical traditions (knowledge management, organisational development, research policy, implementation science) requiring synthesis across disciplinary boundaries; (2) the review aims to identify conceptual patterns and tensions rather than conduct meta-analysis; and (3) narrative synthesis permits engagement with theoretical depth and contextual nuance across diverse organisational and sectoral contexts (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). However, narrative reviews carry inherent limitations including potential selection bias and reduced transparency compared with pre-specified systematic review protocols (Grant and Booth, 2009). To mitigate these limitations, this review employed structured search strategies with documented search terms, explicitly documented inclusion criteria, and employed thematic analytical approaches rather than purely descriptive synthesis.

2.2 Literature Search Process

Literature searches were conducted during between December 2025 and March 2026 utilising research web-based search capabilities to identify peer-reviewed academic publications and authoritative guidance documents. Search terms combined key concepts using Boolean operators: (research management OR research administration) AND (knowledge production OR knowledge translation OR knowledge transfer); (knowledge broker* OR knowledge mediation) AND (research OR implementation); (research-practice gap OR research implementation gap); (co-production OR co-creation) AND (research OR knowledge); (capacity building OR professional development) AND (research practitioners OR practitioners).

Searches targeted publications from January 2018 onwards, emphasising recent literature reflecting current scholarship and contemporary practices (Grant and Booth, 2009). This temporal boundary

enables examination of foundational concepts alongside recent developments and emergent thinking in the field. Language was restricted to English-language publications. Initial searches identified 40+ relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and authoritative guidance documents from sources including peer-reviewed journals (Knowledge Management Research & Practice, Journal of Research Administration, Higher Education Policy, Environmental Management, Health Expectations, BMC Health Services Research), institutional guidance (NIHR, UKRI), and grey literature (government reports, research funder guidance).

From identified sources, approximately 30-40 were selected for detailed thematic analysis based on relevance to core themes of research management, knowledge production, knowledge transfer, or practitioner empowerment; presentation of empirical evidence, theoretical frameworks, or systematic reviews; discussion of practitioner roles and contributions; and explicit engagement with bridging research-practice gaps or enhancing knowledge translation (Ward et al., 2009). This selection process involved iterative refinement as thematic patterns emerged.

2.3 Analytical Approach

Selected literature was analysed thematically to identify: (1) key conceptual frameworks relevant to practitioner roles in knowledge production; (2) empirical evidence regarding barriers and facilitators to practitioner engagement; (3) evidence on effectiveness of capacity-building interventions; (4) identified evidence gaps and limitations in existing research; and (5) recommendations for institutional change and practitioner empowerment (Graham et al., 2019). Analysis involved identifying recurrent themes across multiple sources, evaluating evidence strength and consistency, noting contradictions or contested areas, and examining how findings apply across different sectoral and organisational contexts (higher education, health, environmental management). Critical analysis included assessing theoretical coherence across sources; identifying where evidence is strong versus speculative; recognising contextual limitations affecting applicability; and noting areas where author claims exceed available evidence.

To enhance consistency during thematic synthesis, both authors independently reviewed an initial subset of approximately ten sources and compared emerging codes before proceeding to the full corpus, resolving discrepancies through discussion until agreement was reached on the core thematic categories. Themes were then applied consistently across the remaining literature by the corresponding author, with the second author periodically reviewing thematic allocations and challenging interpretations that appeared to extend beyond what the source evidence supported. Where disagreement arose regarding theme placement or evidentiary strength, this was resolved through discussion and, where necessary, re-reading of the original source, following recommended practice for enhancing rigour in narrative and hybrid thematic synthesis (Proudfoot, 2023). This iterative, dialogic process, rather than a single-coder approach, was adopted specifically to reduce individual interpretive bias given the acknowledged subjectivity inherent to narrative review methodology (Grant and Booth, 2009).

The conceptual framework presented in Section 4 emerged iteratively through thematic synthesis. Rather than applying a predetermined framework, themes were identified inductively through reading across sources, refined through iterative comparison of concepts across studies, and ultimately synthesised into four dimensions appearing consistently across theoretical traditions and empirical evidence (Nonaka, 2009). The framework synthesises established theoretical models (particularly organisational learning theory and knowledge brokerage literature) while grounding dimensions in contemporary research evidence regarding what practitioners report as meaningful and what research suggests supports knowledge production.

Limitations of this literature search and analytical approach warrant consideration. The restriction to English language scholarship potentially excludes relevant work published in other languages, while reliance on publicly available literature may overlook important grey literature or unpublished studies. The concentration of reviewed sources within higher education and health sectors limits generalisability beyond these domains. Furthermore, the geographic distribution of sources shows a pronounced skew toward North American and European contexts, which may not reflect global practices or perspectives. Selection bias reflecting reviewer interests and judgements about relevance represents an additional constraint, as does the interpretive synthesis of framework dimensions, which necessarily reflects author judgements regarding concept importance and interrelationships (Grant and Booth, 2009). These limitations should be carefully considered when interpreting the findings

and assessing applicability to specific organisational contexts.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section synthesises contemporary scholarship organised around six core themes: (1) evolution and contemporary understanding of research management roles; (2) evidence on knowledge production processes and management systems; (3) knowledge brokerage as an intermediary approach; (4) barriers to effective research-practice collaboration; (5) co-production and collaborative knowledge generation; and (6) capacity-building and practitioner empowerment strategies. Rather than cataloguing individual studies, this thematic approach enables critical evaluation of evidence, identification of convergent findings, and examination of contested or contradictory evidence.

