Challenging culture, centring voice: reflections from the Wellcome I-REACCH project and its Mirror Leadership Team

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Abstract

This working paper introduces I-REACCH (Inclusive Research Environment Achieved through Culture Change), a two-year Wellcome-funded project based at the University of Leicester (May 2024 – April 2026) that explores research culture and seeks make recommendations for ways to improve inclusivity. While rooted in the University of Leicester's context, its findings aim to inform and inspire change across the wider UK research environment. Central to the project is its Mirror Leadership Team, an experimental model of collaborative leadership that brings diverse perspectives into decision-making. Early reflections show that genuine influence, rather than tokenistic consultation, enables meaningful engagement and cultural change. The model demonstrates that clear structures, protected time, and transparent communication are essential for effective participation. Including lived experience and multiple voices fosters empowerment, accountability, and the potential for long-term impact, offering a practical approach for research culture initiatives across the UK higher education sector.

Research culture change as co-creation

Research culture change is often spoken about in terms of outcomes: what changed, what improved, what impact was measured (Thelwall et al., 2022; Mingers & White, 2015). I-REACCH takes a different stance, focusing instead on how change is pursued, and who is included in the process. The project is anchored in the premise that research culture cannot meaningfully change without attention to voices, processes, and power (Wellcome Trust,

2020; UKRI, 2024). It aims to bring people together across hierarchies and experiences, to question assumptions, and to co-design and evaluate new approaches (Wellcome Trust, 2020).

This working paper introduces the project as it enters its second year of funding. We focus particularly on the formation and role of the Mirror Leadership Team – a group of colleagues who are not senior decision-makers, but who sit alongside the project's co-investigators and project team to reflect, challenge, and contribute to direction-setting. We also reflect on what it means to model inclusive leadership within the structure of a culture change project.

About the project

Across the UK research sector, there is growing recognition that research culture shapes not only the wellbeing and career progression of researchers, but also the quality, integrity, and impact of research itself (Wellcome Trust, 2020; Thelwall et al., 2022; Mingers & White, 2015). Persistent challenges – including competitive pressures, short-term contracts, narrow success metrics, and the undervaluing of collegial contributions – are seen as symptoms of systemic issues rather than isolated problems (House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2023; Mingers & White, 2015). In response, funders and institutions are increasingly emphasising the active shaping of research culture, promoting values such as inclusion, collaboration, openness, and integrity, and supporting interventions that are participatory, co-designed, and reflexive (Wellcome Trust, 2020; Shift Insight, UK Reproducibility Network & Vitae, 2024; UKRI, 2024). This body of evidence provides the rationale for I-REACCH: by piloting and evaluating interventions within a university context, the project aims to understand how research culture can be strengthened and sustained, benefiting both researchers and the research environment as a whole (Shift Insight, UK Reproducibility Network & Vitae, 2024).

I-REACCH is one of 22 research culture projects funded by Wellcome's Institutional Funding for Research Culture (IFRC) scheme in the UK. It is based at the University of Leicester and runs from May 2024 to April 2026. And responds to the growing body of evidence that research culture – how people experience their working lives in research environments – has a direct impact on individual wellbeing, equity of opportunity, and the quality and integrity of research itself (Wellcome Trust, 2020).

The project has five workstreams:

1. Rethinking equitable recruitment
2. Inclusive career progression
3. Inspiring research culture
4. Leading with empathy
5. Evaluation and dissemination

Each workstream is led by one or two co-investigators, supported by project staff and members of our Mirror Leadership Team, and draws on input from University staff and researchers at all levels, including postgraduate research students. The project is deliberately non-linear: different elements of work are being tested, iterated, and refined in parallel as the project progresses.

