

Transforming research culture: overcoming barriers and fostering sustainable change in Higher Education

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Abstract

I-REACCH (Inclusive Research Environment Achieved through Culture Change) is a Wellcome-funded initiative based at the University of Leicester, focused on co-designing practical interventions to improve research culture. A separate working paper offers a fuller account of the project's approach and ambitions (Angell, Ladipo and Lemos, 2025).

This working paper explores insights from two I-REACCH participatory workshops on research culture, held at the University of Leicester in June 2025 and January 2026. The workshops brought together researchers, professional services staff, and research culture practitioners to reflect on collaborative approaches, barriers and enablers, and the long-term sustainability of research culture change in higher education. Discussions were structured around guided questions and visual prompts to support collaborative reflection.

Across the two sessions, participants explored collaboration as a mechanism for change, the structural and cultural barriers shaping research environments, the conditions required to sustain change over time, and the impact of wider sector pressures.

The findings highlight that while there is strong commitment and emerging good practice, sustaining change requires clearer structures, recognition, and continuity. I-REACCH is supporting a series of activities to begin to address these challenges.

Introduction

Across the UK research sector, research culture is now widely recognised as central to the quality, integrity, and sustainability of research, as well as to the wellbeing and development of those working within it (Wellcome Trust, 2020; Shift Insight, UK Reproducibility Network and Vitae, 2024). This recognition has emerged from a convergence of concerns about how research is funded, evaluated, and experienced in practice, alongside growing attention to the systems and structures that shape research environments. Increasingly, research culture is understood not as an abstract concept, but as something that directly influences how research is conducted, how people collaborate, and how careers are sustained.

Building on this, recent sector work has sought to define research culture more explicitly, emphasising the interplay between systems, behaviours, and relationships that shape research environments (Vitae, 2023). A consistent thread across policy reports and sector commentary is that competitive pressures, short-term contracts, and narrow metrics of success have created an environment that many researchers experience as insecure, exclusionary, or unsustainable (Wellcome Trust, 2020; House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2023). These dynamics are not only experienced at an individual level, but are embedded within institutional and sector-wide systems.

These concerns are closely linked to the ways in which research is assessed and rewarded. Longstanding critiques of performance metrics highlight how these can incentivise particular behaviours while marginalising others, particularly those related to collaboration, inclusion, and community building (Wilsdon et al., 2015; Curry, Gadd and Wilsdon, 2023).

More recent work on responsible research assessment reinforces this, showing how evaluation frameworks shape behaviour and can unintentionally distort research practice where they are not aligned with institutional values and priorities (Curry, Gadd and Wilsdon, 2023). Together, these critiques have contributed to a growing recognition that improving research culture requires not only changes in individual behaviour, but more fundamental shifts in systems, incentives, and structures.

In response, funders and sector bodies have moved beyond diagnosing problems towards identifying and supporting practical approaches to change. This includes increased emphasis on co-designed interventions, community-led approaches, and the importance of sustained institutional investment (Wellcome Trust, 2025; UK Research and Innovation, 2024), alongside emerging practice-based work that highlights the mechanisms required for coordinated and sustained research culture reform across institutions (Clark et al., 2026). Initiatives across the sector are experimenting with new models of leadership, collaboration, and evaluation, alongside efforts to embed cultural considerations within funding frameworks and institutional strategies (Shift Insight, UK Reproducibility Network and Vitae, 2024). What connects these efforts is a shared understanding that research culture is not fixed, but can be actively shaped, supported, and sustained over time.

Despite this progress at policy and institutional levels, much of the existing policy and sector-focused work continues to focus on frameworks, strategies, or institutional perspectives. There

remains less attention to how research culture work is experienced and enacted in practice, particularly by those directly involved in designing and delivering change. There is also a need to better understand how individuals and groups navigate competing pressures whilst attempting to sustain positive change within complex organisational environments.