3.1 Evolution of research management as a professional field

Research management has undergone significant professional development over recent decades, transitioning from primarily administrative functions towards strategic engagement with research agendas and research impact (Santos et al., 2025). Contemporary literature increasingly emphasises that research managers possess expertise extending well beyond administrative support, encompassing deep understanding of stakeholder needs, implementation contexts, and processes for translating research into practice (Santos et al., 2025). Modern research management encompasses strategic planning, grant development support, research governance, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge translation activities (Tuohy et al., 2024), reflecting recognition that research managers occupy a unique position to understand both research processes and practical implementation contexts.

However, literature simultaneously documents persistent gaps between professional development aspirations and institutional recognition. Many research managers report that formal authority and resource allocation do not match their expanded professional roles and responsibilities (Govender et al., 2023; Stoycheva & Popović, 2025). Despite growing literature documenting evolving research management roles and calls for practitioner professionalisation (Santos et al., 2025), a critical evidence gap remains regarding implementation. Literature identifies what expanded research management roles should encompass but provides minimal empirical evidence regarding the institutional pathways, enabling factors, and barriers associated with recognising and implementing such expanded roles in practice. Notably absent are studies examining how research organisations develop and formalise these roles, what structural and cultural changes facilitate role expansion, how research managers themselves can be supported in transitioning to strategic positions, or what outcomes result from implementing expanded research management functions.

This gap holds particular significance given identified barriers to research-practice collaboration and the potential for research managers to serve as knowledge brokers or capacity builders within research organisations. Without evidence regarding implementation mechanisms and effectiveness, it remains unclear whether investment in expanding research management roles represents a viable institutional strategy for enhancing research-practice collaboration.

3.2 Knowledge production and knowledge management systems

Knowledge production encompasses both the generation of new insights and the contextualisation of existing knowledge for application in specific settings (Nonaka, 2009; Edwards and Lönnqvist, 2023). Although Nonaka's SECI model predates contemporary scholarship, it remains influential for conceptualising knowledge production processes through socialisation, externalisation, combination, and internalisation (Nonaka, 2009). Contemporary knowledge management research demonstrates that organisational systems supporting knowledge capture, sharing, and utilisation correlate with innovation and improved organisational performance (Singh et al., 2021; Lam et al., 2021), though implementation in research-intensive settings remains challenging (Alfawaire and Atan, 2021).

Successful knowledge management systems require simultaneous attention to technical infrastructure such as databases and platforms; human and cultural factors including trust and psychological safety; and sustained leadership commitment (Muhammed and Zaim, 2020). Recent scholarship emphasises that effective knowledge management depends fundamentally on alignment between human resource strategies, organisational culture, and management systems, a particularly challenging combination in research institutions where disciplinary hierarchies and traditional academic cultures may actively resist knowledge-sharing initiatives (Ajmal et al., 2025).

Despite the knowledge management literature

identifying effective systems and practices (Singh et al., 2021; Edwards and Lönnqvist, 2023), application specifically to research management contexts remains underdeveloped. The literature provides limited guidance personalised to the distinctive structures, cultures, and challenges of research institutions, where traditional academic norms, disciplinary silos, and decentralised decision-making operate differently from corporate or service sector organisations where most knowledge management research has been conducted. For research organisations seeking to implement knowledge management approaches to enhance research-practice collaboration, significant ambiguity remains regarding which knowledge management principles transfer effectively to research contexts, how systems should be adapted to accommodate research institutional characteristics, and what evidence exists regarding implementation effectiveness and sustainability in such settings.

3.3 Knowledge brokerage and intermediary roles

Knowledge brokers serve as intermediaries facilitating information exchange between researchers and practitioners, translating complex concepts for diverse audiences, and fostering collaborative relationships (Rycroft-Smith, 2022; Caduff et al., 2023). Educational knowledge brokering remains currently under-researched, difficult to define, and insufficiently understood (Rycroft-Smith, 2022). Brokers' effectiveness appears highly dependent on several factors: deep understanding of both research and practice contexts (Rechsteiner et al., 2024); establishment of trust and credibility across communities (Tran et al., 2025); relationship building prior to formal collaboration (Wentworth et al., 2023); and ability to navigate power differences and competing institutional priorities (Fraenkel and Bamberger, 2025).

Theoretical anchors underlying brokerage include structural holes theory, knowledge mobilisation frameworks, communities of practice theory, and distributed leadership theory, suggesting that brokerage operates through multiple complementary mechanisms (Rechsteiner et al., 2024). Recent scholarship increasingly examines challenges of knowledge brokering, identifying that brokers may experience role ambiguity, maintain fragile positioning, and struggle with tensions between maintaining neutrality and advocating for particular knowledge claims (Bandola-Gill, 2023). Furthermore, brokers may filter, distort, or hoard knowledge, and their intermediary position can become marginalised unless accompanied by structural authority and adequate resources (De Jong et al., 2023).

Despite growing recognition of knowledge brokerage as a mechanism for research-practice collaboration, critical evidence limitations persist. While knowledge brokerage literature describes roles comprehensively and identifies success factors (Rycroft-Smith, 2022; Rechsteiner et al., 2024), minimal empirical evidence examines training effectiveness, sustainability of brokerage roles over time, or long-term outcomes of brokerage programmes within research management contexts specifically. Without evidence regarding implementation, durability, and effectiveness, it remains unclear whether investing in knowledge brokering represents a viable strategy for research-practice organisations or under what conditions such approaches might succeed.

3.4 Barriers to research-practice collaboration

Literature comprehensively identifies barriers to effective research-practice collaboration operating at multiple levels (Lacey and Wilkinson, 2025). Temporal misalignments prove particularly significant, with researchers operating within extended research timelines that prioritise theoretical advancement and publication metrics, while practitioners require rapid application of knowledge to address immediate operational needs (Saputra et al., 2024; Giarraffa et al., 2025). These temporal differences are reinforced by institutional incentive structures, with academic advancement primarily rewarding publication and disciplinary recognition rather than research application or knowledge translation (Horta, 2022).

