



Research Culture Institutional Action Plan

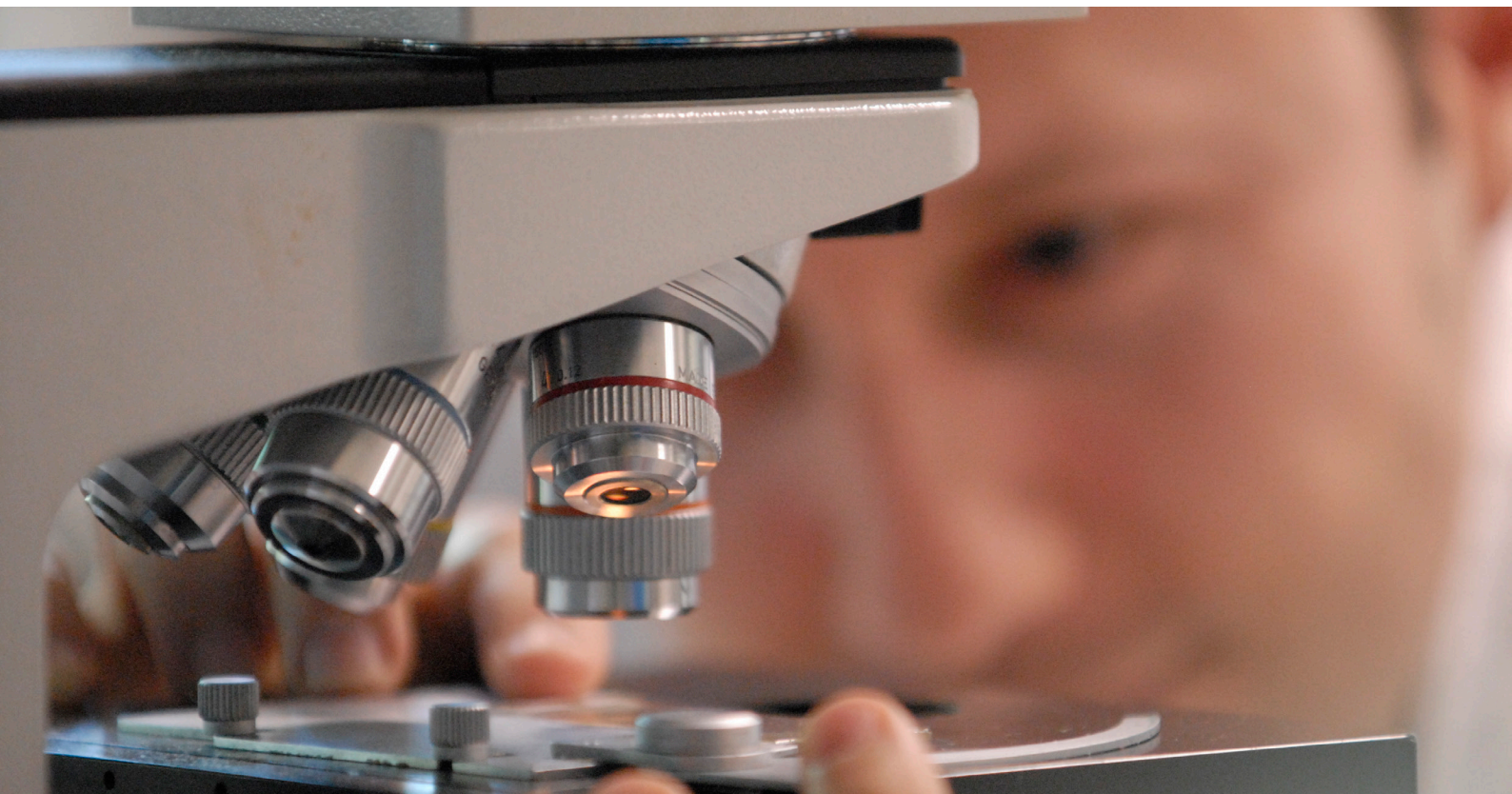
Research culture describes the environment in which research happens, and includes the norms in behaviours, expectations, attitudes and values of our research communities.

At the University of Cambridge, we want our research culture to be the very best it can be, because we know that a good culture will attract the best researchers, and in looking after those researchers, we empower them to do their best work.

