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BUTCHART

Aberdeen Research Culture Consultation Report

Key themes and strategic implications from
engagement across Schools (April 2024–
December 2025)

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Executive summary

This report summarises the findings of structured consultation undertaken between April 2024 and December 2025 by the Research Cultures and Development Team to inform development of the University's Research Cultures Strategy. The consultation was designed as a listening exercise, recognising that research culture is experienced locally and may be understood differently across disciplines, roles and career stages.

Engagement combined exploratory discussions with Heads of School and Directors of Research, discussions within School Research Committees (and equivalent governance groups), open School meetings, and Padlet-based contributions to enable asynchronous input (including, where desired, anonymous contribution). Findings are presented as a qualitative synthesis of recurring issues and enabling conditions, without attribution to specific Schools.

Across discussions, colleagues consistently emphasised the importance of local ownership and flexibility, including protecting practices that work well in disciplinary and School contexts and avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches. At the same time, there was strong appetite to collaborate and share practice across boundaries, tempered by constraints of time, workload and opportunity and by concerns about whether enabling work is consistently recognised and supported.

The findings reinforce the importance of a partnership approach between Schools and the centre. Institutional action is likely to have greatest impact where it provides clarity of priorities and shared principles, reduces avoidable burden through proportionate and discipline-sensitive processes, supports leadership expectations and accountability, and strengthens the enabling conditions – time, space, support and recognition – that make research culture activity feasible in practice.

Introduction

Between April 2024 and December 2025, the Research Cultures and Development Team held structured discussions with Schools across the institution to inform the development of the institutional Research Cultures Strategy. The consultation was designed explicitly as a listening exercise, recognising that research culture is not homogenous across the institution and may be understood, defined and experienced differently in different parts of the University. Rather than applying a fixed or centrally-determined definition of research culture, Schools were invited to articulate the questions, challenges and practices most relevant within their own environments.

Discussions took place primarily through open sessions within Schools, supported by an online Padlet to enable colleagues to contribute asynchronously (and, if desired, anonymously) and to capture points that might not surface in a group setting. To initiate conversation, the Research Cultures and Development Team used a broad, non-prescriptive framing of research culture – centred on the day-to-day conditions and behaviours that enable research to be conducted well and researchers to thrive – while explicitly inviting Schools to describe, in their own terms, the features of research culture that matter most locally, including key strengths, challenges and priorities for improvement.

The discussions focused primarily on research culture as it is experienced locally within Schools and disciplines. While the inclusion of research culture within REF2029 – at the time through the proposed People, Culture and Environment element – provided an important external context and a shared reference point for some participants, it was consistently emphasised in discussions that the motivation to improve research culture is intrinsic and values-led. In practice, this meant that REF-informed considerations were present but did not dominate: the primary emphasis remained on the day-to-day conditions, practices and behaviours that enable research to be conducted well and researchers to thrive.

This report synthesises the recurring themes emerging from School-level discussions and presents a thematic account of shared patterns, common challenges and enabling conditions. It intentionally avoids School case studies at this stage and does not provide an evaluative assessment of individual Schools.

Purpose and use of this report

This report provides a synthesis of the themes raised through School consultation and serves as the underpinning evidence base for the University's Research Cultures Strategy. It does not set out the Strategy itself or provide a detailed account of how individual points were translated into specific strategic commitments. Instead, it is intended to support shared understanding of the issues raised and provide a reference point for implementation and evaluation.

Methodology

Purpose and approach

The consultation adopted a flexible, mixed-methods approach, tailored to School contexts and priorities, and was designed as a structured listening exercise to inform the development of the University's Research Cultures Strategy. It aimed to surface how research culture is experienced locally, identify enabling conditions and constraints, and capture priorities for improvement that could be addressed through institutional strategy, policy and enabling support.

Engagement methods were designed to balance strategic leadership perspectives with opportunities for wider community input. The consultation therefore combined leadership and governance discussions with open forums and asynchronous routes for contribution, and avoided imposing a fixed, centrally determined definition of research culture in advance.