The Mirror Leadership Team: why and how

At the heart of I-REACCH is an attempt to do things differently – not just in what the project delivers, but in how it is run. The Mirror Leadership Team was created to offer a

counterbalance to traditional project leadership models and is loosely based on the [Shadow Board concept](#). It also draws on our positive experiences with a [Mirror College Leadership Team](#) in our College of Life Sciences. In addition, and with a very different role to our formal and traditional governance structures (such as an Internal Advisory Group and an external Critical Friends' Network) the Mirror Team was designed to hold a mirror to the project itself: to reflect, to question, and to bring lived experience and multiple perspectives into the core of the direction setting, idea generation and decision-making processes. Indeed, the Mirror Team were key members of the group that developed the initial project concept.

The inaugural Mirror Leadership Team was formed organically in response to the Wellcome funding call, guided by recommendations for membership rather than open recruitment methods. Since then, new members have been recruited via an open call. The selection process prioritised insight, motivation and potential to shape change rather than career stage or seniority. The Team meets regularly with the project staff and co-investigators (both for whole project discussions, and for specific workstreams), and also leads some areas of work directly – for example, hosting 'hub' discussions, leading the flexible funding scheme, and representing the project externally at conferences.

Early reflections

Two of this paper's authors are members of the Mirror Team. This reflective section is framed as a conversation between the paper's narrator and these two team members. At times, it includes their direct quotes; at others, it draws on a composite of conversations with the wider Mirror Team. The focus is on the barriers individuals have faced, the contributions they make, and the perspectives that shaped both their decision to join and their ongoing involvement.

Looking back over the first year, how has the mirror team contributed to shaping the direction of I-REACCH? In what ways have you challenged assumptions, raised difficult questions, or brought fresh perspectives that have influenced the project's decisions or ways of working?

> *Looking back over the first year of I-REACCH, I can see how the mirror team has had a meaningful impact in shaping the direction and culture of the project. What's made this possible, I think, is that we've been invited in, not just to observe, but to influence – to question, to reflect, and to push the project to do better. There's been a genuine openness from the core team to hearing what we have to say, even when it's uncomfortable or challenges the status quo.*

> *For me personally, I've worked closely with two members of the project team, and also with some of the workstream leads, and I've felt so valued as a team member. After more than 20 years at the University of Leicester, and nearly 30 years in academia – including being a PGR student and a Teaching Assistant at a university in London and, before that, a lecturer in South America – this is the first time I've been asked what I think are the barriers to research, and what my ideas and strategies are for lowering them. It's been incredibly empowering, especially when I've raised concerns about barriers facing carers, neurodivergent researchers, and those of us from immigrant backgrounds. To be able to say those things in a room and see people nodding, smiling, recognising, and sometimes empathising with those experiences – that's not something I've encountered before. It's been deeply affirming and hopefully the beginning of longer-term initiatives to lower barriers to research. I feel that it is through sharing personal experiences that things change.*

Across the Mirror Team, I know others have brought similarly important perspectives. Some have asked thoughtful questions about equity in access to events, or about who is and isn't engaging with the project and why. Others have challenged how decisions are communicated – pointing out that without clarity and transparency, it's harder to build trust or feel part of the process. We've also reflected on the complexity of the project itself, and how that can sometimes make it harder to engage fully – especially during peak teaching times or amidst the pressures of research.

We have also reflected on how difficult it is to bring about change, especially sustainable long-term change. We've found that engagement is a big part of it, and that it's difficult to drive forward without support from the top.

What's helped us contribute is the sense that we're not being 'consulted' in a tokenistic way, but invited to shape something real. That's come through in the way our voices have influenced event design, workshop facilitation, and even the framing of key outputs. We've been part of conversations about how leadership is defined, how recruitment could be rethought, and how we evaluate impact beyond traditional academic metrics.

In a sector where it's easy to feel disconnected from decision-making, being part of the Mirror Team has given me – and I think many of us – a rare sense of ownership and influence. We've helped shape I-REACCH not just by what we've said, but by being part of a model that values reflection, dialogue, and lived experience. And that, to me, is what culture change should look like.