We acknowledge that the research culture in Cambridge is not perfect. Some of the challenges we face are specific to our own institution, and many are complex, systemic issues found in research communities across the world.

This action plan sets out our ambitions for research culture at Cambridge, and how we will work towards achieving these over the coming years. As a signatory of the Researcher Development Concordat, we have already made a commitment to creating a healthy and supportive research culture at Cambridge.

This plan incorporates our proposed actions for meeting our Concordat obligations, and connects them with several other agendas relating to research culture, creating a comprehensive approach to drive change right across our institution.



Where are we now?

In 2019, the University undertook an institution-wide staff survey, and in 2020 the Postdoc Academy surveyed our postdoc alumni. We know from these surveys that our researchers value the excellent intellectual environment, the academic freedom, and the opportunity to work alongside outstanding colleagues in their field. Around three-quarters of our current staff, and 84% of our postdoc alumni, would recommend Cambridge as a place to work.

Cambridge invests heavily in supporting its researchers, particularly the 4200-strong postdoc population. Support for them includes a comprehensive professional development programme, a bespoke careers service, grass-roots societies, and a dedicated Postdoc Academy to provide a voice and a focal point for the community. This is enhanced by wider support for the academic environment provided through HR, the Research Office, and a broad learning and development programme for all staff.

The University holds an Athena Swan silver award, a Race Equality Charter bronze award, and is a signatory of DORA (The declaration on research assessment) and the Concordat for researcher development. A gap analysis against the obligations set out in the Concordat reveals that we have many of the relevant policies already in place, although feedback indicates they are not easy to find, and this makes them appear non-transparent. At the same time, we offer a range of training relevant to improving research culture, but we do not have the capacity or resource to deliver it to all those who need it. Without more investment, it is unlikely that the level of training available will drive the culture change we aim for.

Therefore we recognise why, despite ‘ticking many of the right boxes’, our researchers do not consistently experience a positive research culture, and this is our major challenge. Our plan focuses on ways to improve the communication of our positive practice and support structures, including the training we already offer, and the policies in place. We also recognise the importance of improving our support for PIs, so that they feel better able to support the researchers in their teams, and those they mentor and support in other ways. We will be ambitious in trying new initiatives and activities that have the potential to drive change, and we will work with our colleagues across the sector to tackle big challenges together. Above all, we want all of our colleagues at Cambridge to embrace their responsibilities in creating a positive research culture.

Who is this plan for?

Creating a positive research culture is the responsibility of everyone who contributes to the research endeavour, and who therefore experiences the culture we create. Problems in research culture are often thought to impact most heavily on those who are employed on fixed-term contracts and engaged in the intense competition for permanent roles – typically early career researchers, particularly postdocs. However, we acknowledge that there are pressures at every level within academia. Those with professional responsibility for researchers, particularly those new to the role of PI, may feel unsupported themselves in dealing with the pressures of building a team while still trying to launch their own career. As an individual’s career progresses the expectation to become involved in the broader management of their institution also adds burden. There are also disciplinary nuances, with pinch points happening at different times and in different ways. The proposed actions therefore look at how to support researchers at all career stages.

Throughout the plan, we refer to ‘researchers’ as a way of describing any individual working in the research environment, from PhD student through to professor. Where actions refer to more specific groups, this is indicated in the plan.

Our ambitions

The following six statements reflect our overall ambitions for the future of research culture at the University of Cambridge.

- 1** We will offer a world-class environment in which to do research and teaching, which embodies an open and collaborative, outward-looking culture, and which attracts and supports talented researchers from across the globe.
- 2** We will reward research teams as well as individuals, viewing success not just in terms of advancing academic knowledge and tackling global challenges, but in a way that recognises all contributions to the research endeavour, particularly those which uphold a positive research culture.
- 3** We value all of our researchers, and will provide them with an inclusive, transparent, safe and supportive environment, with zero tolerance of inappropriate behaviour.
- 4** We acknowledge that many of our researchers aim to achieve research independence and lead their own teams, while others may have different aspirations, and we will manage and support them to achieve their own individual goals.
- 5** Professional development will be an integral part of all researchers' roles. We will provide a comprehensive range of opportunities to support researchers in their current role, as well as equipping them to make an impact throughout their career.
- 6** With colleagues from across the sector, we will collectively drive positive change to research culture, working closely with funders and other HEIs, industry partners and other external networks, and will not be deterred by the complexity of the challenges this will entail.

