Research Cultures
Strategy

I am delighted to introduce our new Research Cultures Strategy, which reflects our commitment at the University of Aberdeen to fostering a vibrant, inclusive, and forward-thinking research environment. This strategy provides a clear and purposeful approach to strengthening how we work together as a research community. It embodies our belief that how we do research is as important as the research itself, with excellence defined not solely by outputs but also by the culture in which research takes place.

We are proud of the strong research cultures that already exist within our Schools and disciplines, and this strategy builds on those foundations. By grounding our approach in four key "Ways of Working", we move away from a prescriptive, goal-oriented model. Instead, our strategy respects and supports the diverse research cultures across our community, empowering each part of the University to contribute in ways that are authentic to them.

A key strength of this strategy is its emphasis on collective effort. A thriving research culture cannot be achieved through a single action or directive. It requires engagement from everyone—academic staff, technicians, research professionals, postgraduate researchers, and research enabling staff. By leveraging the diverse research cultures that already exist, this strategy provides a platform for local initiatives to grow while connecting them to a broader institutional vision.

As a value-led strategic vision, Aberdeen 2040 seeks to create a university that is more connected, inclusive, and sustainable—breaking down boundaries within and beyond the institution. Our Research Cultures Strategy plays a critical role in delivering this vision, ensuring that our research environment reflects these values and drives meaningful impact locally, nationally, and globally.

Our approach to research culture enables us, as a university, to foster an environment where shared values and collaboration provide the foundation for excellence. By embedding research cultures that are inclusive, interdisciplinary, international, and sustainable, we position ourselves to tackle complex global challenges, support ambitious research initiatives, and attract and retain world-class talent. It ensures that every member of our research community has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully, while reinforcing our collective commitment to the principles of Aberdeen 2040.

As Vice Principal Research, I am proud of what we have achieved in co-developing this strategy, and I am excited about the journey ahead. This is a living strategy that will continue to evolve in response to feedback and evidence. Together, we will create a Community of Research Cultures that drives positive change and helps us achieve the ambitions set out in Aberdeen 2040.

Nick Forsyth
Vice Principal Research

A New Vision of Research Cultures
at the University of Aberdeen

At the University of Aberdeen, we believe that positive research cultures are the foundation of excellent research, and that the ways in which we work together should drive collaboration, innovation and impact. Everyone who undertakes or enables research makes a valuable contribution to this work.

We also recognise that strong and distinctive research cultures already exist within and beyond the University, and that these are highly valued by our researchers in supporting creativity, autonomy, collegiality and academic freedom.

Tailored to the strengths and aspirations of our communities, and anchored in the values of **Aberdeen 2040**, this strategy therefore supports and empowers people to drive culture change from within, reflecting our institutional ambitions to be inclusive, interdisciplinary, international and sustainable, while addressing the global challenges of our time.

This document sets out Aberdeen's strategy for improving our research cultures, ensuring that this is not only distinctive but also authentically ours. From our commitment to inclusivity and innovation to our focus on collaborative working, this strategy is tailored to the strengths and aspirations of our research community.

Aberdeen 2040:
A Strategic Plan for the University

Aberdeen 2040 is an ambitious, value-led plan that works across boundaries, connecting people from different parts of the University and connecting us to local, national and international communities and partners. These interdisciplinary and international goals for research and teaching are underpinned by a commitment to be inclusive and sustainable: supporting and developing our people to achieve their full potential, working toward leading the sector in promoting health and wellbeing, valuing diversity, and working for the sustainable future of our planet.

Aberdeen 2040 sets out 20 commitments that the University will fulfil, organised around four key strategic themes:

→ Inclusive

Supporting and developing people to achieve their full potential.

→ Interdisciplinary

Breaking barriers to foster cross-disciplinary connections.

→ International

Building meaningful partnerships and fostering global collaboration to ensure our research has worldwide impact.

→ Sustainable

Championing initiatives for the wellbeing of our planet and our community.