Engagement activities

Consultation activity took place between April 2024 and December 2025 and included:

- **Exploratory leadership discussions:** Initial discussions with Heads of School and Directors of Research helped to identify priority questions and to agree appropriate formats for engagement within each School.
- **School governance discussions:** Discussions were held within School Research Committees and equivalent governance groups to explore current practice, challenges, and institutional enablers and constraints.
- **Open School meetings:** Open meetings were used to support broader participation across academic, research and professional services staff and, where appropriate, postgraduate research (PGR) representatives.
- **Padlet contributions:** Padlet-based asynchronous input was used during and following meetings, enabling participants to reflect and contribute beyond live discussion settings and, where desired, to do so anonymously.

The format and depth of engagement varied across Schools, reflecting differences in size, disciplinary norms and existing research culture activity.

Data sources and analysis

Evidence was drawn from facilitated discussion notes from open sessions and committee meetings, Padlet contributions, and follow-up engagement with School leads where clarification or additional detail was helpful. Analysis focused on qualitative synthesis: identifying recurring themes, shared language and cross-cutting issues

across Schools, rather than quantifying activity or assessing maturity levels within individual units. Themes were developed at an institutional level and are presented in this report without attribution to specific Schools, in order to focus on shared patterns and enabling conditions.

Interpretation and limitations

As a consultation exercise, participation was voluntary and may therefore over-represent the perspectives of colleagues already engaged with research culture discussions. The consultation does not claim to provide a comprehensive or uniform picture of practice across all units; instead, it provides robust qualitative insight into common issues, priorities and enabling conditions that can inform institutional strategy and implementation.

Emerging themes from the consultation

Across School discussions, five themes emerged consistently as key priorities and features of research culture in local contexts:

- Theme 1. Local research cultures and ways of working
- Theme 2. Inclusive and responsible leadership
- Theme 3. Rewarding careers
- Theme 4. Research with integrity
- Theme 5. Open research

The themes are presented separately for clarity, but they are closely interconnected in practice. Across discussions, research culture was consistently described as enacted through everyday practices, relationships, norms and ways of working within Schools, disciplines and research groups. The five themes, which will be described in detail below, should therefore be read as mutually reinforcing, rather than discrete areas of activity. During the consultation, a number of cross-cutting issues recurred across all five themes:

- Workload and capacity pressures, and the perception that research culture activity is “additional” rather than core.
- The need for protected time and space to work together (both physically and temporally).
- The importance of proportionate, discipline-sensitive processes and systems.
- Accountability, transparency and clarity of expectations at individual, School and institutional levels.
- Recognition and reward for enabling and relational work.
- Evaluation focused on learning, reflection and improvement, rather than narrow output measures.

These issues are integrated into the discussion of each theme in the sections that follow.

Theme 1: Local research cultures and ways of working

Discussions across Schools repeatedly returned to the importance of preserving and supporting local research cultures. Padlet contributions reinforced this, with colleagues emphasising the value of effective local practices and the need for flexibility rather than uniform institutional models. Participants expressed concern that centrally imposed or overly prescriptive approaches could undermine practices that work well within particular disciplines and Schools.

Participants articulated a strong desire to work collaboratively, share practice and engage in interdisciplinary activity. This ambition was frequently accompanied by frustration about practical barriers, particularly lack of time, competing workload demands, limited shared space, and the fragility of initiatives that rely on individual goodwill.

Dedicated time and space for working together – such as writing groups, seminars, retreats and informal gatherings – were repeatedly identified as enabling conditions for positive research culture. Contributors repeatedly called for protected time, shared physical space, and practical support (including technical, administrative and teaching assistance) to make collaboration and community-building feasible rather than aspirational. Where such spaces and supports existed, they were seen to enable peer learning, mutual accountability, informal leadership and career development. Where they did not, collaboration and community were described as difficult to sustain, particularly in post-COVID hybrid working contexts.