How will we achieve these ambitions?

The plan sets out a series of proposed actions for each of the ambitions. Some of the actions build on work already in progress, and will deliver immediate gains, while others are designed to be considered over a much longer timescale. Short-term projects are intended to take place within around 12 months, medium-term within one to three years, and longer-term actions closer to five years.

We have focused on areas of action where we feel we can exert influence on our own research culture, or as an institution influence wider agendas. However, many of the streams of work relating to research culture are, and will continue to be, influenced by external factors such as funders' terms and conditions, and this might limit or enhance the extent of what we are able to achieve.

The action plan will exist as a living document, and we are open to adapting our actions as we test ideas and as external factors come in to play. Nevertheless, we remain ambitious; there is an appetite across the HE sector to introduce significant changes and it is likely that national developments in policy will only facilitate what we are aiming to do as an institution.

The Research Culture working group will develop the implementation plan for this work, alongside relevant colleagues with expertise in each action area, and will ensure appropriate governance procedures are followed. The group will report their progress regularly to the Postdoctoral Matters Committee, HR Committee and Research Policy Committee as required. External reporting will be provided to Universities UK as the secretariat of the Concordat.



We will offer a world-class environment in which to do research and teaching, which embodies an open and collaborative, outward-looking culture, and which attracts and supports talented researchers from across the globe.

The fundamental basis of our research culture is to maintain the excellent environment, including the academic freedom, which our researchers clearly value. We want researchers who spend time at Cambridge, whether as PhD students, postdocs or in academic posts, to consider the time they spend at Cambridge to be one of the highlights of their career.

Research at Cambridge will be well managed in adherence to internal and external policies and legal obligations, and the research support environment will enable researchers to conduct research at the highest international levels of excellence.

Proposed Actions

Continue our commitment to the Open Research programme

Understand what a good open research culture should look like for all disciplines.

Establish Open Research Operational Committee to encourage close working of all internal services and stakeholders supporting open research and carry out a programme of work aligned with the strategic direction set by the Open Research Steering Committee and responsive to developments within the university and the wider research landscape.

Support researchers in creating an open and collaborative research environment

Review, and update as necessary, the current university training on data management.

Build better connections between researchers through e.g. data champions' network, reproducibility network to facilitate sharing of best practice.

Pilot a new training session for early career researchers on collaborative working, run jointly between the researcher development programme and the SRI network.

Create an outward-looking research environment that makes it easy and beneficial for researchers to engage with industry and other HEIs

Develop a framework for managing and facilitating researcher internships. This will begin with PhD internships, and will extend to postdoc opportunities.

Consider ways to incentivise collaboration with industry through improvement of necessary processes, and recognition of the work in promotions, awards and other reward processes.

Support staff at all levels in creating a positive research culture

Work with Schools and departments to develop and trial local arrangements to support leadership for research culture, for example academic leads or coordinators held at either departmental or school level.

Provide Schools and departments with a toolkit to guide on the kinds of activities and initiatives that help to create a positive research culture.

Case Study

School of Biological Sciences Research Culture Academic leads

One of the School of Biological Science's major priorities is to develop and maintain an inclusive, supportive and principled research culture. The objective of the School's research culture leads is to implement concrete solutions aimed at incentivising behaviour that will improve the research culture for the benefit of all involved in research in the School.

To take this important work forward, the School recently appointed two Research Culture Academic Leads who will join with Academic Leads in Widening Participation in Graduate Education and in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, working together to further these important and often complementary agendas.

The School will recognise commitment to these priorities by negotiating with Heads of Department to reduce appointees' other duties and via the flexibility offered by the new academic career pathways scheme, as it is not appropriate for such work to be an entirely altruistic contribution to the life of the School.

We will reward research teams as well as individuals, viewing success not just in terms of advancing academic knowledge and tackling global challenges, but in a way that recognises all contributions to the research endeavour, particularly those which uphold a positive research culture.