Structural barriers within organisations compound these challenges, including disciplinary silos that limit cross-boundary collaboration (Siddiqui, 2024); hierarchies that privilege academic researchers' authority while marginalising practitioner perspectives (Frers and Meier, 2022); and geographic and organisational separation of research from implementation contexts (Wardani et al., 2022). Cultural barriers prove equally consequential, encompassing differences in language and terminology between research and practice communities (Cerdeira et al., 2023); varying priorities regarding what constitutes important knowledge (Weinmann, 2023); and status differences that affect willingness to engage across boundaries (Rossoni et al., 2024). Resource barriers remain persistent, with practitioners reporting overwhelming administrative demands that limit capacity for strategic research engagement, insufficient funding for collaboration and knowledge translation, and limited access to

research training and professional development (Peckham et al., 2023).

A critical gap exists between barrier identification and solution implementation in the literature. While barriers are comprehensively identified and well-documented across multiple sources (Frers and Meier, 2022; Wardani et al., 2022; Cerdeira et al., 2023; Weinmann, 2023; Siddiqui, 2024; Rossoni et al., 2024), the proposed solutions remain largely general organisational-level recommendations centring on improved collaboration, resource allocation, and cultural change. Notably absent from the evidence base are specific implementation guidance and empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of particular interventions for overcoming identified barriers. This represents a significant knowledge gap that impedes translation of barrier identification into actionable organisational change.

3.5 Capacity building and practitioner empowerment

Capacity building for research practitioners encompasses multiple inter-related dimensions. The most effective interventions include structured didactic activities delivered in person or online (Juckett et al., 2022); mentorship from experienced researchers and practitioners (Burgess and Chataway, 2021); practical application activities such as case studies and field placements (Juckett et al., 2022); peer learning communities (De Nguyen and Phan, 2024); and access to professional development resources (Arun Das et al., 2025). Mentorship emerges as particularly valuable for building confidence and tacit knowledge (Kuzembayeva et al., 2024; Hodges and Horsley, 2025).

However, evidence increasingly demonstrates that capacity building proves insufficient without accompanying structural change (Mufanebadza and Moono, 2025). Practitioners developing research expertise frequently report limited institutional pathways for applying their developed capabilities, leading to frustration and workforce departures (Triwibowo, 2024; Okada et al., 2025). Research on research capacity building in social care specifically documents that despite decades having elapsed since the research-to-practice gap was first identified, the gap persists despite increased access to research resources and training opportunities (Peckham et al., 2023). This suggests that capacity building initiatives, while necessary, are insufficient without systemic organisational change.

Organisational culture proves critical in this equation (Véliz et al., 2023). Cultures emphasising psychological safety, valuing diverse contributions, providing leadership support, and recognising knowledge-sharing significantly enhance practitioner engagement (Dorris et al., 2024; Reed et al., 2022; Al Harrasi and Al Subhi, 2024). Despite widespread implementation of capacity building interventions, they often operate within organisational cultures that do not support the application of learned skills, creating fundamental misalignment between individual development and organisational readiness (Hashem et al., 2024).

The persistence of the research-to-practice gap despite increased investment in training and resources suggests that systematic understanding of which combinations of capacity building interventions produce sustained impact in particular contexts remains incomplete (Peckham et al., 2023). Furthermore, evidence tracking practitioner trajectories and outcomes following capacity building interventions is scarce (Triwibowo, 2024; Okada et al., 2025). Future research must move beyond evaluating isolated interventions to examine how individual practitioner development, institutional structures, and organisational cultures interact to either enable or constrain the translation of capacity building into meaningful research practice.

3.6 Co-production and collaborative knowledge generation

Co-production represents a collaborative approach in which researchers, practitioners, and members of the public work together, sharing power and responsibility from conception through to project completion, including the generation of knowledge itself. Research funders and institutions, notably the NIHR, have increasingly recognised co-production as a central component of their strategic commitments. NIHR (2024)'s guidance emphasises that genuine co-production requires dialogue beginning before project initiation to identify different forms of knowledge, roles, responsibilities, and expectations, with ongoing dialogue embedded into project governance throughout the research lifecycle. Joint ownership of key decisions differentiates co-production from simpler collaborative approaches (NIHR, 2024).

Despite growing institutional investment in co-production, scholars have raised significant concerns about implementation gaps and the depoliticisation of the concept. Literature examining the political and power dimensions of co-production reveals how depoliticisation dynamics can reinforce rather than mitigate existing unequal power relations and may prevent wider societal transformation from

occurring (Turnhout et al., 2020; Cronin et al., 2024). Co-production has become a ubiquitous concept in policy discourse while much literature on the topic remains aspirational in nature, frequently used to signify relational working without rigorous consideration of underlying power dynamics (Durose et al., 2022; Turnhout et al., 2020). This tension between policy enthusiasm for co-production and the complexity of its implementation reflects broader challenges within the research system itself, where entrenched academic and scientific practices may constitute a more fundamental impediment to progress in co-produced applied health research than financial constraints alone (Smith et al., 2022).

Moving co-production beyond pilot initiatives and ad hoc projects towards institutionalised practice requires substantial organisational transformation. Recent scholarship on co-production mainstreaming identifies that successful institutionalisation requires bringing co-production into dominant organisational practices rather than treating it as peripheral, a process that can be understood through organisational learning frameworks distinguishing learning at individual, group, and institutional levels (Mortensen et al., 2025). This mainstreaming process faces various challenges and barriers that hinder learning at both individual and formally structured institutional levels, with the nature of these barriers varying significantly depending on an organisation's position within the co-production development pathway and its particular context.