Participants argued consistently that local ownership is critical. Schools expressed a desire for institutional support that enables, connects and sustains local cultures and ways of working, rather than prescribing their form. This included calls for clarity about priorities, permission to focus on what matters most, and alignment with institutional ways of working that makes research culture activity feel core rather than additional.

Strategic implication

The Research Cultures Strategy should prioritise enabling and protecting local research cultures and ways of working. Particular attention should be given to protected time, shared space, and strategic coherence that reduces the perception of research culture as “additional”.

Theme 2: Inclusive and responsible leadership

Leadership was one of the most prominent themes across consultations and was widely seen as central to setting the conditions in which local research cultures can thrive. Participants consistently described leadership not solely in terms of formal roles, but as the behaviours that shape expectations, priorities and day-to-day working conditions.

Positive examples included accessible and approachable Heads of School and Directors of Research, clarity about priorities, and visible advocacy for protected research time and space. By contrast, a perceived lack of transparency around decision-making, workload allocation and strategic direction was described as a source of anxiety and disengagement.

Concerns were raised about how research culture work is distributed and valued. Participants noted that mentoring, community-building and cultural initiatives are often undertaken disproportionately by a subset of colleagues, and that this work is not

always formally recognised or rewarded. This was framed as both an equity issue and a risk to sustainability.

Responsible leadership was therefore discussed as encompassing stewardship of workload, explicit valuing of research culture work, and the modelling of inclusive behaviours. Participants emphasised the importance of leadership that enables agency and supports local ownership, rather than imposing uniform solutions. Comments also reinforced the value of leaders who actively recognise diverse contributions, celebrate success, and create regular opportunities for staff and students to come together to discuss research, challenges and achievements.

Strategic implication

Leadership development, expectations and accountability should explicitly encompass responsibility for research culture. This should include transparent decision-making, equitable workload stewardship, recognition of enabling work, and leadership behaviours that enable agency and support local ownership.

Theme 3: Rewarding careers

Discussions about careers extended well beyond promotion criteria. Participants described rewarding careers as those that are sustainable over time, with clear expectations and progression routes, where contribution is recognised, and where people are supported across different roles and career stages.

A recurring concern was the limited visibility and recognition for activities that enable research, including mentoring, peer review, supervision and the development work involved in funding applications, including bids that are not ultimately successful. Participants also highlighted perceived career bottlenecks at mid-career and Senior Lecturer level, alongside uncertainty about expectations and progression routes. In addition, postdoctoral researchers and PGRs were described as at risk of feeling marginalised, and not always experiencing themselves as fully integrated members of research communities.

There was strong agreement that valuing diverse contributions is essential to sustaining research activity and morale. Participants also emphasised the importance of supporting transitions into and out of roles, particularly given the fixed-term nature of many research posts and the challenges this can create at key career stages.

Strategic implication

Career frameworks and recognition mechanisms should reflect the full range of contributions that underpin research activity, supporting sustainability and progression across roles and career stages.

Theme 4: Research with integrity

Research integrity was consistently framed as more than compliance: it was described as fundamental to research excellence and to the everyday practices and expectations that shape research. Schools described integrity as encompassing ethical decision-making, transparency of process, constructive peer review, and clear accountability for how research is conducted, supported and assessed. Discussion focused on how systems and expectations can reinforce responsible practice without creating unnecessary burden.

A recurring concern related to the proportionality and usability of ethical approval processes. Comments collected through Padlets highlighted frustration with administrative and approval burdens that absorb time that contributors felt could have been better spent on research activity, with some colleagues describing significant variability in how they felt these demands fall across Schools and roles. Participants described approval processes as time-intensive and insufficiently tailored to disciplinary contexts. This was seen to create barriers to timely research activity and to place additional workload on academic staff.

Alongside formal processes, integrity was strongly associated with cultures of feedback and peer review. Colleagues described a desire for more transparent, supportive and consistent approaches to peer review, mentoring and feedback, particularly where these underpin grant development, supervision and collaborative research. Schools highlighted the importance of constructive and respectful feedback on grant applications and draft outputs, while acknowledging that such practices often rely on informal goodwill. There was recognition that the culture around feedback varies across groups, disciplines and Schools and that individuals experience and interpret feedback differently, reinforcing the importance of clarity about expectations and of modelling respectful and collegial practice.

