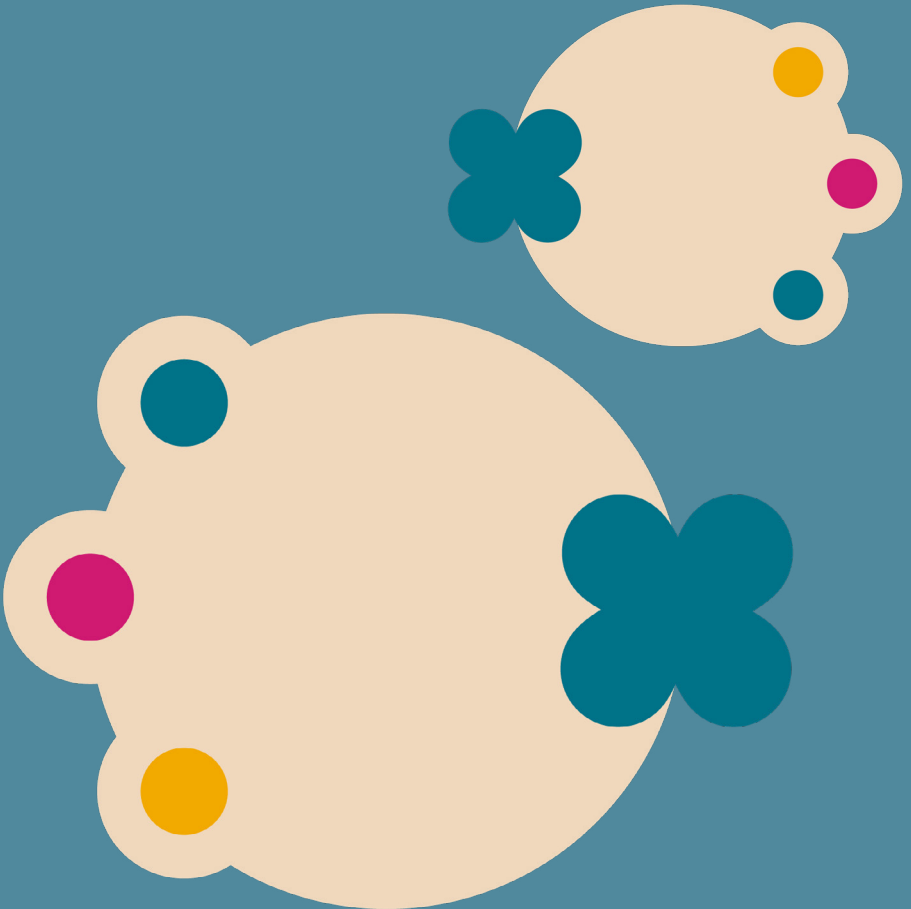




THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



**Implicit
Knowledge**
A conversation guide

Defining implicit knowledge

In the 2025/26 academic year, a research cultures project took place in the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (CAHSS) at the University of Edinburgh, exploring the potential for supporting people to **make knowledge that is institutional or experiential (implicit or tacit knowledge) more visible to one another, to foster more equitable research cultures in CAHSS.**

This conversation guide was created to help those who are seeking and holding implicit knowledge to elicit and share this. Implicit knowledge is intangible, informal and often unarticulated knowledge, acquired through experience and practice, and embedded in organisational practices, norms, and values.

In the context of academic research, implicit knowledge can include things like:

- Unwritten rules and expectations around research practices, publication, and funding.
- Informal networks and relationships that facilitate access to resources and opportunities.
- Assumptions and biases that influence decision-making and evaluation processes.
- Unspoken norms around work-life balance, productivity, and career progression, and the implications of making different kinds of choices.
- How technical and organisational language and vocabulary is used in different contexts and what it implies.

Defining implicit knowledge

Implicit knowledge can play a significant role in shaping research cultures and influencing people's career trajectories in university settings. It can also perpetuate inequities and create barriers, make it more difficult for people in academic and professional services roles to work together, and make the workings of the institution feel opaque and inaccessible. In addition, not all implicit knowledge is helpful, and incorrect or outdated assumptions or beliefs can be hard to interrogate or repair.

The literature on implicit and tacit knowledge notes that this kind of knowledge is low in interpretability, requiring mechanisms, such as storytelling, which can account for its complexity (Argote, 2024).

Conversations are forms of thinking together within communities of practice (Pyrko et al., 2017) that go beyond what could be documented in handbooks or guidelines. Researchers have found that metaphors, storytelling and conversations are all means of externalising tacit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994; Swap et al., 2001; Wijetunge, 2012), informing the approach we have taken to producing this conversation guide.

This guide is not a template for conversations, but a tool to help support knowledge seekers and knowledge holders to understand the complexity of implicit knowledge and hold conversations that can help make it more visible in productive ways.

Implicit knowledge. Discuss.

Principles for implicit knowledge conversations...

Knowing who to ask

The right conversation can open up solutions and clarify processes. Knowing who to ask, and having the confidence and trust to ask, are central to addressing issues caused by implicit knowledge.

Capacity to share

Those in possession of implicit knowledge often are not aware of it, or do not consider that others do not hold it. Universities can also be difficult environments for knowledge sharing, in cases when knowledge is treated as an asset or a competitive advantage and people 'hide' or protect knowledge. During times of organisational challenge and change, there are additional risks that people will lack the capacity to share knowledge they hold. Consideration of and attention to these issues may be an important part of preparing for conversations about implicit knowledge.