To begin to address this gap, this working paper draws on two participatory workshops held at the University of Leicester in mid-2025 and early 2026. These workshops brought together researchers, professional services staff, and research culture practitioners to reflect on their experiences of collaboration, barriers and enablers, and the long-term sustainability of research culture initiatives. By focusing on participant perspectives and lived experiences, this paper offers a grounded account of how research culture work is understood and experienced in practice.

Rather than offering a top-down or policy-led perspective, the analysis centres the lived, relational, and often uncertain nature of research culture change. In so doing, it highlights how individuals and groups are working within and across institutional structures to build more inclusive and sustainable research environments, and the challenges they encounter in trying to do so.

Methodology

The workshops were not originally conceived as research exercises, but as opportunities to listen, learn, and share. The initial workshop was delivered as part of a conference session, and its positive reception led to the development of two further workshops at the University of Leicester. These subsequent sessions form the basis of the analysis presented here.

Together, these workshops provided complementary perspectives on research culture work across different groups within the institution. Eighteen people participated across the two workshops. The first workshop formed part of an I-REACCH Away Day and was attended by 13 participants drawn from the project's co-investigators, project team, and Mirror Leadership Team. The second workshop was opened to colleagues across the University and attracted five participants, including researchers, and members of the Mirror Leadership Team who had not taken part in the earlier workshop.

These participatory workshops created space for structured discussion and collective reflection. Participants included researchers and professional services staff with experience of research culture initiatives, and the sessions surfaced a wide range of concerns, experiences, and ideas. Participants were invited to contribute, both in writing and through semi-structured discussion, and gave consent for their input to be used in this paper.

Participation in the first workshop was voluntary and open to all members attending the Away Day. For the second workshop, recruitment was intentionally broadened beyond the I-REACCH project through invitations circulated via the project's email newsletter, internal University communications, and social media channels. Attendance was open to any interested colleague. This approach sought to encourage participation from a wider range of perspectives whilst recognising that attendance remained self-selecting.

The workshop format was similar in both settings. At the in-person workshop with the I-REACCH team, groups were each given one open-ended question about collaboration, barriers and enablers, sector pressures, or the sustainability of research culture work, with optional sub-questions to guide discussion (Appendix). These sheets included not only the discussion prompts but also artwork,¹ designed to inspire reflection and creativity and to foster an open, engaging atmosphere. These are included in the Findings section of this paper.

The workshops were facilitated by the second author, with the first author providing facilitation support and note-taking. In the first workshop, participants remained with their allocated question throughout the workshop and were encouraged to write directly onto the printed sheets during discussion. Each table nominated a representative to provide a verbal summary to the wider group. The first author took contemporaneous notes during these plenary discussions to capture reflections that were not recorded in writing.

The second workshop was held online, using Microsoft Whiteboard in place of paper sheets, and the session was recorded and transcribed through Microsoft Teams.

Our analysis draws on participant-written notes (on paper or Whiteboard), facilitator notes of verbal feedback, and the recorded transcript. All data were reviewed in full and grouped thematically. Selected quotes are used to illustrate key themes and amplify participants' voices.

This analysis offers a concise thematic summary of the feedback gathered across the two workshops. It does not aim to be exhaustive, but reflects the conversations that took place and highlights recurring ideas, as well as variation in how these are experienced across different groups. While the initial workshop was delivered as part of a conference session as a space for reflection and discussion, subsequent sessions were conducted with participant consent to support a more formal analysis. The aim is to ensure that the findings presented here may be useful to others working to shape more inclusive research cultures.

Findings & implications

The two workshops explored how collaborative research culture work is unfolding in different contexts. Each brought its own focus and tone. However, across both sessions, participants shared a desire to preserve what matters in research culture, even under increasing pressure, and to co-create more inclusive, sustainable ways of working.

The findings are organised thematically. Within each theme, we highlight recurring ideas, variation in experience across participants, and implications for practice.