In academia, a narrow range of metrics are typically used to indicate success – usually related to research outputs – and this means that positive behaviours that support a healthy culture, such as good leadership and collegiality, are not always recognised in a meaningful way. The main points at which these factors come in to play are during recruitment and promotion processes, but should also be considered when awarding prizes and other forms of recognition.

The University is a signatory of DORA, demonstrating its commitment to driving change in the way research and researchers are assessed.

Proposed Actions

Continue our commitment to DORA

Develop guidance for Schools and departments on how to implement the principles of DORA, the responsible use of metrics and suggestions for broader methods of the assessment of researchers.

Develop a bibliometric service that supports researchers and administrators in the responsible use of metrics at point of need.

Review our academic and researcher promotions

On the next iteration of the Academic Career Pathways scheme, gather data to review what kinds of examples are being evidenced and taken in to account to demonstrate that an individual is managing and supporting their postdocs and PhD students.

As part of the ongoing review of the researcher promotion pathway, consider a range of ways to recognise development and progression of research staff. This would include the possible use of grade 8 and/or an intermediate job title between RA and SRA.

Engage the research community fully in this process through representation on the appropriate working group, and through consultation.

Improve the transparency of, and support for, any new process which is developed.

Increase recognition and reward of researchers

Expand the Postdoc Awards Scheme which has been successfully piloted in the Institute for Manufacturing.

Consider ways to formally recognise postdocs who take on official leadership roles within the university, e.g. Chair of the Postdocs of Cambridge Society.

Develop the membership model for the Postdoc Academy.

Develop an award scheme that recognises academics who offer outstanding support to early career researchers.

Improve recruitment processes to recognise a broader range of success measures.

Pilot the Resume for Researchers in recruitment of postdocs in one or two selected departments, and only at shortlist/longlist stage. This will run alongside, and in dialogue with, UKRI's pilot of the same format in grant applications.

Improve support for staff who manage or have responsibility for researchers

Review current support for leadership development of staff who manage researchers. Ensure that provision is coherent, easy to find, and fit for purpose, and supports individuals in developing and demonstrating behaviours and skills that uphold a positive research culture.

Conduct a review of the incentives and barriers experienced by individuals in terms of prioritising research culture. This would include the proportion of time spent on activities relating to research compared with those relating to creating and maintaining a positive research culture. Review how these activities are recognised and rewarded, and how we can better support researchers in prioritising them.

Case Study

The Institute for Manufacturing (IfM) Postdoc Awards Scheme

In 2019, the IfM introduced an awards scheme specifically for postdocs. Nominations were invited for three awards, recognising postdocs who demonstrated excellence in research, teaching, and academic citizenship. The winners received £250 plus a free ticket for the departmental Christmas meal. The process for nominating and selecting the winners was designed to be fair and transparent, as well as easy to administer. The scheme proved to be a simple but impactful way for the department to recognise the diverse contributions made by its postdoc community. It was helpful in raising the profile of postdocs in the department, and encouraging PIs to stop and reflect on the successes of their teams. The scheme ran for a second time in 2020.

We value all of our researchers, and will provide them with an inclusive, transparent, safe and supportive environment, with zero tolerance of inappropriate behaviour.

Our staff surveys indicate that the majority of researchers are very positive about their experience at Cambridge. But a small minority report a negative experience, some of whom are on the receiving end of very poor behaviour, and this is not acceptable. Cambridge is committed to a University-wide cultural change programme to introduce a zero tolerance environment towards bullying, harassment, sexual misconduct and other inappropriate behaviour.

The University holds a Race Equality Charter bronze award, and an Athena Swann silver award. The work in these areas has a strong connection to research culture, and close links between the working groups ensures that the relevant actions are joined up to maximise the impact. More recently, the University has identified work on strengthening its policies around mutual respect and grievance as a component of its COVID-19 Recovery Plan. This work is part of a wider programme of cultural change that is, in part, a response to the Nurturing a Culture of Mutual Respect Survey undertaken jointly by the University and the Unions in 2018.

Proposed Actions

Ensure that the University's change programme to establish a culture of mutual respect meets the needs of our researchers and is effectively communicated to them

Finalise the development of a new Mutual Respect policy, Code of Behaviour, and Grievance Policy, so the types of negative experiences shared by researchers actively inform the expectations, processes, and support set out in these documents. Provide an opportunity for the research community input directly into this policy development.