Sector context:

The changing landscape of research culture

The Royal Society, the Wellcome Trust and UKRI have all played key roles in shaping the way that we think about research culture in the UK Higher Education sector. Since the Royal Society put forward their **definition of Research Culture** in 2017, there has been considerable recognition of the importance of providing the right working conditions for research to flourish. Following research and information-gathering by CRAC-Vitae, the UKRI published a **report on research culture activities** across the UK and used this to create a **research culture framework** encompassing different areas of activity in this domain. Against this backdrop of increased recognition of the importance of research culture in the UK, a new element has been introduced to the next REF exercise. The new **People, Culture and Environment** element replaces the old Environment element and is designed to recognise and reward institutions that are working to provide a positive research culture for their staff, and will serve to further drive progress in research culture in the UK.

Research thrives when we provide the right conditions for people to work in. Our aim with this strategy was to talk to people involved in research across the University to understand how these conditions are changing and are likely to change. From these conversations, we have co-developed a strategy that can adapt as the needs of our research community change over time and can reflect the developing understanding of research culture in the sector. By focusing on how we work together we can build a research environment that is inclusive, dynamic, and sustainable.

Ben Tatler
Dean for Research Culture

Ways of Working

Every sector has its own cultural norms, and these change over time. Recent reports have shown that while many researchers understand their work to be inherently creative, and think of it as a vocation, systemic challenges such as unhealthy competition, heavy workload, precarity and power imbalances have led to increasingly difficult working conditions. Working in these ways can negatively impact wellbeing and productivity, and so universities have a responsibility to recognise these challenges and to find ways to work towards research cultures that support everyone.

At Aberdeen our approach focuses on embedding four positive Ways of Working across the University. These have been identified as areas where the University can support and enable culture change, in ways that would be difficult for individual researchers, teams, units or Schools to put in place. This allows us to respect existing research cultures, disciplinary differences and diverse researcher populations; acknowledge contributions from everyone who undertakes or enables research, and therefore create space for culture change.

These Ways of Working are:

Shared Standards of Excellence

Guided by integrity, transparency, and openness, our shared standards ensure ethical, accessible research, fostering mutual trust, respect, and accountability across all levels.

Collective problem solving and sharing good practice

Focused on sharing good practices across all parts of the University, our approach fosters collaboration to address common challenges and boundaries to strengthen our research cultures.

Recognising contributions and supporting career development

Acknowledging diverse contributions, our approach fosters career growth and inclusive leadership through development, reward and recognition.

Developing evidence-informed approaches to culture change

Guided by evaluation strategies to assess engagement with, and impact of our activities, our approach enables continuous improvement through data-driven insights.

> Robust, reproducible and open research begins with an individual commitment but thrives in an environment that fosters trust, collaboration and integrity.

Alex Douglas
Personal Chair, Applied Health Sciences

This ambitious Research Cultures Strategy will undoubtedly enable our research community to foster a collaborative and inclusive environment. It supports diverse approaches to undertaking research at individual, group, and School levels, ensuring that all contributions are fully recognised and rewarded.

Zeray Yihdego
Personal Chair, Law

In adopting these Ways of Working, our vision is to create a community of practice across the University, bringing people together to share knowledge, solve problems, and foster innovation collaboratively. This evidence-based approach emphasises learning through shared experiences, encourages dialogue across boundaries, promotes knowledge sharing, creative problem solving and inclusivity, and aligns with our strategic goals to create an environment where everyone can contribute and thrive. By focusing on how we work together rather than reaching specific targets or goals, this strategy fosters vibrant, collaborative and collegiate research cultures. This approach promotes sustainability, ensuring that our research environment remains adaptable, inclusive, and resilient to future challenges. We call this vision a Community of Research Cultures.

→ Research Cultures **Strategy**

Linking Action to Impact

Creating a Community of Research Cultures through embedding our four Ways of Working has the potential to drive new thinking across the themes of Aberdeen 2040, offering new synergies and contributions as possibilities emerge through culture change.

