Flourish
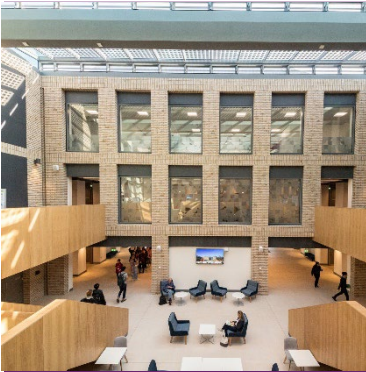
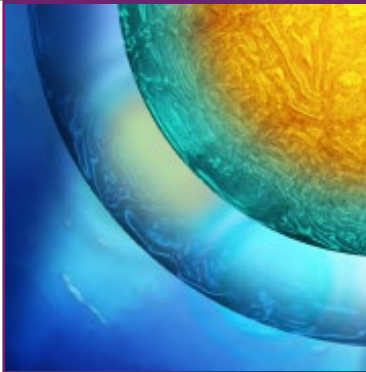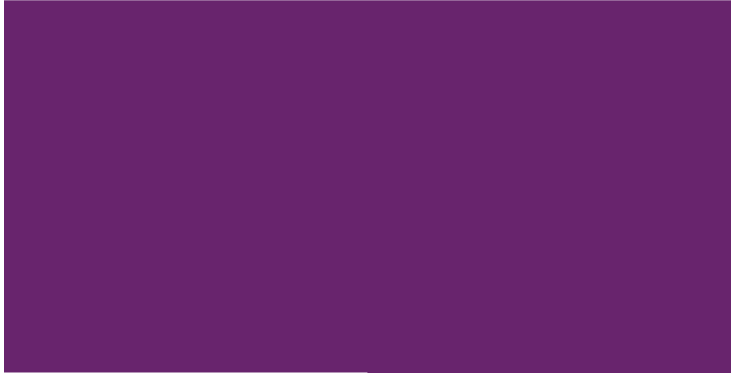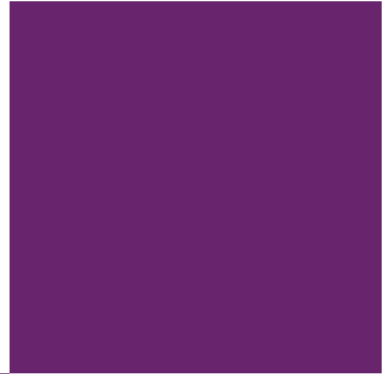## Cultivating research culture at Durham University

Introduction

At Durham, it is exciting to think of the potential of our research community. We have proven capacity to attract fantastic people across all of the activities that contribute to the research environment, but we need to nurture and enable them. This is not only the right thing to do, but also ensures that researchers are able to do their best work.

The highest levels of the academy are driving change and we want to be part of that vanguard. In a keynote talk at a recent UKRI Enhancing Research Culture forum, Simone Buitendijk, Vice Chancellor of the University of Leeds, emphasised the need to focus on our core purpose as universities in relation to research: to generate knowledge and produce research that creates the potential for positive change in the world.

There is a need to redefine what success means for us as a university. Success meaning 'better than everyone else' implies we do not work effectively together in a culture that is about competition rather than collaboration.

We need to be generous, to pursue equal partnerships, decolonise research, define our strengths as individual universities and work together to address the major global challenges.

In this document I outline the critical issues identified across the university research and innovation sector and the important Durham-centred issues as they have already emerged (through the Respect Commission and the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS)).

As a stimulus for discussion, I propose a vision statement for what we might want to achieve and summarise the key areas that require attention, proposing an order of priority. We begin this work seeking an honest understanding and acknowledgement of our problems but also a positive, forward looking, exciting vision for how we develop and sustain a flourishing research culture. I look forward to hearing from everyone across our research community in the course of a comprehensive consultation in the Spring to Autumn of 2022.

Professor Jane Macnaughton
Deputy Pro Vice Chancellor for Research and Research Culture Lead

The consultation process

We are embarking on a programme to take stock of our Research Culture at Durham with a view to ensuring we provide the best environment possible for all those involved in research at Durham University to develop and flourish.

The programme will translate into a defined set of aspirations and plans for bringing about change. The programme will involve the entire research community, including researchers, technical colleagues, professional services staff and those who curate and care for our research infrastructure including libraries and collections. Our work on Research Culture is a collective endeavour and is for all.

This document offers a provocation for the consultation by providing context and setting out our initial ambitions for the future Research Culture we want to have at Durham. A culture where all of our research community can flourish.

