

+ Creating your impact-forward research culture

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1 Introduction

This guide has been developed following the Advance HE event “Connecting Research Culture and Impact”, which brought together sector leaders, researchers and practitioners to explore how research culture underpins the creation of meaningful research impact. It is a guided created by and for the sector, building on insights from the event, questions raised by Advance HE members, and our collective expertise. We hope this guide will help you support your research culture in your institution and across the sector, break knowledge silos and think about impact beyond the REF.

The event and creation of this guide featured contributions from:

- + Professor Candy Rowe, Professor of Animal Behaviour and Cognition, Dean of Research Culture and Strategy, Newcastle University.
- + Dr Emma Francis, Research Fellow, Centre for Behaviour Change, University College London.
- + Professor Georgina Endfield, Professor of Environmental History and Dean of the School of Histories, Languages, and Cultures, University of Liverpool.

This publication aims to translate the speakers’ collective expertise into a practical, sector-facing resource, provide evidence-informed approaches for designing innovative and sustainable research culture, support institutions in moving from culture activity to culture impact and enable leadership teams to build a sustainable, inclusive, impact-driven research ecosystem.

2 Executive summary

An impact-forward research culture is one in which:

- + the way research is conducted directly enables its quality, reach, and impact
- + systems, behaviours, and leadership are aligned with collaboration, inclusion, and innovation.

This guide offers:

- + practical interventions
- + system-level design principles
- + leadership approaches
- + tools for embedding sustainable change.

3 12 principles to creating an impact-forward research cultures

Understand impact-forward research culture

Research culture encompasses behaviours, values, expectations and norms; how researchers experience work and how research is produced and shared.

“Research culture shapes how we think, feel, and act, and therefore the quality and reach of research itself.”

Candy Rowe

Poor research culture affects wellbeing, productivity; research integrity and impact potential. To build a culture takes time and considerable investment. The value of this investment, as well as the cost of not investing, should be clear at all decision-making levels.

Start with co-creation and values

Across institutions, a shared starting point can be co-created visioning exercises, with broad engagement across academics, professional services and postgraduate researchers.

[Reimagining Leadership](#) is a Wellcome funded project at Newcastle University. It aims to improve, recognise and reward leadership practices that speak to the kinds of culture people wanted to see through building more psychologically safe and inclusive research environments.

The Thrive sought to co-develop with stakeholders across the sector a team convening approach, and the Centre for Behaviour Change (CBC) at UCL worked with a cohort of principal investigators to understand the behaviours that underpin collaborative research leadership and the barriers and enablers. Advance HE works with its members and partners to co-create our understanding of what good practice looks like.

Culture change is most effective when rooted in shared values and co-creation is key.

Focus on everyday culture, not just programmes

Some of the most impactful changes have been relatively low-cost but shifts social norms over time. Emma Francis offers several examples: open science practices and transparent reporting of null or negative results¹, structured onboarding², agreements around authorship

¹ Jalil, B., Pedrotti, F., Korzeniowska, A., Jacobs, N., & Newton, J. T. (2026). Open Research Practices and Researcher's Assessment: A global landscape review. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18800265>

² Gomes Rickardo and Sousa Daniele. The Relevance of structured onboarding in the assimilation of organizational culture. World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2023, 18(1), 690-697. Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2023.18.1.0659>

and credit³ and regular, protected time for reflective practice within research groups. At an institutional level, recognition and reward frameworks that explicitly value research culture contributions, not just outputs, have also stood out⁴. These changes matter precisely because they are embedded in everyday practice rather than being one-off events.

Candy Rowe suggested **writing retreats** as a simple and effective activity. Creating facilitated spaces for thinking and writing makes it easy and accessible for people and creates a sense that their research time is valued. A Teams site that brings together and curates relevant research training and development opportunities ([The Research Space](#)) is [another example of an everyday practice. It's just had its first birthday – and in a year has had over 1100 people sign up!](#) Finally, a [maturity framework](#) for research culture can help units reflect on and prioritise their actions to improve research culture, and plan ways to evaluate progress. This initiative is shared across the sector and adopted by others, breaking silos and sharing good practice.

Small changes can have significant impact. Listening before responding, regular team check-ins, equal voice practices in meetings and recognition of contributions, are only a few examples behaviour shift that increase trust, inclusion, and team performance.

Leadership as the engine of culture

Findings consistently show that experiences of research culture vary significantly with leadership and team practices. Some may be familiar with the term 'line-manager lottery'. The solution is to move beyond traditional leadership.

Leadership models have a significant bearing on research culture, particularly in shaping the degree to which psychological safety and shared accountability are normalised within teams. Collective and shared leadership approaches, where responsibility and decision-making are distributed, tend to foster more participatory and inclusive cultures and may be particularly suited to interdisciplinary or collaborative research settings.