¹ Artwork created by Eylul Oguz, I-REACCH Project Coordinator. Used with permission.

1. Collaboration as a mechanism for culture change: how might we work together?

Across both workshops, collaboration was consistently framed as important, but not something that happens easily or automatically. One group described the need to collaborate to ensure that research funding is awarded to diverse groups so that inclusivity is prioritised. The sense was that we could achieve “*greater impact*” collectively rather than individually, and that effective collaboration takes practice.

Participants also highlighted that collaboration is already taking place in a number of ways, including examples such as “crossover conversations”, the “pollination of PPIE [Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement] practices across disciplinary boundaries”, and broader engagement with initiatives such as the Wellcome research culture community. In the second workshop, this was echoed through reflections on existing collaborative practices across disciplines and with external partners, particularly in applied or clinical contexts.

However, these examples were often described as fragmented or uneven. Collaboration tends to happen within specific teams or disciplines, rather than across the institution as a whole. As one participant put it, there are “*pockets of great stuff happening*”, but limited visibility beyond those immediate contexts. This lack of visibility contributes to potential duplication of activity, with participants noting the importance of sharing work so that they are “*not reinventing the wheel*”.

Time emerged as a key constraint for collaboration. Participants emphasised that meaningful collaboration requires dedicated space, yet creating this within existing workloads is difficult; timetabling and existing commitments were repeatedly identified as challenging. Opportunities to come together are therefore inconsistent and difficult to coordinate across academic Schools or Colleges.

Engagement was another challenge. Even where opportunities exist, participants reflected on the difficulty of getting people to participate. This was linked to questions about clarity and relevance, with participants noting that it is not always obvious which activities are intended for them, or the benefits and outcomes of participating.

In summary, collaboration was seen as both essential and constrained. There is clear value in working across boundaries, but without dedicated time, intentional institutional support, and more consistent structures, these practices risk remaining localised rather than becoming embedded across the institution.

WHAT CAN WE ACHIEVE TOGETHER THAT WE CAN'T DO ALONE?



2. Barriers and enablers: what gets in the way, and how might we work around it?

Participants reflected on the practical and structural challenges that shape whether collaboration can take place in meaningful ways. When discussing barriers, participants across both workshops focused first on structural challenges such as workload, dedicated time, and resource constraints. As stated by a participant, *“added workload, especially as there’s a loss of staff”*, has resulted in reduced capacity to engage in research culture activity.

This was closely linked to broader financial pressures, which were seen to shape priorities, limit flexibility and reduce ability to focus on activities that are not directly tied to core outputs. As noted by one participant, there is *“less time for research culture”*.

Participants referred to pressures associated with the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the broader focus on measurable outputs, indicating a strong perception that institutional systems do not always align with research culture goals. This creates tension with research culture activities aimed at collaboration, inclusion, and community building, which are less easily quantified.

Alongside these structural issues, participants identified cultural and interpersonal challenges. These included difficulties in communication, particularly where there is a lack of empathy or understanding between colleagues. One group highlighted issues with *“ambitious PIs [principal investigators] not seeing others’ viewpoints”*, and the challenges of addressing these dynamics before they become entrenched.

There was also discussion of how these issues can escalate, with participants noting that by the time formal processes are involved, conflicts are often already well established. This points to the importance of earlier, more informal interventions, and the need for support in areas such as communication and mediation.



At the same time, participants were clear about what helps. There was a suggestion that more emphasis on “support and training in empathy and how to deal with others” could help address some of these challenges. This reflects a broader understanding that research culture is shaped not only by structures, but also by everyday interactions and behaviours.

Other enablers included supportive line management, opportunities for peer connection, and the creation of spaces where people can come together through mentoring schemes, informal groups, and structured opportunities for discussion.