Ensure clear communication of these policies, once launched, amongst the research community, through channels such as induction and newsletters.

Support the process of building awareness of mutual respect in postdocs and PIs and their responsibilities under the policies (both as colleagues and managers of others) by working with the cultural change programme team on training and other types of development resources so that they meet the needs of the community.

Ensure the needs of researchers are taken in to account in other areas of the wider cultural change programme, such as the development of a centralised support source online.

Facilitate reporting and addressing inappropriate conduct

Consider development of a website to provide one source of information on reporting and addressing inappropriate conduct to include:

- details of support services
- information of how to address issues informally
- ways to report inappropriate behaviour
- relevant HR/RSO policies where not appropriate to deal with informally or been unsuccessful.

Support for staff who manage researchers

Review the support currently offered to staff who manage researchers from across the institution, to ensure that it is coherent, easy to find, fit for purpose, and:

- highlights and develops attributes that contribute to a positive research culture
- supports effective and inclusive management practice
- ensures processes designed to support ongoing learning and career development are followed (eg induction, probation, SRD)
- aligns with mutual respect and cultural change work.

Mentoring for researchers

Ensure that all postdocs have access to the Postdoc Academy's mentoring programme to ensure they have a mentor outside of their group/line management.

Provide a voice for early career researchers within the institution

Work with the existing postdoc organisations within the institution to help improve their engagement with the postdoc community, and strengthen their voice in representing this community.

Consider how existing groups that represent researchers can feed into Senior Leadership Team/Committees as appropriate.

Include researcher representatives on all committees where appropriate.

We acknowledge that many of our researchers aim to achieve research independence and lead their own teams, while others may have different aspirations, and we will manage and support them to achieve their own individual goals.

Our destination data shows that around two-thirds of postdocs who leave Cambridge move in to a research or teaching position in another higher education institution, and later down the line around 30% of these postdocs are in permanent academic positions. The remaining third leaving Cambridge move into a variety of careers, including research in industry, as well as other professional roles that build on their research skills.

Postdocs are employed to deliver a research project, but given the temporary nature of their contract, it's also important they use this time to develop skills and experiences that will help them at future career stages. This might be starting to explore lines of research that develop away from their main research project, or becoming involved with additional activities that develop broader skills.

Proposed Actions

Support early and mid-career researchers to develop independence

Be explicit in both the postdoc induction and academic induction that a postdoc position is considered to be an opportunity to develop research independence, that postdocs should seek opportunities to do this, and that academics should consider ways in which they can provide this to early career researchers.

Develop and expand the successfully piloted mid-contract check-in development event for early and mid-career researchers to help encourage continual review and development towards independence.

Consolidate information about internal funding schemes that allow researchers to apply for a small award to fund some independent work, such as exploring a new approach or collecting pilot data for a bigger proposal, into a single space.

Develop a mechanism to facilitate internal internships, to allow researchers the opportunity to broaden their skills in a variety of university settings.

Ensure that any new redeployment policy takes into account the specific challenges of the academic career structure, and include postdoc and PI input in its development.

Raise the profile of early and mid-career researchers who leave academic research

Develop an awareness campaign using e.g. front page university and department webpages for regular stories on what researchers who have left the university are doing and to tell career stories celebrating this.

Encourage all PIs to include a 'former team members' page on research group webpages, including those who have left academia. Ask PIs to nominate former group members to spotlight at University or department level.

Alumni benefits – review the existing alumni benefits programme for postdocs, and consider ways to improve the scheme, particularly communication about it.

Case Study

Accessing the Returning Carers Scheme to boost postdoc independence

Bénédicte Sanson, a PI in the Department of Physiology, Development and Neuroscience, wanted to support a postdoc in her group in taking a new direction with her research, to move towards independence. The postdoc wanted to use what she had learned using *Drosophila* as a model organism, and apply it in fish. However, the grant did not have funds allocated for purchasing the fish.

