Research Culture Survey Discussion 2022

First, we'd like to thank everyone who took part in our first institutional Research Culture Survey – it's been really important for us to hear what people across our University, from different departments, disciplines and roles think about our research culture. We particularly value the comments that many participants took the time to share with us. Some participants shared personal experiences and others gave a wider institutional perspective; all these insights, concerns and ideas have helped to shape our report, and will continue to inform the conversations we have and prioritise what we do next.

We are one of the first Universities to conduct their own research culture survey focussed on what we, as a community, believe we need for a positive research culture. We want to report and reflect as openly as we can, to engage our community with the work we want to do and what we want to achieve. There's no doubt that the survey captures a unique point in time, following a period of immense challenge and upheaval through the pandemic, felt by so many and having impact both inside and outside the workplace. However, this gives us additional opportunity to reflect on the impact of Covid-19, both positive and negative, and ensure that we include it as part of our response.

As an institution, we acknowledge the areas for improvement, and want to work with our research community at Newcastle University to build a positive research culture that improves the quality and reach of research and research-led education, as well as student and colleague experience. We'd like to ask members of Newcastle University to join together with us on this journey – research culture is shaped by and belongs to everyone, and we all have a role to play. Throughout this summary, we encourage you to reflect and identify where you could help to make positive change, and share some of the suggestions people made in the survey. Whether you feel you have a lot or a small amount of influence, our research culture emerges from all our attitudes and behaviours, meaning that everyone, every day, has a role to play in creating a people-centric culture. We all contribute to our culture at Newcastle University, and whoever and wherever we are, we can all help to ensure that it centres on a meaningful, fulfilling, and positive people experience not only for our students but for our colleagues as well.

Reflecting on the quantitative and qualitative responses in our survey, we've identified three recurring themes that people spoke strongly about and came to the fore around what matters for people and research: collaboration; reaching our potential; and inclusive culture. Whilst each theme encompasses separate topics, key findings are interrelated, and it is important to recognise the crossover between each theme to truly understand their context. A detailed explanation further unpacking how each theme emerged is provided in the following summary, with emphasis on how action points within these areas can engender a truly people-centric culture at Newcastle University, where all our colleagues can thrive.

Collaboration

Collaboration was highlighted in earlier consultations as something our research community values and sees as central to a positive research culture (see our 'Research Culture Roadmap'), and over half of respondents in our survey agreed the University promoted a collaborative research culture. As we move towards a landscape which increasingly recognises the benefits of multi-

disciplinary research — particularly in tackling complex and global challenges — as well as generating new ideas and ways of doing things, it's important that Newcastle continues to promote and facilitate collaboration across different disciplines and between research groups. Creating communities of practice can help people share their expertise, collectively solve problems, and offer spaces to reflect on both project successes and pain points, so that we can become more agile towards future challenges and opportunities. Better connecting people across our research community will also better place us to unlock the potential of our highly specialised and talented individuals, and spark innovation and creativity in areas we may not yet be fully optimising, or even expecting.

Building and maintaining strong collaborative relationships is a skill, requiring individuals to actively understand how to bring the best out in each other to achieve their shared research goals, and create opportunities where trust and connection can grow. Building these collaborative relationships feels particularly important at this present time, with Covid-19 impacting our sense of connection and belonging. The University recognises the value of building supportive communities and more effective team working, which not only creates a more engaging and enjoyable research environment for our colleagues and students, but over the long term, we hope can play a part in discouraging behaviours which contribute to a hyper-competitive research culture. Of course, our ability to do this depends on multiple individual and organisational factors: whilst collaboration rests in the behaviour of individuals, the University also needs to address the enablers and barriers, structural or cultural, that help or hinder people's individual efforts. People's comments suggested that there is more to do, as an organisation and as a collective, if we are striving towards a truly collaborative culture.