Organisational changes such as proper governance structures and research policies enabling co-production typically require longer implementation timescales than individual researcher-level changes, despite the critical importance of individual researchers embracing more equal power-sharing and developing refined negotiation and communication skills (Smith et al., 2022). The gap between rhetorical commitment to co-production and substantive implementation of power-sharing practices remains substantial, yet the mechanisms and processes underlying this implementation gap remain inadequately explored.

While literature documents that depoliticisation occurs within co-production discourse and that institutional barriers exist (Turnhout et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022), significant evidence gaps remain regarding the emotional and organisational dimensions of challenging existing hierarchies, the specific intervention points within research systems where change efforts prove most effective, and the mechanisms through which organisations can develop cultures that genuinely prioritise reciprocal partnership over extractive engagement. Longitudinal research tracking co-production initiatives from conception through institutionalisation is notably limited, meaning evidence on what sustains co-production beyond individual project timescales and how organisations maintain commitment when power-sharing proves uncomfortable remains sparse.

Existing literature also lacks detailed analysis of how different research disciplines, funding contexts, and organisational types experience co-production implementation differently, and what contextual factors enable or inhibit successful mainstreaming. Furthermore, the perspectives and experiences of practitioners and community members regarding their own learning and development within co-production processes, rather than researcher or institutional perspectives alone, remain substantially understudied and could illuminate practical insights into implementation barriers and facilitators. Future research must move beyond aspirational accounts of co-production towards critical examination of the structural, emotional, and cultural work required for genuine power-sharing to become embedded within research institutions and systems.

3.7 Artificial intelligence, digital research management systems and open science

Emerging technological developments are reshaping the knowledge production landscape in which research management practitioners operate. Generative artificial intelligence tools are increasingly positioned as instruments for human–AI knowledge co-construction, with scholars proposing structured prompt protocols to support this collaboration in organisational settings (Robertson et al., 2024). Within innovation ecosystems more broadly, artificial intelligence is described as exerting a transformative influence on how knowledge is generated, shared and applied across organisational boundaries (Secundo et al., 2025). Applied specifically to literature synthesis, a task central to the knowledge broker role examined in Section 3.3, artificial intelligence is beginning to support the identification and organisation of research evidence, although its capacity to interpret nuanced or contested concepts remains a matter of ongoing debate (Chan, 2025).

For research management practitioners, these developments carry dual implications. First, digital research management systems, encompassing grant management platforms, research information systems and institutional repositories, are extending the technical infrastructure dimension of Pillar One

beyond static knowledge repositories towards more adaptive, AI-supported systems. Second, the global expansion of open science policy is reshaping practitioner responsibilities. Open science is understood as integrating reproducibility, transparency and collaboration into the norms of scientific practice (UNESCO, 2021), and research management and administration networks internationally are increasingly engaging with open science implementation as a core professional competency, including research assessment reform and open infrastructure adoption (OpenAIRE, 2025). Taken together, these developments suggest that the four-pillar framework proposed in Section 4 should be read as applying to an evolving practitioner role in which digital and open science literacy increasingly complements the interpersonal and governance competencies emphasised elsewhere in this review. However, the evidence base regarding how artificial intelligence and open science mandates specifically reshape research management practitioner empowerment remains nascent, representing a further avenue for future research alongside those identified in Section 5.7.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTITIONER EMPOWERMENT

Based on synthesis of contemporary evidence, this review proposes a four-pillar framework (Figure 1) conceptualising essential dimensions for empowering research management practitioners as knowledge producers (Nonaka, 2009; Jin & Peng, 2024; Singh et al., 2021). This framework, grounded in organisational learning theory and empirically identified success factors, proposes that practitioner empowerment requires simultaneous attention to knowledge systems, relational structures, individual development, and organisational learning (Shankar & Tewari, 2023; Graham et al., 2019). The framework is presented as a synthesis of existing theoretical and empirical evidence rather than a novel theoretical contribution. Its value lies in integrating established concepts specifically for practitioner contexts within research management, and in proposing operational mechanisms for implementation based on evidence regarding what practitioners and organisations report as meaningful and effective.

4.1 Pillar One: Institutional knowledge systems and sharing cultures

The foundation for practitioner empowerment lies in creating institutional systems and cultures that value, capture, and enable access to diverse forms of knowledge (Matsuo et al., 2024 and Singh et al., 2021). This dimension encompasses technological infrastructure in the form of knowledge repositories, collaborative platforms and documentation systems that enable knowledge capture and retrieval. Additionally, organisational cultures that explicitly value knowledge contribution from practitioners are essential, characterised by psychological safety and recognition of diverse expertise (Matsuo et al., 2024 and Jin & Peng, 2024). Formal mechanisms enabling practitioners to articulate learning from implementation experience must also be established (Graham et al., 2019).

Evidence demonstrates that psychological safety is fundamental to knowledge sharing. When team members perceive their environment as psychologically safe, they become more likely to share knowledge, raise questions and contribute insights without fear of negative consequences (Jin & Peng, 2024). Importantly, empirical findings indicate that psychological safety is multidimensional, encompassing team collaboration and understanding, team information sharing and reciprocal give and take balance (Matsuo et al., 2024).

Evidence further demonstrates that technology alone proves insufficient. Organisational culture, leadership visibility and psychological safety prove equally critical to knowledge sharing effectiveness (Jin & Peng, 2024 and Shankar & Tewari, 2023). Barriers include competitive reward systems, hierarchical gatekeeping of legitimate knowledge and disciplinary silos (Singh et al., 2021). Implementation requires auditing existing systems, identifying practitioner voice gaps and establishing psychological safety through leadership behaviours that demonstrate empathy and emotional support. Leadership must make explicit commitment to knowledge contribution as valued institutional activity (Shankar & Tewari, 2023).

