

Research Culture Insights: Revisiting the University of Leeds 2021 Big Conversation

Executive summary

The challenge

In common with other research institutions, we face significant challenges to our research culture. As acknowledged in our [research culture statement](#), our environment is not as diverse as it should be, and we often define success too narrowly or exclusively. Our funding mechanisms can be complex and overcompetitive, our structures can be rigidly hierarchical, and we need to do better at creating a safe and supportive environment that enables colleagues to flag when things are going wrong. These conditions can become normalised, yet their spread and impact has not yet been systematically analysed.

The response

To improve our research culture and environment, we need to identify our most pressing problems, in consultation with members of the University. This report makes use of an existing dataset elicited through the Big Leeds Conversation in July 2021 from volunteer respondents from the community. That survey focused on colleagues' expectations of each other, what they enjoy about working at the University, and their ideas on how we can become a values-led University.

To follow up, this *Research Culture Insights* project presents an independent secondary analysis of a subset of the original data. It focuses on around 1300 survey contributions by professional services and researchers (including PGRs) and categorises data relevant to research into the [five themes](#) of the 2021 research culture framework. The report will inform the development of our Research Culture strategy, as well as parallel work overseeing the implementation of the [University values](#).

Project aims

Run by external consultancy *Clever Together*, the overall aims of the *Research Culture Insights* project were to:

1. Highlight the positive and negative aspects of our research culture as experienced by survey respondents.
2. Identify current and potential interventions suggested by respondents, for adoption / adaptation by research leaders across the University.
3. Provide a baseline for our research culture initiatives.
4. Identify priority areas to inform the Research Culture strategy.
5. Demonstrate the University values of: Collaboration; Compassion; Inclusivity and Integrity.

The full report provides the background to the original Big Leeds Conversation (p.3), and the aims and methods of the Research Culture Insights project (p. 6-9). It then provides data and representative quotes on areas of strength (p.13), and challenges and solutions relating to the five themes: collegiate and supportive environment (p. 17-24); equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in research (p. 25-32); personal development, reward and recognition (p. 33-40); open research and impact (p. 41-46); and responsible research and innovation (p.47-54).

Project outcomes

This project:

- Reinforces the mandate to tackle the most pressing challenges to our research culture.
- Offers strategies for alleviating the negative and broadening the positive aspects of our research culture, enabling research leaders to create bespoke actions in their areas.
- Prompts ongoing consultation, e.g., by holding regular discussions at School, Faculty and Service levels to highlight best practice and gaps.
- Informs future surveys by highlighting where further information is needed.

Key findings by theme

1. **Collegiate and supportive environment** attracted the most contributions and engagement. Respondents agreed that one of the best things about working at the University is its people - how they collaborate, support, and relate to each other with kindness and respect, and create inclusive communities. **Sustainable ways of working (including workloads) and the need for colleagues at all levels to live the University's values** were raised as priority areas.
2. **Personal development, reward and recognition** was the second most discussed theme. Staff appreciate when their managers recognise their strengths and allow them to get on with their jobs with trust and autonomy. Many ideas and comments focused on **career development, fair wages**, and a reduction in **fixed-term contracts**.
3. 15% of contributions pertained to **EDI in research**. Respondents emphasised the need for meaningful action to make the University more equitable, diverse, and inclusive.
4. **Responsible research and innovation** received almost 10% of the contributions. Respondents spoke passionately: in favour of **sustainability** and strengthening a culture of **innovation**; and against **inefficient processes and practices** that impact productivity and wellbeing.
5. **Open research and impact** elicited the fewest comments. However, this theme revealed the need to better **reward and recognise** that colleagues are here on a bigger mission – to nurture a culture of learning and do meaningful research to make the world more just and sustainable. Also, respondents called for **research systems and processes** to be simpler and more joined-up across the University.

Recommendations by respondents

- a. To improve collegiality and supportiveness, respondents recommend adequate resourcing, flexible working practices that are consistent across the University, a facility (independent of HR) for colleagues to report concerns in confidence, development for leaders on how to establish and maintain trust, and a more equitable valuing of staff.
- b. Suggested interventions to improve EDI including creating an EDI strategy, allocating EDI roles and responsibilities across all Schools and management levels, a clear reporting process for colleagues witnessing discriminatory behaviours, eliminating homogenous panels, and training managers to better enact existing EDI policies.
- c. Solutions to improve personal development, reward, and recognition include more flexibility to develop skills, a route for development in every role, adequate staff resourcing, simplifying processes for recruitment and promotion and aligning them with University values, improvements to performance monitoring, and 360-degree feedback to improve managers' accountability.