Key point: The Mirror Team model shows that providing participants with genuine influence – not tokenistic consultation – fosters meaningful engagement and cultural change. Diverse perspectives, combined with reflective dialogue, ensure that decisions are informed by lived experience (Wellcome Trust, 2020; Shift Insight, UK Reproducibility Network & Vitae, 2024).

What has felt effective and what has been more difficult or frustrating about the Mirror Team model so far? And what changes might strengthen this approach in year 2, and what would you suggest to others hoping to create a similar structure in their own projects or institutions?

Being part of the Mirror Team has been both rewarding and at times challenging. What I've found most effective is the way the model creates space for us to contribute honestly and reflectively. I've felt that my perspective has been valued – not just in a superficial way, but as part of a serious effort to shape the direction of I-REACCH. That's come through especially clearly in things like the co-design workshops and funding reviews, where I could see the impact of our input on real decisions. It's not often in university projects that you're invited in as a critical friend, rather than expected to deliver a predefined task – that's been refreshing. However, even when I felt listened to, it was often by project members who weren't the actual decision makers – and by the time my message reached those who were, it sometimes became diluted or misinterpreted.

I've also appreciated the opportunities to work across disciplines and career stages. Some of the conversations I've had – both formally and informally – have really helped me to see research culture issues through different lenses. The model brings together people who wouldn't usually be in the same room,

and that's been one of its strengths. Events like the away day and the main hub meetings made that particularly visible – being able to hear from others, move around tables, and build up a shared picture of what matters to people has been powerful. It gives you a perspective that I wouldn't normally have on how things can be done differently, perspectives I never gained, even after nearly 30 years in academia.

That said, it hasn't always been easy to stay connected. Communication across the project can feel quite complex, and during busy periods, I've found it hard to keep track of what's happening – even within my own workstream. The volume of emails, sometimes with little notice about meetings or actions, can be overwhelming, especially when juggling other responsibilities. I've missed meetings because they were arranged too last-minute, or simply struggled to prioritise I-REACCH alongside teaching and research demands. At times, I've also felt that while the project's ambition is exciting, it doesn't always align with the time people have available or the clarity they need to contribute meaningfully. I think the model works best when there's more structure – regular check-ins, clear expectations, and alternative ways to engage beyond meetings. Something as simple as a shared document with updates could make a big difference.

I often felt I had to "squeeze" in my participation around other commitments, because no time had been formally allocated for my involvement. Unlike students, who are paid for their time, academics are expected to take on this work in addition to everything else – rather than being relieved of other duties to make space for it. It felt like an afterthought. If this is to be a meaningful process of reflection and action, then having the time to engage properly is essential. In fact, this reflects one of the core barriers to improving research culture: we are consistently asked to take on extra work – whether for teaching, administration, or initiatives like this – without being given extra time. The result is that research time is squeezed. There is also an uncomfortable divide in how this plays out. It sometimes feels like a small group of senior academics are largely protected from these pressures and can prioritise research, while the rest are left to absorb the additional workload. This dual structure reinforces many of the existing challenges in the research environment.

Overall, though, I think the Mirror Team model is one of the things that makes I-REACCH distinctive. It's not perfect – no structure is – but it's created a space for challenge, reflection, and collaboration that feels genuinely inclusive. With a bit more clarity and support, and especially quality time, I think it could become a really strong example of what meaningful engagement can look like in research culture work.

Key point: The Mirror Team model works best when participation is supported by clear structures, communication, and protected time. Without this, engagement can be uneven, reflecting broader systemic pressures in academia (Mingers & White, 2015; Wellcome Trust, 2020).

What does it mean to you personally to be part of the Mirror Team? How has your involvement affected how you think about voice, inclusion, and your own role within research culture?