However, these enablers were not consistently available. Experiences varied across the institution, with support often dependent on specific individuals and the embedded research culture within academic Schools or Colleges. There was also a more collective framing of responsibility, with references to “allyship”,

“empowerment”, “advocacy”, and the idea that improving research culture is not confined to specific roles or projects.

In summary, barriers and enablers were understood as interconnected. Structural constraints, institutional priorities, and interpersonal dynamics all shape how research culture is experienced in practice.

3. Sustaining change: what supports lasting impact?

Building on these barriers, participants turned to the question of sustainability, shifting the discussion from immediate concerns to longer-term change. Across both workshops, participants were clear that isolated or short-term initiatives are unlikely to lead to lasting impact.

There was particular concern about what happens when funded projects come to an end. Participants questioned how momentum is maintained, and who takes responsibility for continuing work once initial funding or coordination ends. This was captured in reflections on one-off initiatives, and uncertainty about “*who’s going to continue it*” beyond the life of a project.

Sustainability was often framed in terms of embedding. There was a sense that projects such as I-REACCH provide a recognisable space for engagement, and that sustaining this presence in some form is important. Participants further emphasised the need for research culture to be integrated into everyday practice rather than treated as an additional or temporary activity. This includes concerns about: the loss of a clear identity or focal point for research culture work once a named initiative ends; aligning project aims and objectives with institutional priorities; ensuring leadership support; and creating structures that support ongoing engagement.

The idea of scale also emerged as important. Participants spoke about the need to reach a “*tipping point*” or “*critical mass*”, where new ways of working become normalised and self-sustaining. Without this, there is a risk that changes remain marginalised rather than becoming embedded across the institution.

Value and recognition of research culture was another key theme. Participants questioned whether current systems adequately value research culture work, asking whether “*metrics for promotion... could be tweaked or adapted*”. There was a clear sense that without formal recognition, this work will continue to sit at the margins.

Suggestions for strengthening sustainability included creating research culture networks, embedding activities within existing institutional structures, and developing roles or responsibilities to support ongoing work.

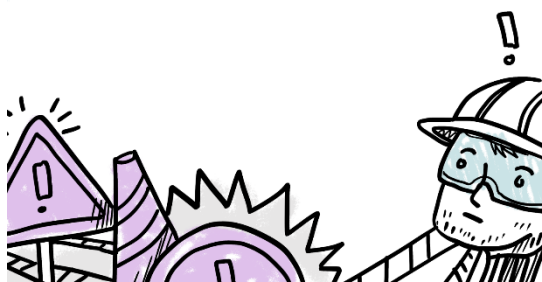
However, these suggestions were often accompanied by an acknowledgement of constraints, particularly in relation to funding, workload, and institutional capacity. Sustainability was therefore understood as a complex challenge, requiring both structural changes and ongoing commitment.

In summary, sustaining change was perceived as embedding research culture rather than a one-off project aimed at improving research culture. Across both workshops, participants emphasised the need for continuity, recognition, and clearer structures, alongside the constraints of time and resource. Without these, there was a shared concern that activity would remain short-term and dependent on individuals rather than becoming part of ongoing institutional practice.



4. Responding to sector pressures: what do we risk losing, and how might we preserve what matters?

These questions of sustainability were closely connected to wider sector pressures, which participants saw as shaping both what is possible and what is at risk. The final question prompted participants to situate their experiences within the wider higher education context. Across both workshops, there was strong recognition of the pressures facing the sector, including financial constraints, staffing reductions, and increasing workload. These pressures were seen to have direct implications for research culture.



Participants noted reduced time for activities beyond core responsibilities, alongside concerns about declining academic freedom where “*money follows investment*”. Discussion focused on what might be lost in this context, and identified risks including the loss of “*expertise, institutional memory, [and] staff morale*”, as well as a general sense that colleagues may feel “*lost*” within the system. There was also concern that under pressure, institutions may revert to established practices, resulting in “*more of the same*” rather than innovation.