Over half of the respondents felt they had opportunity to exchange ideas and expertise, but many PGRs, researchers, and academics also told us that we can improve by providing more **opportunities** to encourage interdisciplinary and collaborative interactions, whether that be through networks, informal interactive spaces, or events (in person and online). People spoke about their desire for opportunities to meet new people or hear about new things that stimulate them and their work, which could be as simple as chatting over a coffee, or finding interesting research talks, or conversations to join. As an institution, we have actively been working to break down siloes and promote cross-disciplinary research as part of our research strategy (for example, through the development of NUCoREs), and we recognise the opportunities provided by different centres, institutes and groups across the University that are also helping to foster better networking, connectivity and inspiring encounters. However, people spoke of experiencing some barriers to joining these activities, and asked for: better communication; being encouraged to attend activities; ensuring spaces feel inclusive; tackling logistical issues to better foster cross-Faculty working; and, help prioritising collaborative and interdisciplinary working within an already busy role.

Another area for improvement is making it easier for people to **find potential collaborators and share skills and expertise**. One real positive from the survey is that people generally felt that others shared their expertise when asked, highlighting the individual efforts that our community make to support one another and foster good collaboration, which is a strength that we should celebrate. However, free-text comments revealed that the difficulty is in knowing who to approach in the first place. Expertise sought could be around knowledge in a particular research area, method or technique, or specialised support around making grant applications, enhancing impact, or finding an appropriate mentor. As an institution we need to make it easier for people to make those all-important links that enhance their personal and professional development, as well as deliver and enable our research.

Recognition is also crucial for successful collaboration; when people feel confident that their ideas and contributions will be appreciated, this will have a positive impact on openness, team working and research outputs, and allow colleagues and students to learn and grow. Promisingly, people generally felt that their views on research were valued by those around them, which perhaps suggests that many local groups work well together, and hear different views. Disappointingly, they were less positive about the University valuing their contributions to research, with a wide range of research activities and achievements not being sufficiently celebrated and rewarded, and individual contributions remaining hidden in group outputs and successes. As an organisation, we clearly need to find new ways to recognise and reward diverse contributions from students and colleagues, and better appreciate the work people do. This will include considering how we reward collaborative as well as individual efforts, and recognise people's contributions in the delivery of complex projects.

Realising our potential

There is no doubt that our people are our greatest asset. The University's success rests on the day-to-day efforts and achievements of all our colleagues and students: when our people do well, we all can enjoy the benefits. Our research community hosts developing and active leaders in research, alongside a whole host of equally talented and dedicated colleagues who enable and amplify our research. Through our [University Vision](), we aspire to creativity, excellence and impact and deepen our strengths in research and research-led education. We want everyone to have the freedom and opportunity to succeed. Nurturing and supporting people to reach their own professional potential helps us reach our institutional goals to improve the quality, impact, and reach of our research. In our survey, we heard how people felt more could be done to support their career aspirations, and people spoke of how this would enhance their own performance and unlock potential and opportunities for the institution. Below, the research culture team reflect on how we realise our potential from an individual and a research perspective; whilst interlocking, we hope to describe opportunities identified by feedback to nurture our researching community as well as our reach in research.

As many people are driven by continuous growth and improvement, career development is key when considering what makes an engaging working environment. This strongly resonated with what we heard in some of our early consultations, in that a positive research culture should not only give people the freedom to be curious and creative, but also be encouraging of ambition and appropriate risk-taking, allowing them to stretch their horizons, and to provide room for growth through new ideas, skills and knowledge. Here at Newcastle, we know that careers in research often aren't linear, and career pathways are often unclear. Increasingly, we see people moving across job roles and sectors, and this porosity is beneficial as it allows people to develop unique combinations of skills and expertise and bring new perspectives to traditional roles. However, there is often no fast-track for development, which takes time; this can be disconcerting for people wanting to focus on their professional growth. In addition, it can be difficult to see the next career move and know how to prepare for it; for example, for early career researchers considering routes outside of academia, or professional services colleagues looking for a new challenge. Often an imbalance in the number of applicants versus the number of posts available can make for a competitive and disheartening recruitment arena. Therefore, it's important that Newcastle University is cultivating a culture which prioritises the nurturing of career development, whilst also supporting individuals to navigate our sector-specific challenges.