The consultation process will have two stages:

1. Values consultation in Easter Term 2022 to establish our community's responses to the question: 'what do we value in research culture'?

2. Determining priorities for action to achieve (1). This will involve town hall meetings with specific groups including academic staff at different levels, professional services staff and technical staff.

Context to the Flourish Programme

The culture within which we operate as a research community at Durham profoundly influences what we do and how well we do it. In turn this affects how valuable our research may be to the wider community.

Research culture encompasses the structures and regulatory frameworks that govern our research but, more importantly, the values we share and demonstrate in how we behave and relate to one another across those structures between academic, professional services and technical staff, students and postdocs and also those who keep our research infrastructure and estate fit for cutting-edge research.[1]

The evidence of a recent range of reports and surveys in the UK HE sector shows that poor research culture is adversely affecting the mental health and wellbeing of researchers and that some feel unfulfilled, poorly supported, and unclear about their futures.

A key issue is that there has been too great a focus on the **outcomes** (the what) of research and less on the **process** (the how).

We need to focus more on the 'how': the quality of leadership, the processes, structures and policies that oversee university research as well as the environment within which research happens.

Research Culture at Durham

- EDI Team/ Faculty Leads
- Organisation Development
- Durham Centre for Academic Development
- Student Culture Commission
- RESPECT
- Staff Survey Response
- Research Culture Committee
- Staff Networks

Key issues across the sector

The Wellcome Trust has acknowledged its role as a major funder in shaping research cultures and has produced a report based on the experience and views of researchers themselves on what the problems are and what an ideal research culture should look like.[2]

Critiques included too great a focus on metrics, poor support for 'blue skies' or discovery research, lack of diversity (in relation to ethnicity as well as career path), poor leadership, bullying and harassment, and an overcompetitive atmosphere that stifles collaboration. Key valued characteristics identified by researchers were: creativity, support and collaboration.

Conclusions from The Royal Society's conference on Research Culture reflect some of the critiques that came out of Wellcome's report: the need to re-assess criteria for recognition and esteem, the importance of mobility and the recognition of diverse career paths, open science and the critical importance of leadership.[3]

The Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) has also surveyed its constituency identifying problems of high expectations, poor management, lack of diversity; problems of respect for the contributions of professional services staff (PSS) and for diverse career pathways, and tolerance of poor behaviour.[4]

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy recently produced their R&D People and Culture Strategy.[5]

Helpfully their conclusions summarise issues that are central to the other reports, asserting that we need to aim for:

- **A positive, inclusive and respectful culture**

- **Appropriate recognition and reward**

- **Abolishing bullying and harassment**

- **Confidence to engage amongst staff and stakeholders**

- **The development of institutional frameworks to encourage positive behaviours and support inclusion.**

In response, the Russell Group produced a Research Culture Toolkit with approaches that universities might consider in making improvements.[6]

Their suggestions address both Universities and Funders and cover the following:

Career stability and progression

- Addressing precarity and lack of diverse opportunity

Recognition and Reward

- Looking at recruitment and promotion criteria – considering the use of the 'Resume for Researchers' and Narrative CVs
- Aligning with the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) principles
- and adopting the Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT)

Wellbeing, management and support

- Improving leadership and management training, especially with respect to career development, mentoring and appraisal
- Reducing bureaucracy

Equality, diversity and inclusion

- Respecting diversity of career paths
- Specific training for underrepresented groups

Preventing and addressing bullying and harassment.

Research culture at Durham

The CEDARS survey and the Respect Commission both point to problems with research culture at Durham. Some issues align with the conclusions above, but there are adjustments and additions:

Career progression

- Research staff are less likely to participate in appraisal
- Half of managers are not confident in dealing with poor 'performance'
- There is a perception that progression and promotion processes are unfair and prioritise research publications and grants over citizenship and positive contributions to the research environment
- Opportunities for career development are not taken up
- Less than 20% of researchers have had experience of other sectors to assist them in career development

Bullying and Harassment

- Female researchers at Durham are more likely to have felt bullied or harassed and are less likely to report this than male researchers
- Correct implementation of the Respect at Work Bullying and Harassment policy/procedure for dealing with incidents, where there is a perception that responsive measures are not implemented, especially with regard to senior staff

Wellbeing at work

- Like staff across the HE sector, workload is heavy and can impact upon mental and physical wellbeing. Durham has recently published a health and wellbeing strategy and our work on culture needs to interact with that strategy and provide solutions for staff that will address workload.

Diversity

- At Durham we are actively dealing with problems of lack diversity of our community, including of socio-economic and geographical background. These issues may impact on our research culture through narrowness of outlook and experience.