We used Theory of Change to show how our Ways of Working can support the delivery of the strategic vision for the University laid out in Aberdeen 2040. Together with evidence gathered from our research cultures through consultations and surveys, this approach enables us to identify the activities that are needed to bring the existing diverse research cultures in the university together as a Community of Research Cultures.

Based on a large literature that has demonstrated the benefits of working within communities of practice, this Theory of Change approach allows us to anticipate likely medium-term outcomes of working as a Community of Research Cultures as we make progress toward our long-term impact of delivering Aberdeen 2040.

A core part of Theory of Change is to develop a logic model describing these steps from the University's current position to the long-term impact that we want the strategy to achieve.

Developing strategy in this way allows us to identify not only which activities we need to focus on, but also where we can assess progress towards our long-term strategic goals. First, in the short-term, we can assess the effect that the activities we launch have on how people work together across the University and the extent to which these activities promote and support our Ways of Working (the outputs in our logic model). Second, in the medium-term, we can assess the extent to which working as a Community of Research Cultures brings the expected benefits to the University and our staff (the outcomes in our logic model).
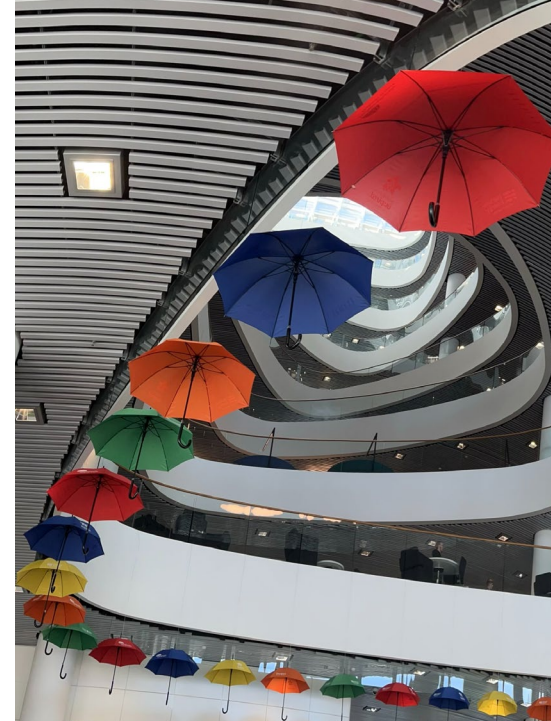
Our Research Cultures Strategy is underpinned by academic scholarship and established literature, ensuring it is rigorous and evidence-informed. Drawing on robust research methods and insights makes our approach thoughtful and effective, and gives us a strong foundation to support staff, postgraduate researchers, and research centres, creating a culture of continuous development and shared excellence.
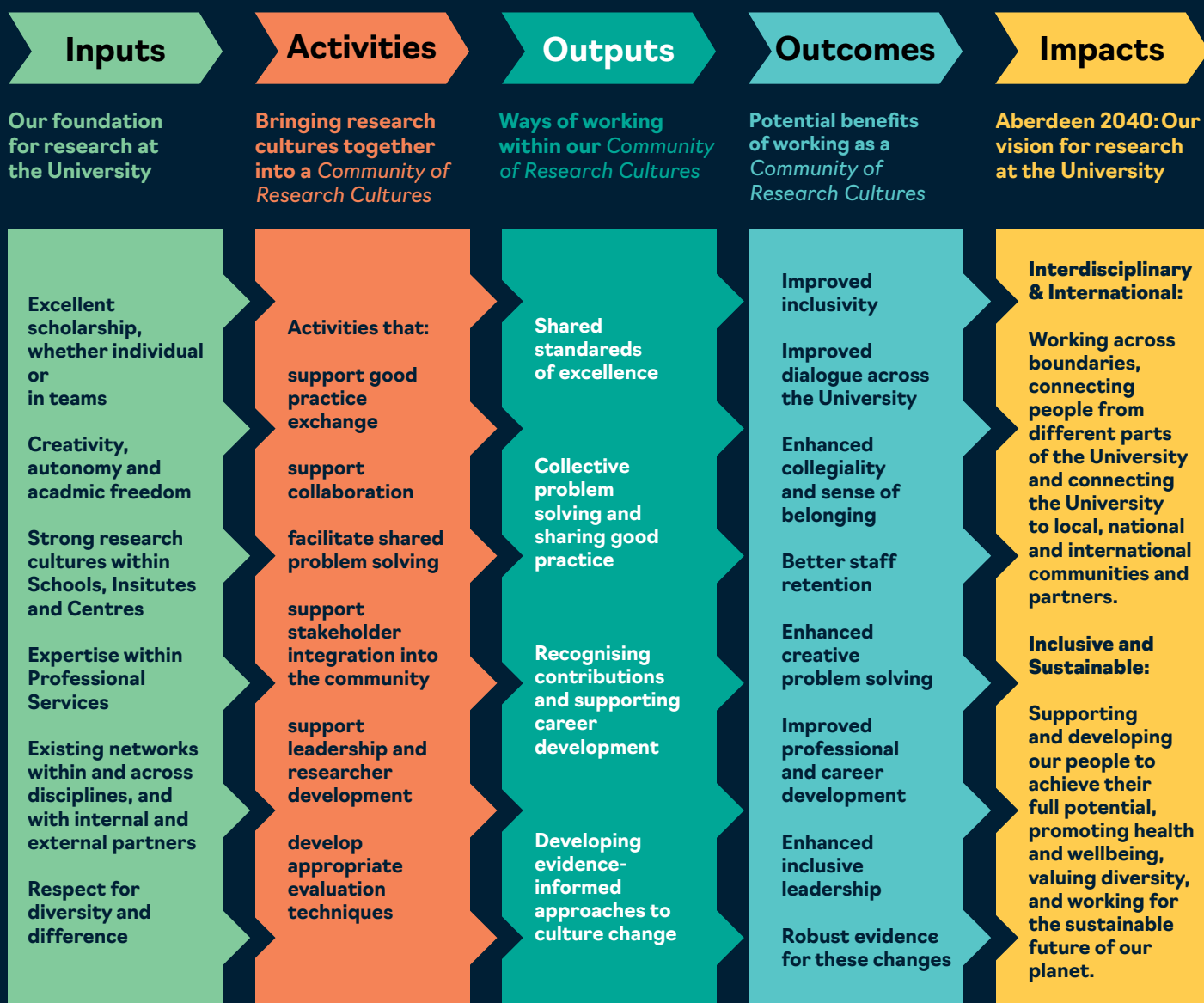
Beth Lord
Personal Chair, Philosophy