At the same time, participants emphasised the importance of preserving what matters. This was often framed in terms of people and relationships. One contribution highlighted the need to “*invest in people... our human resource is what we sell*”, particularly in relation to early career researchers and postgraduate researchers.

There was discussion about how the sector responds collectively. Participants suggested the need for stronger collaboration across institutions, including ideas such as regional research culture hubs and shared training or networks. There was also a sense that the sector could do more to advocate for itself, with participants noting that universities do not always “*shout loudly enough about our successes*”.

Despite the challenges, there was also recognition that the current context prompts reflection, particularly in relation to what universities prioritise and how they operate.

In summary, these discussions highlight both the fragility and importance of research culture in the current environment, and the need to balance immediate pressures with longer-term commitments to change.

Discussion and implications

This working paper explores the experiences and perspectives shared during two participatory workshops held at the University of Leicester, shedding light on how research culture work is understood and experienced across different groups within a single institution. These findings point to a set of interconnected challenges and opportunities that shape how research culture work is enacted in practice. The discussions highlight both the value of this work and the challenges involved in sustaining it over time.

Across both workshops, collaboration emerged as central to research culture activity. Participants described its role in amplifying diverse voices, building relationships, and enabling forms of impact that would be difficult to achieve alone. At the same time, collaboration was often experienced as uneven and dependent on local contexts, with limited opportunity for

sharing practice more widely. This points to a tension between strong, localised examples of good practice and a lack of visibility or coordination at an institutional or sector level.

Structural constraints were a consistent theme throughout. Financial pressures, increasing workload, and staff losses were seen to limit the time and capacity available for engagement in research culture activity. These constraints are not only practical, but also shape what is prioritised and rewarded within the institution. Participants highlighted the continued dominance of metrics, outputs, and performance frameworks, and the difficulty of aligning these with relational and inclusive ways of working. As a result, research culture activities often remain additional rather than embedded, despite widespread recognition of their importance.

At the same time, the findings highlighted variability in how research culture is experienced. While some participants noted supportive environments, access to networks, and opportunities to engage, others pointed to isolation, lack of clarity, and limited access to these same opportunities. This unevenness reflects differences across roles, contract types, disciplines, local leadership, and academic Schools or Colleges. It also raises questions about who is able to participate in, and benefit from research culture initiatives, and who may be excluded or overlooked.

A further point emerging across both workshops is that participants were, by and large, already engaged with or supportive of research culture improvement. This reflects the ongoing challenge of broadening participation beyond those who are already invested in this work. Reaching colleagues who are constrained by time, sceptical of the agenda, or less connected to research culture conversations remains a significant and unresolved issue.

The question of sustainability brings these themes together. Participants were clear that one-off interventions, however valuable, are unlikely to lead to lasting change. Instead, there is a need to move beyond project-based activity towards more embedded approaches, where research culture is integrated into institutional structures, systems, and everyday practice. This includes recognition within workload and promotion frameworks, clearer ownership and coordination, and the development of spaces and roles that can sustain activity over time.

These findings also sit within a broader landscape of research culture activity across the UK higher education sector. Universities, funders, and sector organisations are increasingly creating opportunities for collaboration, shared learning, and collective reflection on research culture through conferences, networks, communities of practice, and institutional initiatives. The workshop format reported here originated from a conference session attended by participants from across the sector, reflecting wider interest in questions of collaboration, sustainability, and culture change. While approaches vary between institutions, many are grappling with similar challenges around participation, recognition, sustainability, and embedding change within existing structures. The themes identified through these workshops therefore resonate beyond the University of Leicester and contribute to wider conversations about how positive and sustainable research cultures can be supported in practice.

These findings reinforce the view of research culture as a living, relational, and systemic dimension of higher education. It shapes how individuals experience their work, how

relationships are formed and maintained, and how institutions respond to both internal and external pressures. Supporting positive research culture is, therefore, not only about implementing specific initiatives, but also about creating the conditions in which those initiatives can take root, thrive and continue.