Flourish principles and challenges

Terry Eagleton's book, *The Idea of Culture,* reminds us that one of the original meanings of culture is 'husbandry' or the 'tending of natural growth'.[7] This is the characteristic of 'culture' we need to develop at Durham. Culture change is not about an end point, but needs to be thought of as a process of evolution and development: of people, of structures, and of environment, and it is something ongoing. It involves both regulation (an element of compliance) but also the idea of creative and spontaneous growth, nurtured by high quality leadership but engendered by the participants themselves.

Implicit in this are some challenges specific to Research Culture:

1. To marry the **regulatory frameworks,** we are committed and signed up to (such as The Concordat for Researchers, The Research Integrity Concordat, DORA) with the activity of developing our own unique research culture that fits Durham's values and key research strengths.

2. To **identify a set of values, ways of working, and norms of behaviour** that are common across the range of research cultures at Durham, reflecting the diversity of disciplines, methods and ways of knowing and understanding that the University prides itself in.

3. To **nourish and celebrate the diversity, creativity and freedom** of individuals and research teams to develop world-changing research, while enhancing Durham's reputation not just for the quality of our research but for the way in which we conduct ourselves.

Durham has some current and future institutional challenges which relate more broadly to the development of a positive research culture as we strive to:

- Increase research funding.

- Improve our research reputation globally.

- Increase regional engagement and impact. Durham's commitment to city and region is not clear to the external community but with new initiatives, such as the levelling up agenda opening out funding potential for the North East, any new research strategy needs to make clear that our work is regionally as well as internationally focussed.

- Improve the infrastructure for research particularly in the sciences so researchers have the facilities and space they need.

- Define more clearly our research strengths which currently are broadly listed as Health, Creativity Culture and Heritage, Sustainability and Data and Modelling.

Building a flourishing research culture involves not just addressing, but also influencing, these specific challenges to ensure that the way we achieve them supports our ambitions for research culture change.

We know that developing a positive, supportive research culture is **all about quality as much as about the right thing to do**. At the centre of this is supporting the next generation of researchers to thrive and develop flourishing research. This requires us to develop an environment that is serious about supporting them, clear about what we commit to (and what we do not), with a research strategy that enables researchers to build sustainable and flourishing careers, whatever the destinations of this may be.

Vision, Values, Commitments

Proposed draft Vision:

Flourish@Durham is committed to the cultivation of a research culture that is characterised by respect and care; where diversity of person, career track and role are valued, encouraged, and supported and collaboration and interdisciplinarity are cherished. Flourish@Durham seeks to ensure research is carried out in an atmosphere of creativity, excitement and fun where individuals and teams are dedicated to and enabled to do their best work.

Progress on this needs to be **led from the front but also requires personal responsibility:** those involved need to own the vision in order to take up and progress the actions and behaviours that will support it. It is also a shared endeavour which will engage all constituents of the research community: researcher, professional, and technical staff and research infrastructure colleagues.

Key commitments

1. A commitment to developing a positive culture as a **process not an end point.**

2. A commitment to adopting a **values-driven approach** that oversees everything we do from developing a strategy to how we live, work and study together at Durham everyday (see below).

3. A recognition of the **value of everyone's role** in creating a positive research culture: staff (professional, technical, academic), research students, undergraduates; and of the influence of place (Durham City and County) on our culture.

4. A commitment to **celebrating and recognising** not just successful outcomes of research, but **success in process**: building teams towards grant applications, supporting and mentoring colleagues, contributions to EDI.

5. **Valuing the contribution of research across disciplines and modes**, including discovery and challenge-based research i.e. fundamental research starts with generating research questions often in interdisciplinary contexts and for which the impacts may not be immediately obvious.

6. Encouraging the development of a **research community drawn from talent across the world** recognising that this brings challenges in learning and respecting others and inducting others into a research culture that may be very different from their own.

7. Demonstrating a commitment to a culture of openness and collegiality through continuous **learning from others across the sector** and collaborating on possible joint projects to improve culture across HEIs.