Evidence for the benefits of working in communities of practice

Communities of practice involve groups of individuals who share common interests and goals, who come together to solve problems collaboratively and share best practice, and who develop resources, systems and processes which reflect this, while maintaining differentiation of practice and culture within the constituent groups[1]. A considerable body of research has shown how communities of practice bring benefits to an organisation and the individuals within it. They enhance dialogue between individuals within and across organisations[2], leading to improved sharing of knowledge[3]. By bringing together different perspectives, communities of practice enable and enhance creative problem solving and innovation[4].

Sharing values and working collaboratively in this way also improves inclusivity across organisations by fostering participation and engagement, breaking down hierarchical boundaries and raising awareness of cultural differences[5-7]. This is turn enhances collegiality[8] and provides a greater sense of belonging to an organisation[9].

Individuals within communities of practice are more likely to engage with and benefit from professional and career development opportunities[10-11] and enhanced inclusive leadership[12]. These benefits have been shown to lead to better staff retention[13-14].

→ Research Cultures **Strategy**

Research Culture Strategy Logic Model

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
Our foundation for research at the University	Bringing research cultures together into a *Community of Research Cultures*	Ways of working within our *Community of Research Cultures*	Potential benefits of working as a *Community of Research Cultures*	Aberdeen 2040: Our vision for research at the University
Excellent scholarship, whether individual or in teams

Creativity, autonomy and acadmic freedom

Strong research cultures within Schools, Insitutes and Centres

Expertise within Professional Services

Existing networks within and across disciplines, and with internal and external partners

Respect for diversity and difference | Activities that:

support good practice exchange

support collaboration

facilitate shared problem solving

support stakeholder integration into the community

support leadership and researcher development

develop appropriate evaluation techniques | Shared standards of excellence

Collective problem solving and sharing good practice

Recognising contributions and supporting career development

Developing evidence-informed approaches to culture change | Improved inclusivity

Improved dialogue across the University

Enhanced collegiality and sense of belonging

Better staff retention

Enhanced creative problem solving

Improved professional and career development

Enhanced inclusive leadership

Robust evidence for these changes | **Interdisciplinary & International:**

Working across boundaries, connecting people from different parts of the University and connecting the University to local, national and international communities and partners.

Inclusive and Sustainable:

Supporting and developing our people to achieve their full potential, promoting health and wellbeing, valuing diversity, and working for the sustainable future of our planet. |

Theory of Change[15] is a method for identifying the key steps needed to achieve a desired long-term goal. First, we define the long-term goals and then work backwards to identify the necessary conditions for achieving them and the activities that will create those conditions using the current resources available. A core component of this approach is the use of logic models[16], which visually map out these steps, showing how activities lead to short-term *outputs*, medium-term *outcomes*, and long-term *impacts*. These stages also help identify key indicators to track progress and evaluate whether the planned activities are effectively leading toward the intended goals.

How we assess progress in research culture

To demonstrate that our approach to culture change is effective, we need to evaluate our activities and our outcomes robustly. However, we must also avoid over-assessing or using inappropriate or ill-conceived measures. For this reason, a key part of our strategy is to work to core principles in how we develop and implement evaluations of the work we conduct in the University. These principles draw upon best practice and current thinking in the sector. Valuing and utilising both qualitative and quantitative evidence, our evaluation strategy is built around three core principles:

1. We will co-develop evaluation plans with everyone who is involved in designing and implementing the activities, ensuring that they always fit into our overall strategy.

2. Using the principles laid out in the Inorms SCOPE Framework, we will only evaluate where necessary, we will involve stakeholders in the process, and we will use expert approaches which give reliable and useful insights.

3. We will develop tools to support reflective assessment in evaluating key areas such as openness, inclusivity and collaboration. This will include maturity matrices (an example is the EDGE tool for Public Engagement), which can be tailored through co-development to different disciplinary requirements.

A foundation for future growth

Our strategy provides a way to achieve our vision of working as a Community of Research Cultures that will drive culture change in the University and support our long-term strategic goals. But we recognise that this is an ongoing, evolving process and that research cultures can always be improved.

Over time change is inevitable, whether within the University or across the sector as a whole and so our strategy needs to be responsive to these changes in supporting the needs of our community.

Therefore, to be sustainable, our strategy needs to be agile and flexible enough to adapt when evidence suggests new priorities in the University. It is in recognition of these needs that we have built our strategy around ways of working and the collaborative spirit of working as a Community of Research Cultures. By focusing on processes we can enact culture change that goes beyond reaching stated outcomes, by supporting as-yet-unknown outcomes and needs around research. This provides the agility and adaptability that the future will require.

Our Research Cultures Strategy is both forward-looking and firmly aligned with national priorities, including the sector-wide focus on people, culture, and environment. What sets our approach apart is its authenticity—shaped by the insights and experiences of our research community and designed to be both practical and progressive. By prioritising ways of working over fixed goals, we ensure that our strategy remains adaptable, innovative, and capable of driving meaningful change that benefits staff, students, and partners alike.

Liz Rattray
Director of Research and Innovation

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