4.2 Pillar Two: Collaborative governance and partnership structures

Empowering practitioners requires establishing formal collaborative structures enabling genuine practitioner voice in research governance (Norström et al., 2020; Edelmann & Albrecht, 2023). This extends beyond communicating findings to practitioners to co-creating research agendas and exercising authority in research design and governance decisions. Participatory approaches represent a continuum spanning from consultation to shared leadership, with research indicating that stakeholders and practitioners contribute substantially when engaged throughout multiple stages of collaborative processes rather than at

isolated time points (Abma et al., 2019).

Evidence-based mechanisms include formal practitioner representation in research steering committees with meaningful decision-making authority; participatory research design processes where practitioners help define research questions and shape research agendas (Abma et al., 2019); stakeholder consultation in research prioritisation and framing; regular feedback loops enabling researcher responsiveness to practitioner input; and joint dissemination of findings (Khalil, 2016). Barriers include time constraints on practitioner participation, hierarchies privileging researcher authority, disciplinary gatekeeping of 'legitimate' research methods, and institutional structures separating research from implementation contexts (Edelmann & Albrecht, 2023). Implementation requires allocating dedicated time for collaboration (not treating it as add-on work), developing collaborative competencies for researchers and practitioners, and creating formal governance structures including practitioner representation (Delgado et al., 2023). Critical to successful collaborative governance is recognition that meaningful participation requires enabling stakeholders to participate in fundamental decisions about research purpose and scope, not merely implementation parameters (Delgado et al., 2023).

4.3 Pillar Three: Systematic capacity building and professional development

Practitioners require diverse competencies to engage effectively in knowledge production, including data interpretation and research literacy; communication for non-specialist audiences; stakeholder engagement and facilitation; project management; and systems thinking about research-practice connections. Evidence supports multiple complementary mechanisms such as formal training programmes targeting specific skill gaps; mentorship from experienced researchers and practitioners; learning communities providing peer support (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024); access to professional credentials and recognition; and structured opportunities for supervised practice. However, evidence increasingly demonstrates that capacity building proves insufficient without accompanying structural and cultural change. Professional capacity development must be integrated with institutional pathways enabling practitioners to utilise developed knowledge and skills (Saputra et al., 2024). The professionalisation of practitioner roles requires not only individual learning but concurrent organisational changes such as formal job descriptions, career pathways, and recognition of expertise (Saputra et. Al., 2024). Implementation requires competency assessment to identify priority gaps, personalised learning pathways, external credential recognition, simultaneous creation of roles and structures enabling practitioners to utilise developed capabilities, and organisational commitment to embedding practitioner expertise in decision-making processes.

4.4 Pillar Four: Continuous feedback and adaptive learning

Organisations must establish continuous evaluation mechanisms enabling assessment of knowledge production efforts' effectiveness and iterative strategy refinement (Santos et al., 2024). Evidence supports the need for establishing baseline metrics and evaluation indicators aligned to organisational goals prior to interventions, conducting regular feedback sessions enabling practitioner reflection on research application and collaborative learning processes, documenting case studies of knowledge translation and partnership processes, tracking research utilisation in decision making and facilitating adaptation cycles enabling strategy refinement based on evidence (Riddering et al., 2024). Evaluation of participatory and collaborative processes requires extending beyond output measurement to examine partnership functioning, process quality, stakeholder experiences and contextual factors enabling or constraining practitioner engagement (Norström et al., 2020). Barriers include difficulty isolating practitioner contributions from other organisational outcomes, lengthy timelines between knowledge generation and measurable impact, and organisational resistance to critical evaluation. Implementation requires establishing safe spaces for critical reflection, building evaluation capacity among practitioners and employing mixed methods capturing both quantitative outcomes and qualitative experiences of collaborative work and individual learning.

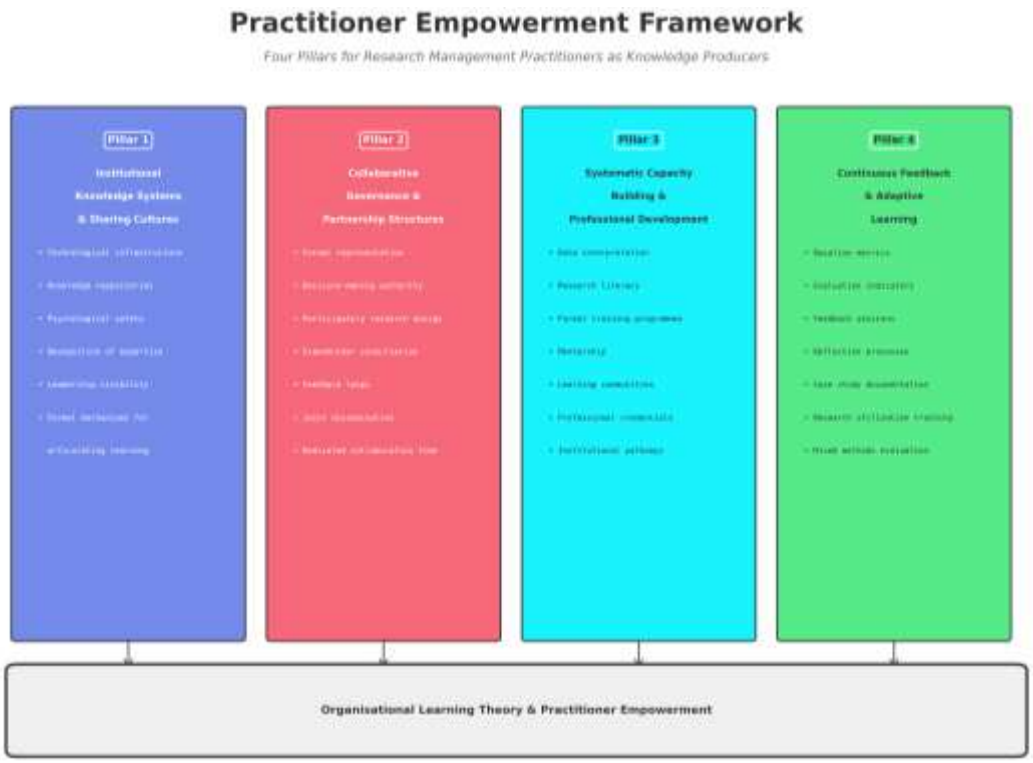


Figure 1: Practitioner Empowerment Framework (Authors' own design).