Looking ahead, there is a need to build on existing work by focusing on embedding and sustainability. This includes strengthening institutional structures that support collaboration and participation, recognising and rewarding research culture activity, and ensuring that opportunities are visible and accessible across the organisation. There is also a need to continue engaging with the lived experiences of those involved, particularly where these highlight disparities and challenges that may otherwise remain unseen and unheard.

To summarise these insights, the key messages from the findings are set out below:

Key messages from the findings

The analysis highlights a number of interconnected issues shaping research culture in practice:

- collaboration is widely valued but remains uneven and dependent on local contexts;
- structural constraints, including workload and resource pressures, limit engagement with research culture activity;
- research culture initiatives are often experienced as additional rather than embedded within core practice;
- access to support, networks, and opportunities varies significantly across roles, disciplines, and local environments;
- sustaining change beyond funded projects remains a key challenge, particularly where ownership and responsibility are unclear; and
- wider sector pressures are shaping both what is possible and what is at risk in research culture work.



Above: Workshop prompt materials used to support discussion across four thematic areas: collaboration, barriers and enablers, sustaining change, and sector pressures.

Taken together, these findings point towards several priorities for institutions (including ours) seeking to strengthen research culture, grounded in the themes and perspectives emerging from these workshops, illustrated below.

Implications for practice:

- create **dedicated time and space** for collaboration, reflection, and engagement, recognising these as core rather than additional activities;
- improve **visibility and coordination** of existing initiatives to reduce duplication and support shared learning;
- **embed** research culture within institutional structures, including workload allocation, promotion criteria, and leadership responsibilities;
- support early and informal approaches to addressing interpersonal challenges, including **training in communication, empathy, and conflict resolution**;
- ensure that opportunities to engage in research culture activity are **accessible**, clearly communicated, and relevant to a diverse range of roles;
- develop mechanisms for **sustaining activity** beyond individual projects, including clearer ownership, ongoing resourcing, and integration into existing systems; and
- strengthen cross-institutional collaboration and collective advocacy to respond to wider sector pressures.

In response to these findings, I-REACCH is supporting a series of mini-projects designed to address specific challenges identified through this work. These initiatives focus on areas such as supporting teams to embed I-REACCH outputs into day-to-day practice, developing resources to help teams reflect on their research environments, and establishing an institution-wide, grass-roots community of practice for research culture. While these projects are ongoing, they reflect a commitment to moving from reflection to action, and to developing sustainable approaches that can be integrated into institutional practice.

Finally, this work invites reflection on your own context. What spaces exist for collaboration and connection? What are the barriers that limit participation, where do they sit, and how might they be addressed? And, crucially, how might the work you are doing contribute not only to immediate change, but to change that can be sustained over time?

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Appendix

At the in-person workshop, participants were divided into small groups, each assigned one core question with associated sub-questions to guide discussion. Groups remained with their allocated question for the duration of the session and provided written responses, followed by verbal feedback during a plenary session during which the first author took notes. At the online workshop, participants worked through all questions collectively, using discussion and note-taking by the first author on a Microsoft Whiteboard.

The questions for the workshops were as follows:

- 1. What research culture issues are you tackling in your own context – and how?**
 - What works well, and what's proving more difficult?
 - What support or approaches might help you go further?
- 2. What can we achieve together that we can't do alone?**
 - Where is collaboration already making a difference?
 - What gets in the way, and how might we work around or through that?
- 3. What helps or hinders long-term culture change following funded projects like I-REACCH?**
 - What conditions support lasting change, and where are the sticking points?
 - What new opportunities or ways of working could strengthen sustainability?
- 4. How can projects like I-REACCH – and universities more broadly – respond to ongoing sector pressures?**
 - Are there new or creative responses we should be exploring?
 - What do we risk losing, and how might we preserve what matters?

About the authors

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