Key values

In order to Flourish@Durham we are committed to creating

- a culture of **Belonging**
  we want people to recognise Durham as place that includes them, whatever their gender, background or ethnicity, whether they are here already or thinking about joining us.
- a culture of **Collaboration**
  collaboration is central to a healthy research culture from individual projects to cross-institutional work.
- a culture of **Kindness** and Care
  our best work can only be done in in an environment that feels safe and mutually supportive:
  building on our Health and Wellbeing strategy, positive health and wellbeing are a priority at Durham.
- a culture of **Honesty and Integrity**
  people who access and use our research must rely on its truth and integrity.
- a culture of **Creativity**
  researchers need space and time to think, collaborate and develop innovative, creative research ideas that can change things for the better.
- a culture of **Success**
  a flourishing research culture entails that people feel they can do their best work, feel fulfilled and successful.
- a culture of **Trust**
  Trust is a value central to any healthy intuitional culture and will be at the heart of what we strive to achieve.

Key Actions

We will set the tone and framework for the approach by:

1. **Paying attention to the connective tissue: we need a joined-up approach** ensuring culture change being effected elsewhere is part of this process and identifying where there are conflicts. This requires a mapping of strategies and structures internally and externally that drive or influence research culture:

   Internal:
   Strategies: University Strategy and values; Respect Commission, EDI Strategy, Research and Engagement Strategy, HEIF Strategy and the emergent KE Strategy.
   Structures: RIS, Faculty Structures, DCAD, DTCs, Ethics, Mentoring, HR: Progression and Promotion, Induction.

   External:
   Athena SWAN, REF, The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, The Concordat to Support Research Integrity, The Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research, the Knowledge Exchange Concordat, DORA, Open Research/Science (Plan S/UKRI), Research Funders (especially UKRI, Wellcome), Russell Group Research Culture and Environment Toolkit.

2. **Paying attention to language in a communications plan** that emphasises our ongoing commitment to behaviour and culture change that is led from the front and disseminated through key research leaders and influencers in the University. We need to replace words like competition with **collaboration**; performance management with **nurturing**; success with **thriving and flourishing**. Our approach to culture change will not emphasise the end points of compliance but the continual aim of striving to improve. This is not something that is amenable to action planning or policy statements but is about modelling behaviour, as well as ensuring the internal and external structures and drivers do not militate against achieving change.

A road-map charting a timeline and success measures will be developed alongside our strategy and actions. Key priorities for action (very much for discussion and expansion).

3. Demonstrating we value diversity by **reviewing progression, promotion, reward and recruitment processes**.   We need an innovative and imaginative approach to attracting and retaining a diverse, dynamic and creative research workforce (including new ways of recruiting, promotion, reward and recognition – valuing citizenship and mentoring at all levels), recognising a greater diversity of career paths, including valuing time spent out of the HE sector.

4. Addressing the challenging process of **demonstrating and incentivising excellence** that are not just about metrics or league tables but about processes of support, collaboration, collegiality and knowledge exchange.

5. **Supporting the researcher community** to feel confident that their problems will be heard and addressed; ensuring they have opportunities to explore (and potentially experience) a diversity of career directions.[8]

6. **Supporting the researcher community** by recognising that high quality research takes time to develop. We need to address workloads and examine the expected balance of work across an increasing number of commitments: research, teaching, administration, citizenship, knowledge exchange and policy engagement. We need to provide opportunities for creative thinking, developing collaborations and writing research proposals.

7. **Ensuring research leaders and managers** are equipped with the skills and confidence to lead research culture development within their own teams and especially to feel comfortable mentoring and supporting their staff particularly with respect to career planning.

8. **Addressing any disconnect between policy and practice:** the researcher and wider academic community need to feel confident that our policies actually mean what they say. Confidence in what we are trying to do will soon fade if we say something will change and it does not, or if we have a policy that patently does not deliver.

9. As research leaders, commit to influencing the wider sector to **define success in terms of our core mission** rather than competition with each other.

Conclusion

This is just the start of the process of reforming Research Culture at Durham. These ideas are not set in stone but suggest a way forward and are a stimulus for debate but also for us to make decisions about our direction. That direction depends on the views of our research community. I very much hope you will be able to take some time to contribute to the consultation through the workshops and feedback opportunities in the next few months.

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[1] https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/UKRI-040221-TechnicianCommitmentActionPlan.pdf

[2] Wellcome (2020), What Researchers Think About the Culture They Work In.
https://wellcome.org/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture

[3] The Royal Society, Research Culture Policy Reports. https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/projects/research-culture/

[4] ARMA (2021). https://arma.ac.uk/arma-research-culture-survey-report/

[5] UK Government (2021) https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-and-development-rd-people-and-culture-strategy

[6] Russell Group (2020) https://russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5924/rce-toolkit-final-compressed.pdf

[7] Eagleton, T. (2000). The Idea of Culture, Oxford: Blackwell.

[8] Useful to explore the activities of the Prosper programme at Liverpool in this relation:
https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/researcher/prosper/