Bénédicte worked with her postdoc to apply for a small sum of money (circa £3000) through the University's Returning Carers Scheme, which enabled her to buy the necessary fish. The postdoc was then able to acquire preliminary data in the fish model and use it in a proposal for her own independent fellowship (Royal Society Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowship), which was successful.

Both the postdoc and Bénédicte believe that having been awarded this small amount of money helped the postdoc build a strong case for the application and also created a productive conversation between them about steps to independence.

Professional development will be an integral part of all researchers' roles. We will provide a comprehensive range of opportunities to support researchers in their current role, as well as equipping them to make an impact throughout their career.

At Cambridge, we offer an extensive professional development programme for all staff, as well as a tailored Researcher Development Programme for PhDs and postdocs. The programmes operate at capacity, but we know that a significant proportion of our researchers don't engage in any formal training, and we do not currently have the resource to stretch our offering to all.

The UK HE sector is investing heavily in researcher development in order to meet its requirements under the new research culture agenda, and we risk falling behind. At the same time, many researchers and academics see professional development as another demand on their time, and one which doesn't necessarily deliver immediate benefits on which they will be measured or rewarded. Those PIs who want to encourage their teams to get support don't always know where to find the relevant information.

Proposed Actions

Improve overall engagement with professional development

Consider modifying all university research and academic contracts to reflect that individuals have a responsibility to engage in professional development.

Include a commitment to professional development on all role descriptions.

Develop guidance for Schools, departments and individual researchers about what constitutes appropriate professional development at various career stages. Integrate this guidance into inductions for all researchers and academic staff.

Review the approach to SRD (staff review and development) currently used for researchers, and consider ways to modify and improve it to build better engagement in professional development.

Improve provision for PIs, and those with responsibility for other researchers, to help them support their own researchers and teams

Review current support and develop guidance for staff who manage researchers to help them engage in meaningful and regular career conversations in order to identify opportunities for continuing professional development.

Develop a PI portal or similar shared resource, creating a recognisable space where PIs can go for resources and information, including case studies on how PIs have supported postdocs and PhDs.

Consider how to better support and advocate for new/early career PIs, particularly in terms of communicating the support available, facilitating peer support, and mentoring.

Develop our professional development programme and provision

Consider creative approaches to building upon our current programme of development opportunities, including online synchronous and asynchronous material.

Develop a central hub via the Postdoc Academy, whereby early career researchers can find all appropriate researcher development content and resources on offer across the University and guidance for navigating the available options.

Create a development pathway in the institution that takes individuals from PhD through to established academic.

Develop a Postgraduate Certificate in Research Leadership as a bespoke programme to support early career researchers to achieve career success in a variety of sectors.

Case Study

An information flyer for PIs

In 2018, the Postdoc Careers Service, the Researcher Development Programme and the Postdoc Academy collaborated to produce a flyer for PIs outlining the key support services for postdocs. This was in response to feedback from academics that they often didn't know about the useful support these teams provided, and how to answer some of the typical questions from postdocs about careers and support.

The flyer has been welcomed by PIs as well as departmental administrators across the University and has started useful discussions between these services and the departments they support. In several cases, departments have invited representatives to join staff meetings or committees to further raise awareness.

With colleagues from across the sector, we will collectively drive positive change to research culture, working closely with funders and other HEIs, industry partners and other external networks, and will not be deterred by the complexity of the challenges this will entail.

While local efforts are important for driving institutional culture change, many of the challenges involved in creating a better research culture are systemic features of academia. In order to bring about real change, we need to work with other institutions across the UK, and internationally, as well as other key stakeholders in the research system, including funders and employers of researchers.

Proposed Actions

Work in partnership with the UK HEI sector, including funders

Continue to engage with the Researchers14 network to drive discussions and develop approaches around improving UK research culture.

Work with a consortium of UK universities (Edinburgh, UCL, Leeds, Cardiff, Queens' University Belfast and the School of Advanced Studies) to create a development network for the UK Future Leader Fellows. This includes developing a framework for leadership development.

In partnership with the public affairs team, connect with BEIS and UKRI, as well as other interested stakeholders, to share data and insight from the Postdoc Alumni Survey.

Help to drive change to research culture on an international level

Develop and deliver a pan-European project to transform research culture across a network of key research intensive universities.

Continue to engage in developments around research culture through the LERU network.