That said, their effectiveness depends on institutional conditions. Where hierarchical structures and individual performance incentives dominate, shared leadership can be difficult to sustain. Supporting leaders at all levels to develop relational skills, not just managerial competencies, will be important for cultural change.

³ Authorship:

Coles, N.A., DeBruine, L.M., Azevedo, F. et al. 'Big team' science challenges us to reconsider authorship. *Nat Hum Behav* 7, 665–667 (2023). <https://doi-org.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/10.1038/s41562-023-01572-2>

⁴ Recognition and reward contributions:

Eldridge, V. (2026). Hidden Contributions That Power Modern Research. *Nature*, 652, 1077-1079. <https://doi-org.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/10.1038/d41586-026-01260-x>

Design culture as a system

Culture change cannot be achieved through single interventions, it requires coordinated system change. Leadership development, redesigned reward and recognition systems, organisational processes, revised research practices and infrastructure and tools, are essential to utilise when striving to achieve systemic change.

System changes requires deep collaboration and learning across the sector, perhaps even across the global HE sector, which is becoming more challenging as universities become more competitive. There is a strong incentive to collaborate even when competitiveness is high, as the rewards of a positive and sustainable research culture are a public good.

Embed psychological safety and inclusion

Psychological safety enables innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and honest reflection and learning⁵. Structured reflexive practices, like those introduced through the Thrive model, alongside safe discussion space and leadership development focused on behaviour and interpersonal relationships are essential to building positive research cultures. Normalising failure is key to learning, and has been increasingly recognised across the sector. An effective knowledge sharing requires deliberate infrastructure. For instance, sector-wide repositories of evaluated case studies, active communities of practice and forums where staff can share failures as well as successes without reputational risk.

Make Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) central to research culture

Evidence shows that experiences of research culture differ across demographics and structural inequalities persist. However, data gaps still limit full understanding, although this is an area of growing attention. Some institutions and funders have begun disaggregating research culture data by protected characteristics, gender, ethnicity, disability status and findings consistently point to differential experiences across these groups. Funding bodies are increasingly reporting data and trends on the diversity of applicants and recipients for grants (eg, see [UKRI](#)⁶), and making a commitment to ensure funded researchers are more

⁵ Jones, M.S., Cravens, A.E., Zarestky, J. et al. Facilitating psychological safety in science and research teams. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 11, 1632 (2024).

<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-04037-7>

⁶ UKRI (2023).

Diversity data for all research councils [dataset]

https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/uk.research.and.innovation.ukri./viz/EDI_Funding_data_2023/Summary

representative of the global population (eg, see [Wellcome](#)⁷). At the time of writing this guide, we still lack systematic, longitudinal data that would allow robust comparison across institutions and/or disciplines. Tailoring interventions to address these inequalities rather than treating research culture change as universally applicable remains an important and underserved priority.

Similar to previous steps, inclusion must be built into systems, not left to individuals.

Rethink research teams for impact

The [Thrive Team Convening approach](#) outlines five principles:

- 1 Appropriate expertise
- 2 Collective leadership
- 3 Inclusive governance
- 4 Development for all
- 5 Reflexive practice

Applying these principles into practice supports stronger and more diverse teams, inclusive project design, improved research outcomes and greater and more varied recognition of contributions.

Align reward and recognition with culture

Traditional systems reward outputs such as publications and grants, yet undervalue leadership behaviours, collaboration and culture contributions. While these do not directly produce publications and funding, they build a culture of innovation, risk-taking, learning and support, resulting in advanced research and measurable research excellence.

Commitment to EDI is essential for equitable career development. Research culture change initiatives can support more equitable succession planning by making development opportunities more visible and accessible, challenging informal sponsorship networks that tend to replicate existing hierarchies and building cultures where leadership potential is identified through transparent and inclusive processes. Mentoring, sponsorship programmes and career development frameworks that are explicitly designed with EDI in mind are among the more promising interventions that address directly the tendency of current systems to reproduce hierarchy and exclusion. Aligning recognition with the full range of contributions that sustain a healthy research culture is both an equity imperative and a practical condition for research excellence.

⁷ Couch, L., & Whitting, E. (2021). How we're putting diversity, equity and inclusion at the heart of our strategy. Wellcome. <https://wellcome.org/insights/articles/how-were-putting-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-heart-our-strategy>

Build space and time for culture work

In an environment of mounting workload and performance pressures, time for culture work may be treated as discretionary rather than essential. Without protected space and time, even well-designed culture initiatives will struggle to take root. Research leaders have a critical role to play in modelling this by designating time for collaboration, development, reflection and any other culture building activity that is part of the university strategy.

Structured interventions such as retreats, protected research time and dedicated non-meeting time, are valuable tools in this regard. They service multiple functions: signalling that research culture is a genuine institutional priority, creating conditions for shared best practice and breaking silos across teams.

