

Achieving research culture change by taking ACTION

A strategic approach to planning and evaluating change initiatives

Research culture shapes how we work and how knowledge is created, shared, and valued. It is expressed through the everyday behaviours, values, and expectations that guide how we conduct and communicate research, how we collaborate, and how we recognise and support each other. A positive culture is integral to research excellence – creating the conditions in which excellence and integrity can flourish. Strengthening culture, in this sense, is inseparable from strengthening research itself.

Because research culture touches every part of how we work, it is neither possible nor effective to try to change everything at once. Meaningful progress depends on being strategic: deciding where to act, why, and how. That means grounding our choices in evidence, not assumption. By focusing resources and efforts where they can have the greatest impact, we can make culture change both purposeful and sustainable.

ACTION: A structured approach to planning culture change

Planning culture change is not about simply drafting a list of actions – it is about creating a logical pathway from identified need to long-term impact. Planning and delivering meaningful and sustainable culture change is complex work. It often involves navigating uncertainty, relationships, and competing priorities. And once an initiative is underway, not everything will go according to plan, so we need to be ready to learn and adapt as we go. For these reasons, working with others can make this work more manageable, by sharing perspectives, spreading responsibility, and creating space for reflection and learning.

A practical, evidence-informed way for teams leading culture change to plan and deliver an initiative follows six key steps:



The six steps needed to take ACTION for culture change



Step 1. Assess the need for change

Begin by defining the issue clearly. What is happening now, and why is it problematic? What evidence – formal or informal – shows this is a priority?



Step 2. Clarify your intended impact

What do you want things to be like in the future? This is the bigger-picture, long-term change that your initiative can support and contribute to, but may not deliver on its own.



Step 3. Transform the situation by setting clear outcomes

Large-scale culture change happens through smaller, measurable shifts. Outcomes are a way of describing the change or difference you will make as you progress toward your intended impact.



Step 4. Identify activities to achieve your outcomes

Only after clarifying your outcomes should you decide what actions to take. Your activities are all the different things you are going to do to tackle the need you have identified (Step 1) and achieve your outcomes (Step 3). Activities might include developing resources, piloting new approaches, facilitating workshops, or improving policies. Each should be clearly linked to one or more outcomes, grounded in evidence or prior learning, and proportionate to available resources.



Step 5. Organise your approach to evaluation

Taking the structured approach across steps 1-4 helps organise how you will evaluate progress. This involves analysing evidence about the extent to which you are achieving each of your outcomes (Step 3), and whether some of your activities are making more of a difference than others. The aim is not simply to measure what you are *doing* (your activities), but instead to evaluate what *difference* you are making - i.e. to what extent you are achieving your outcomes by carrying out your activities.



Step 6. Note and your progress and learning

Once you begin your activities, it is important that you log what happens. Things won't go exactly according to plan – they never do. You will learn as you go and tweak your plans accordingly. Logging progress and decisions will help you reflect on your progress and evaluation. Capturing and sharing these reflections and the decisions you make will help you and others learn from your experience.

For more information about how to approach and complete these six steps, use **The Culture Change Companion**, created collaboratively by the University of Aberdeen and [Evaluation Support Scotland](#) and available in our [evaluation support resources](#). This provides guidance, prompts for thinking, and a place to record the planning, decision-making and progress of your change initiative.

By following the ACTION steps in **The Culture Change Companion** ([available here](#)), you can create two documents that can be shared even before you start your activities to help people understand what you are doing, why you are doing it and how you will know whether you are making progress.

1. Making the logic of your planned change visible

Together, these steps allow you to build a **Theory of Change** – a structured model that links what you plan to do (activities) with the difference you hope to make (outcomes and impact). Below is an example **logic model** for how engagement with open research (the desired impact) can be used to raise the global visibility of research (the need). Logic models not only help to identify outcomes and activities that will help deliver the change, but also provide a concise visual summary that can be shared with others.

The need	Activities	Outcomes	Impact
<i>The problem that needs to be solved</i>	<i>What we plan to do to achieve our outcomes</i>	<i>The difference we hope our activities will make</i>	<i>The long-term change we are aiming for</i>
Our research needs to have greater global visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness of Aberdeen University Press • Develop guidance for using open repositories • Provide training and resources for open research in the arts and humanities 	<p>A greater proportion of our outputs are published in open and ethical outlets</p> <p>Increased use of open repositories to share data, code, and processes</p> <p>Open research practices are more widely adopted across the Arts and Humanities</p>	Open research practices are widely adopted to enhance collaboration and knowledge sharing

2. Creating and sharing an evaluation plan

Approaching change in the structured way outlined above makes evaluation more focused and meaningful. By planning your evaluation before you begin your activities, you can create an **evaluation plan** that can be shared with others.

Evaluation focusses on the outcomes you identified in Step 3. These are the measurable changes you expect to see on the way to your desired long-term impact and will guide the evidence you need to collect. It is important that your evaluation is **proportionate**, **purposeful** and – where appropriate – **participatory**: you should only collect the information needed to assess progress, you should choose methods that can genuinely show whether the desired change is happening, and you should strive to involve those affected by the change both in deciding what to measure and in reflecting on its impact.

Evaluation should draw on both quantitative and qualitative evidence, each offering different insights into what is happening and why. Above all, evaluation is about learning: identifying what works, what doesn't, and what might need to change next, so that culture change remains adaptive, transparent, and evidence-informed.

Effective culture change begins with understanding the need for change, defining the impact we seek, and then planning activities that are grounded in evidence and reflection, ensuring progress is both purposeful and sustainable.