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The literature examined in this review reveals a persistent tension between what research institutions recognise as necessary for practitioner empowerment and what they actually implement. Sections 3 and 4 present substantial evidence regarding what effective practitioner empowerment requires, yet the translation of this knowledge into institutional practice remains incomplete. This gap between evidence and implementation constitutes the central finding of this review and requires careful examination.

The literature comprehensively identifies practitioner empowerment as multidimensional, requiring simultaneous attention to knowledge systems, governance structures, professional development, and continuous learning (Singh et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2019). Yet the evidence presented in section 3 demonstrates that research institutions frequently adopt piecemeal approaches addressing individual pillars in isolation. Capacity building programmes operate without accompanying changes to governance structures or organisational cultures (Peckham et al., 2023; Triwibowo, 2024; Okada et al., 2025). Co-production initiatives proceed as discrete projects without becoming institutionalised (Mortensen et al., 2025; Durose et al., 2022). Knowledge management systems are implemented without addressing the cultural and relational barriers that inhibit their effectiveness (Ajmal et al., 2025; Muhammed and Zaim, 2020).

This fragmented approach produces specific negative outcomes documented across the literature. Practitioners who develop research expertise through capacity building interventions encounter limited institutional pathways for applying their newly developed capabilities, resulting in frustration and workforce departures (Mufanebadza and Moono, 2025; Triwibowo, 2024). Collaborative governance structures established without underlying knowledge-sharing cultures remain performative rather than transformative, with practitioner voice marginalised despite formal inclusion in decision-making processes (Frers and Meier, 2022; Smith et al., 2022). Knowledge systems implemented without psychological safety and leadership commitment fail to generate the knowledge sharing necessary for effectiveness (Shankar & Tewari, 2023; Jin & Peng, 2024).

5.1 Synthesising the four-pillar framework: Interdependencies and integration

The four-pillar framework presented in section 4 gains significance precisely because it emphasises these interdependencies. The pillars cannot succeed independently; rather, they operate synergistically, with success in each dimension enabling and

reinforcing progress in others. Establishing knowledge systems without psychological safety and supportive organisational culture produces technical infrastructure without genuine knowledge contribution (Singh et al., 2021; Matsuo et al., 2024). Collaborative governance structures without adequate professional development place practitioners in decision-making roles without the competencies necessary for meaningful contribution (Delgado et al., 2023; Abma et al., 2019). Capacity building without governance structures enabling practitioner influence produces skilled individuals without institutional channels for application (Saputra et al., 2024; Peckham et al., 2023). Continuous feedback mechanisms without underlying systems supporting knowledge production and governance become evaluation exercises documenting failure rather than learning systems enabling improvement (Riddering et al., 2024; Norström et al., 2020).

This interpretation explains why decades of investment in practitioner capacity building have failed to close the research-to-practice gap. The evidence presented in section 3.5 documents that despite substantial increases in training and professional development opportunities, the fundamental gap persists (Peckham et al., 2023). Individual practitioner learning proves necessary but insufficient without concurrent institutional changes addressing governance, knowledge systems, and organisational culture. The four-pillar framework provides one possible explanation for this persistent gap: institutions have invested in pillar three (capacity building) without simultaneously developing pillars one, two, and four.

5.2 Bridging barrier identification and solution development

A critical gap identified in section 3.4 concerns the relationship between barrier identification and solution implementation. Literature comprehensively documents temporal misalignments, structural barriers, cultural differences, and resource constraints limiting research-practice collaboration (Lacey and Wilkinson, 2025; Horta, 2022; Siddiqui, 2024; Frers and Meier, 2022; Wardani et al., 2022; Cerdeira et al., 2023; Weinmann, 2023; Rossoni et al., 2024). Yet proposed solutions remain largely generic organisational recommendations such as improved collaboration, resource allocation, cultural change without specific guidance for implementation or empirical evidence regarding intervention effectiveness.

This review bridges this gap by providing the four-pillar framework as a specific implementation pathway. Rather than remaining at the level of identifying barriers, the framework translates barrier understanding into concrete implementation mechanisms. For example, temporal misalignments between research and practice timelines are not addressed through vague calls for improved alignment but rather through deliberate governance structures ensuring practitioners participate in research prioritisation and scope-setting (pillar two), with dedicated time allocation for such participation and explicit organisational valuing of this work (pillars one and four). Resource barriers are addressed not through general resource allocation recommendations but through institutionalising practitioner roles with formal job descriptions, career pathways, and budgeted time for strategic engagement (pillar three).

5.3 The co-production paradox: Rhetoric versus implementation reality

Section 3.6 presents perhaps the most striking contradiction in current literature and practice, that is, the enthusiastic policy and institutional adoption of co-production as a central component of research strategy, occurring simultaneously with substantial evidence that co-production remains largely aspirational, frequently failing to embed genuine power-sharing or address underlying power dynamics (Durose et al., 2022; Turnhout et al., 2020; Cronin et al., 2024). Co-production has become ubiquitous in policy discourse whilst implementation complexity remains unaddressed.