Work is only one factor of our lives. Career pathways will inevitably change depending on our needs for balance, authenticity, and challenge both professionally and personally. Consequently,

there is increasingly more emphasis on the importance of lifelong learning, so people feel equipped to respond and adapt to everchanging employment landscapes. We want to encourage these viewpoints as we recognise that with precarious research contracts, where people (researchers and professional services colleagues) are commonly contracted for a fixed period and/or to implement highly specialised skills, this can heighten the need to become more aware of our skillsets and how they apply more broadly. As an institution we also want to dispel the stigma that is associated with a transition to a career beyond academia, such as industry, entrepreneurship, or creative practice. These are career pathways where our community's skillsets and perspectives are highly valuable and in demand, hosting even more possibilities for growth and influence. We want to encourage people to feel empowered to think about how they would like to grow, particularly if it involves exploring a route less travelled. By doing so this should help to keep development at the forefront of our colleague and student experience as well as future-proof individual skillsets. Therefore, our approach in supporting individuals to develop expertise and navigate their own career goals and pathways should have a profound impact on our research culture.

We found that responses to our survey indicated a varied experience in relation to professional and career development; overall, respondents were evenly split across positive, neutral, and negative responses in their belief that development opportunities will help their career progression. This also varied by role, most likely reflecting varying career pathways and perceptions of career opportunities available to people, with PGRs being the most positive, and academic colleagues being the most negative (a pattern seen across all questions relating to skills and careers). This variation across the academic career pathway likely reflects the **training opportunities available** for different groups; PGRs are learning to become researchers through their degree programmes, with Faculty-based development programmes they are often required to engage with as part of their degrees. In contrast, training opportunities are less focussed on developing research skills in colleagues, and we recognise that more can be done to develop skills and support career development across all career stages and roles. However, as Newcastle strives towards everyone feeling that they have access to opportunities which enable them to reach their full potential, we need to pay closer attention to ways that we can truly support different needs to facilitate quality development across all roles. Free text comments support this view, with some respondents stating that they feel more can be done to ensure training materials are tailored to the unique context of what they do and aspire to.

Another way to interpret the mixed sentiment is that organisational factors are contributing to the different experiences that are felt amongst our research community. The **encouragement** individuals feel to develop their skillset is one important factor. Promisingly, over half of respondents responded positively to this, with many free text comments praising supportive managers and peers. However, looking across roles, academic colleagues again were the group that most negatively responded to the question about being encouraged to develop their skills and expertise, which suggests this is an area where more can be done. This lack of encouragement could be due to several organisational factors, for example, managers not knowing about the current training on offer, suitable training not being available, or it not being clear what kind of development opportunity would be valuable in a rapidly changing research environment. In future, we will need to think more about what skills are required and fill training gaps for all colleagues and students. In addition, we can ask those in managerial positions to be mindful of exploring ways to incorporate development opportunities and performance conversations into business as usual, to better embed development into our ways of working. Encouraging individuals to also think about what development means to their own career goals and how Newcastle University can support their growth. This will not only make career conversations more valuable, but by encouraging a higher

level of awareness and proactivity in relation to pursuing development goals, it will help us to engender a culture centred on empowerment.

Supporting people to be open when things go wrong can also play a crucial role in unlocking individual potential. We learn by making mistakes so creating a psychologically safe environment, where individuals **feel safe to fail**, will encourage individuals to stretch themselves without fear of failure, and view mistakes as opportunities to learn and improve, and reduce the likelihood that mistakes will be repeated. Promisingly, half of our respondents do perceive a positive learning environment, being supported to be open when things go wrong and learn from their mistakes. However, this finding also suggests that it would be helpful for us all to be more mindful of adopting a growth mindset and actively encourage one another that failure is part of the learning process, to help build future performance, increasing innovation and creativity across the organisation. Talking openly about past mistakes can be a powerful vehicle for change as it allows others to relate to our experiences, increase experimentation with new ways of working, and enable bolder steps to be taken to advance our research. It can also help people feel more connected to others and more willing to seek help and advice when needed, which can help to improve individual performance and build better collaborative relationships around research.