Accountability emerged as an important aspect of integrity. Contributions to the Padlets suggested that clearer expectations and accountability for workload distribution, decision-making and support roles would strengthen trust and reduce the sense that enabling work relies disproportionately on individual goodwill. Participants highlighted the need for greater clarity in relation to workload allocation, peer review and mentoring contributions, and leadership responsibilities. Where accountability was perceived to be diffuse or opaque, this was seen to undermine confidence in institutional processes.

Integrity was also linked to evaluation practices, with participants emphasising that what is measured and rewarded shapes behaviours. They argued for evaluation approaches that move beyond output-only measures and better recognise responsible research practice over time, including learning, collaboration and improvement. This included a desire to recognise a wider range of contributions to research, and the full range of people who make those contributions.

Strategic implication

Research integrity should be supported through proportionate, discipline-sensitive systems, clear accountability, shared expectations for feedback and peer review, and evaluation approaches that reinforce responsible research practice.

Theme 5: Open research

Open research featured less frequently than other themes but was nonetheless an important dimension of discussions where it arose. Participants generally described openness in broad terms, encompassing transparency, collaboration, and accessibility, rather than focusing solely on the technical aspects of open research.

Examples of where open research featured in discussions included interdisciplinary working, shared seminar series, collaborative research festivals, and open research profiles and identifiers. Contributors highlighted a strong appetite for seed funding, conference participation and informal networking opportunities as practical enablers of openness and collaboration. Participants also highlighted the value of openness in enabling collaboration across Schools and disciplines, particularly where shared spaces or structured opportunities were created.

Discussions indicated the need for discipline-sensitive approaches to open research. In some areas, openness was framed primarily through collaboration and engagement rather than through data sharing or open methodologies. Participants therefore emphasised the importance of avoiding one-size-fits-all expectations, while maintaining clear institutional principles that support openness in forms appropriate to different research contexts.

Strategic implication

The Research Cultures Strategy should frame open research inclusively, recognising multiple modes of openness aligned with disciplinary practice. It should prioritise the enabling conditions – time and opportunity to collaborate, practical support and infrastructure, and incentives that reinforce openness – that make openness possible.

Concluding reflections

The consultation indicates that Schools are actively engaged in shaping their research cultures and place strong value on local ownership, flexibility and the preservation of practices that work well within disciplinary and School contexts. Across discussions, colleagues emphasised a desire for institutional support that enables, connects and sustains local research cultures and ways of working, rather than prescribing their form.

The five themes identified through the consultation provide a coherent foundation from which to develop the University's Research Cultures Strategy. Taken together, they reinforce the importance of focusing on enabling conditions that make positive change feasible in practice: protected time and space, proportionate and discipline-sensitive systems and processes, transparent decision-making and clear expectations, and recognition of enabling and relational work. They further highlight the value of evaluation that supports learning and adjustment over time, rather than functioning primarily as a performance measure based on outputs.

The findings reinforce the importance of a partnership approach between Schools and the centre. Institutional action is likely to have greatest impact where it provides clarity of priorities and shared principles, supports shared learning and the sharing of practice across boundaries, and creates practical opportunities for collaboration across Schools and disciplines. It should reduce barriers that contribute to the perception of research culture activity as “additional” rather than core. This implies an implementation approach that combines strategic coherence at institutional level with flexibility in how Schools shape and sustain local cultures, practices and relationships.

Finally, the consultation highlights the importance of maintaining a developmental approach as the Strategy moves into delivery. Continued engagement with Schools, clear governance and proportionate evaluation will be important to track progress, support learning and reflection, and adapt activity over time, particularly where capacity constraints risk limiting the sustainability of change over time.



This report was prepared by the Research Cultures and Development Team

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