- d. Suggested ways of tackling challenges to responsible research and innovation include investing in more efficient and standardised systems and processes, more flexibility and less bureaucracy, and a greater visibility of the consequences of breaches, malpractice, and other forms of bad behaviour.
- e. To improve open research and impact, respondents called for more opportunities to learn and share ideas by facilitating internal collaboration and welcoming external colleagues. They also called for more time and funding for innovation, and more transparent systems for research funding.

Current initiatives¹

Here we highlight some of the current initiatives across the University that address the challenges and recommendations above. More examples can be found in our list of [winning projects](#) from the 2022 Research Culture Awards. Taken together, they represent a useful piloting of initiatives, as well as providing a solid foundation for improvement. We encourage research leaders including Deans, Pro-Deans, Directors of Research, Institute Directors, Service Leads, and Principal Investigators to build on these projects in their respective areas. Please keep the Research Culture team updated with via researchculture@leeds.ac.uk.

1. Collegiate and supportive environment

A wealth of informal grassroots communities exist within research groups, Institutes, and Schools to provide support and exchange of ideas on improving research culture. Centrally, our [Research Culture Community](#) is our MS Teams space for sharing best practice, ideas, resources, and challenges in an open forum.

Our [Research Culture Cafes](#) enable colleagues to share experiences and propose suggestions for change. We have held 16 cafes since their inception in December 2020. We will soon enhance this provision with **Research Culture Clinics**, which will provide a drop-in for people to talk to members of the RC team to highlight issues or challenges they do not want to raise in a group and seek advice/support on how they can support RC locally.

There are several research groups implementing **codes of conduct**, and we share and promote these where appropriate. Click [here](#) for an example from the Sediment, Soil, and Pollutant Analysis Laboratory (SSPAL).

We have implemented an anonymous [reporting form](#) for colleagues to raise research culture issues or challenges. [Report and Support](#) is an **online disclosure and support tool** for members of our community to report incidents relating to harassment and misconduct that they have witnessed or experienced. We are seeking additional ways to enable colleagues to safely call out poor behaviour. We recognise that competition drives negative behaviour.

Our results in the 2021 **Research Excellence Framework** were communicated with less emphasis on the metrics and league tables than in previous rounds, and in line with our [responsible metrics statement](#).

We acknowledge the **workload implications** of our initiatives and action plans. We review areas of duplication and stop practice where there is no detriment. For example, we recently reviewed the degree of overlap between work upholding the [HR Excellence in Research Award](#) and the [Researcher Development Concordat](#). In light of substantial similarity, we decided not to apply for HR-Ex renewal

¹ This section is adapted from a related resource at <https://sway.office.com/2jVz0AmCVxeCJbTM>.

(after 12 years of holding the award), instead focusing our efforts on the implementation of the RD Concordat and how we can best align it with the [Technician Commitment](#).

The University is addressing problems presented by **fixed term contracts** with our [Fairer Futures for All](#) pledges.

We will continue to **align** our work in research culture with initiatives across the University, so researchers can focus efforts and not become overwhelmed with numerous competing strategies.

Research Culture is an **institutional priority**, recognised through its inclusion in our Key Performance Indicators and Faculty planning exercises.

2. Personal development, reward and recognition

We work closely with OD&PL to provide a range of [researcher development](#) opportunities, including for colleagues seeking to improve their [research leadership](#) skills.

The University-Wide [mentoring scheme](#) is available to all staff, and was recently enhanced with new matching criteria and mentor skills training. In addition, the [Aurora](#) programme provides a pool of female colleagues acting as mentors to others.

We are institutional signatory to the [Researcher Development Concordat](#) and [Technician Commitment](#), both championing a culture of **career development and progression**.

Evidencing a more positive research culture is now a key requirement in some **funding proposals**. We [support grant applicants](#) to think more deeply about research culture as part of their proposal and ongoing role in research leadership.

In 2022, our inaugural [Research Culture awards](#) recognised and shared the successful work our colleagues are engaged in across the institution.

HR and OD&PL plan to consider how well our **annual review systems** (Staff Review and Development Scheme and Annual Academic Meetings) serve individuals and managers. Within these meetings, researchers' yearly goals and related support needs may be facilitated by **new research expectations** documents at University and Faculty levels, as well as within some Schools.