Openness and integrity in research improve the quality and reach of research. As an institution, it's important that we maximise the reliability, visibility and impact of our research, building public trust in what we do, and ensuring that the knowledge we generate brings widespread benefits. All questions relating to openness and integrity captured a generally positive sentiment, particularly around understanding the benefits of open research practices and feeling confident in one's own ability to meet ethical requirements. There was also a strong level of confidence that Newcastle University takes research integrity seriously and that the best research practices are seen to be widely applied. However, the university can clearly do more to value and promote open research, and enhance our training provision in relation to topics such as ethics, open data, open access publishing and research tools. People acknowledged that our sector faces unique challenges when trying to embed open research practices more broadly due to the need for highly specialised approaches and consideration of a wide range of research topics across different disciplines. To fully realise the potential from our research across the project lifecycle, we will seek to further promote, support and incentivise open research practices (sensitive to disciplinary context), to enable people to further explore and adopt open practices that will benefit their research.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that **time** was mentioned as a significant factor in relation to development. People spoke of the time it takes to find relevant opportunities and know what is available, which indicates that the university can do more to enable better navigation of our current provision. Perception of a high workload and working beyond capacity were also recognised as organisational barriers to development, with some respondents even noting that the only time they feel they have available for training is outside of working hours. We want our people to feel able to achieve their best and unlock their research potential and will continue to work towards a culture which prioritises and embeds training and development into our core student and colleague experience.

In addition, results indicated that many of our research community do not feel they have the time available to think creatively and develop their ideas. Without the time to develop ideas, problem solve and share experiences with peers, we limit the potential that our research community can reach. Free text commentary also captured the sentiment that many respondents feel they are consistently working whilst under a lot of pressure which poses serious consequences for innovative behaviours. We also risk disengaging our research community, ineffectively utilising individual

expertise and limiting the reach of our research. We recognise that this is an area for priority action, and there is a pressing need to release quality time to help our talented colleagues and students flourish and achieve their full potential.

An inclusive culture

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) are embedded into our core values, and through our EDI Strategy, we have a long-standing commitment as an institution to develop a culture that is positive, supportive and inclusive, and where all colleagues and students can reach their full potential. Fairness and inclusion has also been highlighted by our research community as a fundamental principle of a positive research culture. As an institution, we absolutely agree with this, and recognise that the business case for EDI improving research has never been stronger. If we are to fully understand some of the complex challenges we face at national and global scales, and develop deep and innovative programmes of work to tackle them, we need to be able to provide a culture where diverse people, skillsets, perspectives and ideas are welcomed, respected and valued. We want everyone that delivers and enables the exciting research we do to be able to bring their best selves to work and feel like they belong and are supported in our research community. One positive that we're taking away from the survey data was that people largely agreed with the question that diversity is important for research and innovation. Of course, we don't know exactly how each respondent in our survey defined 'diversity' for example, protected characteristics, roles, disciplines, nationalities, or more. However, regardless of this, peoples' responses reveal a widely held belief that diversity, of either thought or expertise, will enable higher quality research. This shared belief across our research community is important and will help us have focussed conversations about how we build that diversity, as well as those inclusive research environments that we can benefit from. We would like more people to feel included as members of our research community, and that their diverse contributions are valued. There were some clear messages from our survey that highlighted we can be doing better with respect to this.

We heard from some of our respondents how we can do more to better r**ecognise** peoples' different contributions towards achieving our research goals and successes, and help them feel more **valued** members of the research community. Not everyone currently feels like they are heard and valued. For example, Professional Services colleagues spoke of not always having their skills and input recognised, whilst some of our PGRs and PDRAs spoke about wanting more visibility and recognition for their important contributions to research projects and teams. Feelings of exclusion will make people less motivated and engaged, and enjoy their work less. It is increasingly recognised that no research happens in isolation, and research production is enabled by a wide range of partners and collaborators in many different roles. It is important for us to reflect on these insights and consider not only what we value, but how we recognise and celebrate that value across our community.