Power relations

Implicit knowledge is often privileged knowledge, gained through access to mentors, leadership roles, and informal networks. In addition, gender, race, class, language and other

factors, as well as the prior experiences and expectations that people bring to their attempts to clarify or share implicit knowledge, will result in different perceptions of both the knowledge people seek and hold, and their strategies for discovering and sharing this. This complicates the picture of implicit knowledge and requires awareness and care in holding conversations aiming to make implicit knowledge more visible.

Previous experiences

People will bring their previous experiences, both positive and negative, into knowledge seeking and sharing conversations. Taking account of these experiences, and recognising when our own implicit knowledge needs to be 'unlearned', are important principles for productive conversations.

Organisational contexts

The context in which knowledge is circulating matters, especially in complex and challenging information landscapes. Not all issues with implicit knowledge can be addressed through conversations, but conversations may highlight where there is a need or opportunity to take further action to foster transparency, transferability, transmissibility of knowledge.

Planning and holding implicit knowledge conversations

Some conversations about implicit knowledge will be straightforward, and not require significant planning or preparation. Where this is the case, this guide may be of interest but it is not necessary to follow or adapt the suggestions below. However, the nature of implicit knowledge is that it is often complex both to recognise and to reveal, and there are power dynamics and organisational contexts that influence how knowledge flows. The guide is therefore aimed at supporting conversations where complexity or difficulty is anticipated or encountered.

Drawing from Souto (2015), implicit knowledge conversations should allow **reflection, depth and reflexive communication** (communication that takes into account what is happening in the conversation as well as the outcomes sought).

Curiosity or a “questioning mind” is key:

- Taking a ‘not-knowing stance’ and being open to discovery
- Interacting in a non-judgemental way
- Asking questions and being curious
- Allowing your conversational partner time to reflect and articulate their points well

This aligns with what is sometimes described as a ‘calibration’ phase of important conversations¹, where the person who has asked for or is leading the conversation explains the gap, or knowledge, they are seeking to clarify, the problem they have noticed, or the process or issue that needs to be understood or explained. Calibration involves asking the other person about their reactions, seeking to discover if they understand the problem in the same way, if they think the knowledge sought or being shared is likely to resolve the issue, and what barriers they see in making this knowledge visible or using it. Taking time to develop a shared understanding is crucial to navigating the complexity of knowledge flows and identify possible solutions.

¹The University of Edinburgh’s Researcher Development office has developed an important conversation model based on training by Robin Henderson

<https://myconsultants.net>.

See also <https://www.judyringer.com/resources/articles/we-have-to-talk-a-stepbystep-checklist-for-difficult-conversations.php>

Mismatches, unlearning and action

Complexity can be due in part to a mismatch of knowledge, or assumptions that are shaping how the information shared is being understood by both people in the conversation. Because implicit knowledge can fall out of date or be partial and subjective, a degree of 'unlearning' of some things is required in order to move forward or take on new information.

If you encounter mismatches or discover new things through conversation, these principles for unlearning in professional settings (McLeod et al., 2020, pp. 187–192) may help:

- anticipating and acknowledging the emotional discomfort involved in unlearning;
- exploring the entanglement of personal and professional identity;
- moving away from the expert/novice dynamic towards an equal unlearning encounter;
- explore the potential for positive change that exists within the unlearning experience;
- accept that unlearning is a continual process in which you are a learner.

It is good practice in important or challenging conversations to close by identifying next steps or actions, and to make sure to follow up on these, for example:

- Where the conversation has identified structural or organisational issues that can be addressed, make sure someone has an action to take this forward.
- Where a problem around lack of knowledge sparked the conversation, check that this has been resolved, or that a next step for resolving it has been identified.

For knowledge seekers

Things for knowledge seekers to consider

- Gaps in your knowledge might be obvious, or they might not. It is not always easy to know what you don't know, so taking time in advance of the conversation to think through what the problem or issue might be, from your perspective, can be a good starting point for a conversation that reveals implicit knowledge.
- Approach conversations with curiosity and willingness to unlearn things.
- Being a researcher or research professional can be different in different disciplines, Schools, and so on, so there are often layers of implicit knowledge to navigate.
- In a complex organisation like ours there often is help and expertise to be found, but it can take persistence to find it.
- It's important to be proactive in addressing implicit knowledge gaps, but there is a tendency to take personal responsibility for structural issues. Identifying where an issue is beyond the individual or interpersonal can help identify less-obvious next steps.
- If you find the information you are seeking or come to understand processes better, consider how you can share it with others.

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Trial and error

I was new to the university and became slowly aware of the patchwork of structures that were in place around research funding and reporting. My entire understanding of the university research structure was gleaned through trial and error and guesswork. In my mid-career now, I try to bestow this hard earned wisdom on early career researchers in my area (and anyone else who will listen to be honest).

Survey response from researcher, CAHSS implicit knowledge project

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For knowledge holders

Things for knowledge holders to consider

- Recognise the knowledge you hold, and how it is perceived because of your own role. Power dynamics can be obvious or subtle, and have real consequences for implicit knowledge and how it is experienced.
- Approach conversations with curiosity and willingness to unlearn things. Pay attention to whether the assumptions and knowledge you hold are still accurate and up to date.
- Where you as knowledge-holder face structural barriers to being heard or valued for your knowledge, these conversations face additional challenges.
- Consider who may need to know what you know, and be proactive.
- Think about who is and isn't in your networks of informal knowledge sharing, and expand these where you can.

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Complexity and access

There is a lot of implicit knowledge about what types of help research-enabling staff offer. We all hope that researchers will get the support they need even if it takes them time, or they need to ask multiple people before finding the right person. But sometimes they don't get the help they need when they need it.

Survey response from research-enabling staff, CAHSS implicit knowledge project

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Making Implicit Knowledge
About Research More Visible
project information
August 2026

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