Share learning across the sector

Sharing learning and good practice across the sector remains a significant challenge. A recent [UKRI report](#) analysing 347 research culture initiatives across the UK, reaches the conclusion that activity is widespread but highly fragmented, limiting the impact of each individual initiative. Many initiatives exist across funders, institutions, and grassroots groups. Yet they are often localised or short-term, poorly connected, and not consistently embedded. At the same time, they are both broad and deep⁸.

Initiative fatigue is a genuine risk, particularly in institutions where staff are already stretched. More effective knowledge sharing requires deliberate infrastructure. For instance, sector-wide repositories of evaluated case studies, active communities of practice and forums where staff can share failures as well as successes without reputational risk. An example of recent cross-sector working on a research culture initiative includes developing a framework for positive action in research funding (see [here](#)⁹).

Funders can support effective sharing by building knowledge exchange requirements into grants and by funding evaluations that are designed to be generalisable. At an institutional level, research culture teams benefit from having dedicated time and resource to engage with the wider sector, not just deliver internally. Ultimately, reducing duplication requires a degree of coordination at the sector level something that Advance HE, funding bodies and the Russell Group are well placed to facilitate given their wide reach.

There is a lack of accessible, visible channels through which to disseminate what is working and to learn from others facing similar challenges. Existing mechanisms such as conferences, while valuable, can be difficult to navigate and rarely provide the sustained, searchable or community-based exchange that culture change work requires.

⁸ Shift Insight, UK Reproducibility Network & Vitae. (2024). *Research Culture Initiatives in the UK*. <https://www.ukri.org/publications/research-initiatives-in-the-uk-report/research-culture-initiatives-in-the-uk-report/>

⁹ Van Krimpen, R., & McClement, F. (2026). A Framework for Positive Action in Research Funding and Careers. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19670021>

A dedicated platform, such as the proposed Good Practice Exchange, could address this gap by providing a centralised, accessible space for resources, case studies and peer learning. This kind of infrastructure would not only make good practice more visible but would help build the connective tissue across institutions that sector-wide culture change depends upon.

Ensure sustainability beyond funding

Funding bodies play a pivotal role in driving improvement in research culture and to-date have actively funded research culture initiatives (for instance, Research England, UKRI, Wellcome). Many now require applicants to their schemes to provide evidence of their plans to improve research culture. The intention of this being that this will (hopefully) lead to more researchers becoming familiar with and measurably demonstrating good practice.

However, institutional reliance on external funding can create dependency risks. Initiatives funded on short cycles can struggle to embed lasting change before funding ends. Additionally, funders and institutions should ensure that research culture initiatives are designed with robust, independent evaluation from the outset. Sustainability requires institutions to build research culture change into their core operating budgets and governance structures. It must be acknowledged, however, that higher education institutions, particularly in the UK, are operating under significant financial strain, with shrinking core budgets, restructuring and workforce pressures that make investment in research culture change difficult to prioritise. The risk is that research culture improvement becomes hardest to sustain precisely when the conditions that erode it are felt most sharply. This makes the case for funder flexibility and longer grant cycles stronger, not weaker. But it also points to a structural contradiction that neither institutions nor funders alone can resolve and signals a need for key stakeholders across the sector to come together to address it.

4 Conclusion

These guide reflects a growing consensus across the sector: Research culture is not a peripheral issue, it is central to delivering impactful research.

Across the initiatives presented at the event and the questions raised afterwards, three main themes are worth emphasising:

- 1 **Culture drives impact: How research is conducted, the norms, behaviours, and values that shape practice, determines not just what is produced, but who can contribute and what difference it makes.**
- 2 **Leadership enables culture: Culture change does not happen by accident. It requires leaders at every level who model the behaviours they ask of others, protect space for development, and hold themselves and their institutions accountable.**
- 3 **Systems sustain change: Lasting change requires reform of the structures including reward systems, governance, funding models, that shape incentives and signal what is truly valued.**

While creating an impact-forward research culture is a complex, non-linear and challenging process, it is essential for creating a clear strategy, outlining how research is conducted, who participates and what difference it makes. Creating an impact-forward research culture is not a nice to have, it is a crucial step in assuring a sustainable, innovative and impactful research ecosystem, both in the UK and globally.

Next steps for institutions

- + Use this or another guide as a set of principles to develop your impact-forward research culture - identify where current practice is strong, where gaps exist and where the conditions for change are most ready.
- + Prioritise developing a coherent, system-based strategy - electing intervention areas that connect and reinforce each other rather than isolated initiatives.
- + Co-create interventions with your research community - involve researchers and research enablers at all career stages in designing, delivering and evaluating culture change work.
- + Building in evaluation of initiatives from the outset - ensuring initiatives generate learning as well as activity.
- + Connecting across the sector - engage with Advance HE and other organisations across the sector to share progress, avoid duplication and contribute to a growing collective evidence base.

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