We should also aim to improve **psychological safety** across our research environments, ensuring that we foster a culture across the whole organisation where people feel respected, involved and included. A psychologically safe environment is also characterised by feeling able to contribute differing perspectives without fear of personal retribution. We also want to strive towards a culture where people feel they can openly share opposing views, as feeling unable to challenge the status quo hinders innovation: it reduces diversity of thought and can result in the continuation of potentially less efficient practice. Whilst many people in our survey felt able to do so, others didn't, and clearly there's a mix of different experiences across the organisation. Some people felt that their points of view were listened to and valued, whilst others felt they were

dismissed or ignored, which can lead to people no longer contributing to important discussions and decisions. As a University we thrive on creativity, innovation, and experimenting with good ideas – they underpin our core business in education and research, and also enable us to better respond to rapid changes in the world around us. We need everyone's ideas to be successful, and no one should feel afraid to offer their thoughts or perspectives on problems or challenges. Wherever we sit in the organisation, we need to foster environments where people feel safe to share their thoughts, failures and ideas for improvements to how we do research, and where we listen and are open to fresh thinking.

More seriously, we also heard peoples' experiences of **inappropriate behaviour** that they have witnessed or experienced both inside and outside the University, and too many people weren't confident that reports of inappropriate behaviour would be dealt with effectively within the organisation. Newcastle University takes bullying, harassment, discrimination and inappropriate behaviour of any kind very seriously, and have policies, reporting systems for colleagues and students, and trained volunteer networks to support people, already in place. However, as highlighted in many other sector-wide reports (*Wellcome Trust: What researchers think about the culture they work in (2020), ARMA Research Culture Survey (2020), Research culture: A Technician Lens (2022)*), colleagues and students felt there was much more we could do to create safe environments, and tackle instances of bullying, harassment and discrimination. This is an area of priority for us.

Final reflections

These initial findings from the survey are already providing some key messages for us to reflect on, both as an organisation as well as individually. Whilst we take away some real positives from the data, we also know that there are some real challenges to tackle. We recognise that these are difficult times, particularly with so much happening in the world around us, and the impact that has on our professional and personal lives. These results may feel like there is a lot to do, and that the positive things that many of us are doing are not having sufficient impact. We have to remember that they will - culture change is a marathon not a sprint, and whilst at the moment, some of that work is hidden and not widely celebrated, it is very much appreciated.

The research culture team also want to emphasise that this isn't the end of our analysis of the data we collected, and we will continue to use it to inform our actions and activities. As we publish our Research Culture Action Plan, we felt that this was an important point to be open about the feedback we've received and our initial interpretations of the data. We recognise that people may have their own questions they want to ask from the data, and interpretations will differ from our own. We welcome any reflections people have and will work to ensure that we create opportunities to carry on this dialogue. It is important to us that we keep working with everyone, and learn from different experiences as we hear more from members of our research community.

We are just on one small step of our journey towards building that positive research culture that people have told us they want to see. There will be some 'quick fixes', but there are a lot of complex and interrelated issues that will make this a long process, which we may find frustrating and difficult at times. We know that some of the things we will try will fail or not work in the way we would like, but we need to experiment and try new things, and learn from our own mistakes. We will continue to work together with our talented research community to find solutions to what can sometimes seem quite intractable issues where it can sometimes be hard to know where to start. We very much need to work together on these.

These findings and our report give an institutional perspective, and where we can see opportunity for University-wide action. We hope that it provides a scaffold to enable more local activities that we want to support, and empower people across the organisation to lead on the changes they want to see. We are, of course, all agents of change, wherever we sit in the University. Even by the small things we all do in response to reading this report, we are all creating positive change – small changes can lead to big ones over time. Culture change is a joint responsibility. It takes all of us.

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