As higher education institutions continue to grapple with building a better research culture, I-REACCH has provided the Mirror Team with the opportunity to be part of a group committed to identifying and challenging the issues that undermine the quality of the research environment. As was intended, the Mirror Team holds a mirror to the project: we reflect, we question, and we bring lived experience and multiple perspectives into the core of decision-making.

Personally, my educational philosophy is that all voices should be included in higher education decision-making. We need to challenge our assumptions – and our intentions – by listening to those who aren't always invited into these conversations. My views have been shaped by over 15 years in the sector, including work as a regulator, and through my PhD research, which focuses on the impact of student voice on higher education quality assurance. That work reaffirmed what I've always believed: that diverse voices aren't just important – they're essential. When we include those voices in a meaningful way, we create the conditions for change.

Being part of the Mirror Team has strengthened that conviction. One of the things I've valued most is how much this group brings together people with different life experiences – early career researchers, mature students, members of the global majority, those who've worked in academia and those who are newer to it. It's not always comfortable work. It requires courage to share experiences that haven't always been heard or taken seriously in institutional spaces. But in this team, there's a shared commitment to honesty and integrity – we're not here to rubber stamp. We're here to speak the truth about the barriers we've experienced and seen.

I bring my own perspective as a PhD student from the global majority, a mature student, and someone who's worked in a UK university in a research role. Across the five workstreams, I've contributed to developing the research leader's toolkit, supported the first round of the I-REACCH Inclusive Research Culture Funding Scheme, and worked on a Creative Engagement Fellowship. I've worked closely with the evaluation workstream too, co-creating an approach that values lived experience alongside more traditional forms of evidence.

These contributions are part of something bigger – a team effort to ensure the project remains accountable and grounded. Others in the team have said that being involved has given them confidence to speak up, to see that their voice matters, and that their challenges are shared. For many of us, this is the first time we've been invited to offer advice and critique to senior academics in a way that's been genuinely welcomed.

Through this experience, I've become more reflective about my own role in shaping research culture. I've seen how powerful it can be when people are given space to share their perspectives – and when those perspectives lead to action. I hope this project helps all of us, individually and collectively, to

reimagine how research can be done. We need research culture to be more inclusive, more open, and more honest – not just at Leicester, but across the sector.

Key point: Meaningful participation in research culture initiatives requires a commitment to including diverse voices, recognising lived experience, and creating safe spaces for honest dialogue (Wellcome Trust, 2020; UKRI, 2024). When this is done, it can empower participants and strengthen the wider project's impact.

Next steps

Following the preparation of this paper and informal meetings between the Project Manager and each mirror team member, we are making a number of process-oriented improvements to enhance collaboration in the second year of the project:

1. Setting up a central repository to store our key communications with the mirror team, to help with inbox management.
2. Encouraging each workstream to have short, regular check-ins.
3. Encouraging each workstream lead to provide a written summary of meetings for those who are unable to attend.
4. Providing more advance notice for whole-project activities.
5. Sharing a timeline or visual overview of progress across the different workstreams to help members situate their own contributions within the wider project.
6. Providing a map of evaluation and feedback surveys from I-REACCH and from the wider University as these can be difficult to navigate.

During the one-to-one meetings, some mirror team members also emphasised the importance of measuring impact in a way that goes beyond academic metrics. They raised the idea of tracking whether people felt genuinely listened to and whether the project led to meaningful change, especially for underrepresented groups or those with structural disadvantages. There was also a suggestion to explore social return on investment as a way of articulating the value of interventions.

Over the next year, the project will continue to explore how the Mirror Leadership Team can challenge and shape Wellcome I-REACCH, and how I-REACCH can help Mirror Team members to develop in their careers. We hope that by documenting and reflecting on this model, we can offer insight for other institutions and projects seeking to experiment with inclusive leadership structures.

As this working paper series develops, we plan to share further reflections on the practical, emotional and intellectual labour involved in research culture change – and to highlight the process, not just the products, of this work.

3227 words (including Abstract)

Acknowledgements

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