We champion all careers with research as equally valuable.

3. Equality, diversity, and inclusion in research

The University has **senior leadership** from two Deans for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Head of EDI, an [EDI strategy](#), and a strong network of EDI leads across Schools and Faculties.

We provide **research grants for groups subject to negative biases**, for example colleagues on the [100 Black Women Professors Now](#) programme.

The **Decolonising Research** group has produced a position statement (planned for release early 2023) together with a bank of materials to support colleagues to develop this aspect of their work.

Several rounds of **recruitment** in research culture have provided interview questions in advance to make the process fairer and more inclusive, and we are working with HR to extend this. Our [case study](#) on the topic (viewed nearly 2000 times) has been commended across and beyond the sector.

The Women@Leeds Network is piloting ways of supporting colleagues returning to work after **parental/adoption leave**, as well as increasing equity in this provision throughout the University.

We are exploring **alternative research group structures**, with equal recognition for contributions and expertise.

The University received a Bronze [Athena Swan](#) award in 2021 for its work to support the career development of women. We are increasing our Faculty and School Athena Swan awards and at present hold 3 Bronze awards, 5 Silver, and in 2019 our School of Medicine was the first to receive a Gold award and remains 1 of only 2 medical schools in the UK to have achieved this.

4. Responsible research and innovation

We published our [Responsible Metrics Statement](#) to confirm our commitment to the responsible use of research metrics in assessing research performance. We are an institutional signatory to [DoRA](#).

We are embedding the responsible use of metrics in our [recruitment and promotion processes](#), including HR training.

We are an institutional signatory to the [Research Integrity Concordat](#).

5. Open research and impact

We provide a range of support for [open research practices](#) and have recently published our institutional [open research statement](#) outlining our commitments.

We host regular [Open Lunches](#) and are an enthusiastic supporter of **UKRN** and the new open publishing platform [Octopus](#).

In November 2022 at the international [Knowledge Equity Network](#) summit, we will launch our declaration to fair and equitable access to knowledge.

Our [Engaged for Impact awards](#) recognise and reward research teams who are committed to impact in all its forms.

Our **Engaged for Impact Strategy** is designed to deliver the University's vision for impact. Its aims are to develop a healthy and sustainable research impact culture, and to develop consistent and high-quality support throughout the research and impact lifecycle.

Leeds is a signatory of the [Manifesto for Public Engagement](#) and promotes research that makes a positive difference to society. In our University strategy 2020-2030 we explicitly recognise, value and support high-quality research that includes academic outputs, innovation, **social impact, public engagement**, and policy reform.

Our [Engaged Research](#) MS Team brings together a community (including academics, researchers, PGRs and professional staff) and provides support and resources including Public, Policy, Patient, School and Third Sector Engagement. It currently has over 1100 members.

Our annual [Be Curious](#) event is an open invitation to our local family audience to explore our research. It has been shortlisted at The Child Friendly Leeds Awards 2022. [Be Curious LATES](#) are exclusive online evening events which encourage adult audiences to engage with our research, and enable national and international reach (46% national, 14% international attendees).

Our [research culture surveys](#) are open and transparent, with findings available to the entire community.

We know a lot of work can appear to happen behind the scenes in a closed manner. We continue to provide open communication of our plans, progress, and hurdles.

Next steps

Mapping the recommendations from the Big Leeds Conversation against our current research culture initiatives above reveals further opportunities for improvement. **We strongly encourage research leaders to explore how these gaps can be addressed in their areas, in collaboration with their teams.**

The *Research Culture Insights* project comes early in our research culture journey. We created our formal research culture governance structures and released our [research culture statement](#) at the end of 2021. This reanalysis project represents baseline monitoring and consultation. We will continue this consultation and monitor and report changes to our culture regularly and in a variety of ways, e.g., via planned staff surveys and focus groups. Regular reports facilitated by the Research Culture team will communicate how the challenges are being addressed, and how the recommendations are being taken up. We continue to acknowledge that we have challenges to overcome.

Regarding dissemination, the full report will be scrutinised by the **University Executive Group** and **key research governance groups** to influence strategy at all levels and align with related strategies. This summary will be shared with **research leaders** through e.g., Faculty Research Committees, the DoRI forum, and Heads of School forum, to empower those with a local remit to apply tailored actions and align with strategy. We will abridge this executive summary and share it with the **wider UoL research community** via communications channels such as Inside Track.

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