This paradox reflects deeper institutional dynamics. Research institutions embrace co-production language because funding bodies mandate it and it aligns with contemporary research policy discourse. Yet genuine co-production requires relinquishing traditional academic authority and engaging in time-intensive, emotionally demanding processes of shared decision-making, processes that threaten established institutional hierarchies and academic identity (Smith et al., 2022). The evidence suggests that institutions frequently adopt the rhetoric of co-production while maintaining traditional power structures, effectively engaging in what Turnhout et al. (2020) term depoliticisation. They adopt collaborative language while preserving status quo power relations.

The literature examining mainstreaming of co-production (Mortensen et al., 2025) illuminates why this occurs. Moving co-production from pilot projects to institutionalised practice requires embedding co-

production into dominant organisational practices, a process substantially more demanding than implementing isolated co-produced projects. This requires changes across multiple organisational learning levels. Individual practitioners must acquire new collaborative skills, teams must develop new working practices, and institutions must embed co-production into standard governance and decision-making processes. The evidence presented in section 3.6 suggests that most current co-production efforts operate at the project level without achieving the institutional embedding necessary for genuine mainstreaming.

5.4 Knowledge systems and organisational culture: The alignment imperative

Section 3.2 identifies that knowledge management success in research institutions requires alignment between human resource strategies, organisational culture, and management systems. This insight gains importance when synthesised with section 3.6 findings regarding co-production. Organisational cultures primarily organised through disciplinary hierarchies, rewarding individual achievement and publication impact, and valuing researcher expertise while marginalising practitioner perspectives fundamentally conflict with the collaborative, power-sharing, knowledge-integrating cultures required for genuine co-production and effective knowledge management.

The literature examined does not suggest that these cultural features are accidental or easily modified. Rather, they reflect deeply embedded academic values developed over centuries and reinforced through institutional structures, career advancement mechanisms, and professional identities. Ajmal et al. (2025) document that traditional academic cultures actively resist knowledge-sharing initiatives, particularly those elevating practitioner knowledge to equivalent status with researcher expertise. This requires fundamental rethinking beyond mere awareness-raising or policy implementation. It demands reconsideration of what constitutes legitimate knowledge, who has authority to define research directions, and how institutional status and resources are allocated.

The four-pillar framework's emphasis on organisational culture and psychological safety addresses this challenge directly. Establishing genuine knowledge systems and practitioner empowerment requires deliberate organisational culture work. This means making explicit the values and behaviours required for collaboration and knowledge-sharing, and aligning reward systems, career advancement mechanisms, and resource allocation with these values. Without this foundational cultural work, other initiatives operate within environments actively inhibiting their success.

5.5 Bridging individual empowerment and structural enablement

The persistent tension between capacity building and structural change documented throughout section 3.5 reveals a fundamental misunderstanding in how practitioner empowerment is often conceptualised. Capacity building literature frequently treats empowerment as individual characteristics such as skills, knowledge, and confidence, developed through training, mentorship, and professional development. The evidence reviewed in this report suggests this conceptualisation is incomplete.

Jurkowski et al. (2025) and other scholars increasingly distinguish between psychological empowerment, which comprises individual feelings of efficacy and agency, and structural empowerment, which involves meaningful power in decision-making and resource control. The literature examined reveals that psychological empowerment without structural empowerment produces frustration and workforce departures (Triwibowo, 2024; Okada et al., 2025). Practitioners develop confidence and capability only to encounter unchanged institutional structures limiting their influence. Conversely, structural empowerment without underlying psychological safety and organisational support can place practitioners in governance roles without genuine welcome or integration.

The four-pillar framework bridges the gap between individual and structural dimensions. Pillar three (capacity building) addresses psychological empowerment through deliberate skill and knowledge development. Pillars one, two, and four address structural empowerment through knowledge systems valuing practitioner contributions, governance structures granting practitioner decision-making authority, and feedback mechanisms ensuring practitioner perspectives shape organisational direction. Genuine empowerment requires both dimensions operating simultaneously and reinforcing each other.

5.6 Critical gaps and limitations in current evidence

Alongside synthesising existing evidence, this review must acknowledge significant gaps limiting

current understanding. First, implementation research remains underdeveloped. Literature comprehensively documents what practitioner empowerment requires but provides limited empirical evidence on how organisations successfully transition to empowering systems, which implementation pathways prove most effective, how long genuine institutional change requires, and what factors predict implementation success or failure. Research institutions implementing practitioner empowerment initiatives operate substantially without evidence-based guidance.

Second, the research-to-practice gap literature addresses general practitioner-researcher collaboration but provides limited insight specific to research management contexts. Research management constitutes a distinct professional field with particular characteristics. Research managers often occupy structurally ambiguous positions within academic institutions, lacking clear disciplinary identity or traditional academic credentials whilst holding responsibility for research governance and strategic engagement. How evidence regarding general practitioner empowerment and co-production translates to research management-specific contexts remains unclear.

Third, most literature remains cross-sectional, documenting associations between factors such as organisational culture and knowledge-sharing without establishing causality or examining mechanisms. Longitudinal research examining how practitioner empowerment initiatives develop over time, what sustains them versus what leads to failure, and what long-term outcomes result remains scarce. Literature tracking practitioner trajectories following capacity building interventions is particularly limited.

Fourth, literature emphasises organisational-level factors such as culture, governance, and systems with less attention to individual and interpersonal factors. These include emotional labour, relationship work, and identity negotiations involved in genuine collaboration across traditionally unequal power positions. Understanding practitioner empowerment requires grappling with how individuals navigate changing professional identities and institutional positions.

Finally, this review emphasises anglophone, predominantly UK-based scholarship. International and multilingual literature may contain relevant approaches and evidence not captured here, and generalisability to different cultural and institutional contexts remains uncertain.

5.7 Future research directions

These gaps suggest several priority areas for future scholarship. First, implementation research examining specific pathways through which research institutions successfully develop practitioner empowerment systems is essential. Case studies documenting institutional change processes, barriers encountered and overcome, timelines for meaningful change, and factors predicting success would provide valuable guidance for other institutions.

Second, research management-specific literature is needed. How do the four pillars manifest within research management contexts specifically? What particular barriers exist given research managers' ambiguous institutional positioning? How can institutions develop research management roles combining strategic engagement with governance authority? What outcomes result from invested research management practitioner empowerment?

Third, longitudinal research is needed examining practitioner empowerment initiatives over extended periods. How sustainable are co-production arrangements? Do practitioners remain engaged following initial capacity building interventions or do they depart? What factors sustain commitment over time? What long-term outcomes occur in organisations investing substantially in practitioner empowerment versus those that do not?

Fourth, research explicitly examining power dynamics, emotional labour, and relational aspects of practitioner empowerment would deepen understanding. How do individuals navigate changing professional identities? What psychological processes occur during institutional power-sharing? How do researchers and practitioners build authentic collaborative relationships across historical inequalities?

Fifth, research examining how practitioner empowerment integrates with other institutional priorities and performance metrics would address the critical gap between policy expectations and institutional capacity. How can research institutions balance practitioner empowerment with research excellence assessments, publication metrics, and competitive funding pressures? What institutional structures enable sustainable integration?

5.8 Implications for research institutions

Several key implications follow from this review's synthesis of evidence. First, practitioner empowerment constitutes genuine organisational transformation, not a marginal initiative. Institutions

must commit resources, leadership attention, and time adequate to large-scale change, typically spanning three to five years at minimum based on change management literature cited across reviewed scholarship.

Second, foundational work on organisational culture and psychological safety must precede governance restructuring. Implementing advisory roles and governance participation within hierarchical cultures resistant to practitioner knowledge produces marginal influence despite formal authority. Institutions must first establish cultures in which practitioner contributions are valued, diverse expertise is recognised, and psychological safety enables candid communication.

Third, research funders' increasing emphasis on research impact and partnership quality creates institutional pressure for change. These external expectations now comprise assessment criteria, representing 25 per cent of Research Excellence Framework impact assessment, and funding prioritisation. Institutions can leverage these expectations to justify and support internal cultural and structural change.

Fourth, pilot initiatives offer valuable learning opportunities. Rather than implementing institutional transformation immediately, research institutions can conduct deliberate pilot projects. These pilots should document learning regarding barriers and facilitators, build internal evidence of partnership benefits, and inform refinement of subsequent scaling. Critical evaluation must examine power dynamics and genuine practitioner influence, not merely consultation.

Finally, research institutions themselves hold crucial knowledge regarding implementation challenges and solutions. Individual organisations implementing practitioner empowerment initiatives should systematically document and share their experiences through academic publication, policy briefings, and communities of practice. Collective knowledge-sharing would accelerate learning across the sector and address the substantial evidence gap regarding implementation pathways.

5.9 Operationalising the framework: Illustrative institutional pathways

While Section 4 presents the four pillars conceptually, research institutions may find it useful to consider concrete starting points for implementation. For Pillar One, an institution might begin by auditing its existing research information system to identify where practitioner generated insights, such as funder engagement patterns or common proposal weaknesses, are currently undocumented, then establishing a lightweight internal knowledge base populated through regular, protected time set aside for practitioners to record lessons learned. For Pillar Two, a research office could pilot a rotating practitioner seat on a faculty research committee with defined voting rights on one specific agenda item, such as internal seed funding allocation, before expanding participation to broader governance matters once trust is established. For Pillar Three, rather than commissioning generic training, institutions could map practitioner competencies against a locally developed framework and pair each practitioner with a mentor drawn from either senior management or academic staff for a fixed period, with progress reviewed jointly. For Pillar Four, a manageable starting point is a biannual reflective session in which practitioners and academic leadership jointly review two or three case studies of research-practice collaboration from the preceding period, focusing on what enabled or hindered practitioner contribution rather than on output metrics alone. These illustrative pathways are not prescriptive; their purpose is to demonstrate that pillar level implementation can begin at modest scale before institution-wide adoption, consistent with the pilot-then-scale approach discussed in Section 5.8.

6. CONCLUSION

This narrative literature review demonstrates that empowering research management practitioners as knowledge producers requires integrated attention to knowledge systems, governance structures, professional development, and continuous learning. The evidence comprehensively identifies what effective practitioner empowerment requires while simultaneously revealing substantial gaps between institutional rhetoric and actual implementation. Research institutions must choose between continuing to implement fragmented initiatives addressing individual dimensions while expecting integrated outcomes or committing to genuine institutional transformation addressing all four pillars simultaneously.

The four-pillar framework synthesised in this review provides one possible pathway forward. Its value lies not in novel theoretical contribution but in integrating established concepts specifically for practitioner empowerment within research management contexts and grounding implementation recommendations in evidence regarding what practitioners and organisations report as meaningful and effective. Whether institutions adopt this specific framework or develop

alternative approaches, the central message is clear. Practitioner empowerment cannot succeed through piecemeal initiatives and instead requires systemic institutional change embedding new structures, cultures, and values throughout research organisations. The research institutions that successfully navigate this transformation will likely develop competitive advantages through enhanced research-practice collaboration, improved research application, and stronger connections to societal impact. Those that continue current approaches will likely see persistent gaps between practitioner capabilities and institutional utilisation, continued workforce departures among capable practitioners, and limited progress on research-practice collaboration despite substantial investment.

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