



Ulster
University

Research
and Innovation

Research Culture Priorities & Action Plan 2025 - 2029

**Towards an Inclusive, Collaborative
and Thriving Research Culture**

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Foreword

I am delighted to share with you our Research Culture Strategic Priorities and Action Plan for 2025-29.

Research Culture is part of our overall organisational framework – both shaped by, and contributing to, all our activities across the University. It is rooted in our core organisational values of enhancing potential, collaboration, inclusively and integrity – the values that define us and who we are.

At the heart of our Research Strategy is a commitment to people. We recognise that research and innovation thrive in a positive, inclusive, and supportive environment.

Our Research Strategy sets out a vision where:

‘We believe in equality in research, we celebrate diversity and we foster inclusion. We are advancing our national and international reputation for research excellence while simultaneously playing a leading role in the enrichment of the social, economic, and cultural life of Northern Ireland. We are a university of, and for, the world.’

A positive, supportive, inclusive Research Culture is the key to delivering our vision.

We are deeply committed to developing both our research community and the environment in which they work. This commitment is demonstrated in the strategic priorities and supporting actions outlined here in our Research Culture Action Plan. In addition, through the Wellcome Trust’s Research Culture NI project, we are fostering meaningful partnerships across Northern Ireland’s research community and have invested in a dedicated Research Culture Manager to drive this agenda forward.

In a time of significant challenge for the HEI sector, it is as important as ever that we work together to support our research culture and community. Research Culture does not happen in isolation, nor does it emerge from the top down – it is built collectively. We all have a part to play in shaping the future of Ulster’s research culture.

**Professor Liam Maguire,
Pro Vice Chancellor for Research**

What is Research Culture and why is it so important?



The Royal Society, as part of their Changing Expectations project, investigated the evolving relationship between the research community and the wider research system, and have defined research culture as:

“Research culture encompasses the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities. It influences researchers’ career paths and determines the way that research is conducted and communicated.”

Since the launch of the Royal Society’s Changing Expectations project, fostering a positive research culture has become a key policy priority for governments, higher education institutions (HEIs), funding bodies, and research organisations. For instance:

- The UK government’s R&D People and Culture Strategy (2021) is making significant progress towards creating a more open, inclusive, and transparent research environment.
- UKRI’s vision is one of an outstanding research and innovation system characterised by diversity, inclusivity, and openness.
- The Research Excellence Framework (REF) has sharpened its focus on Research Culture. The upcoming REF 2029 will expand its environment statement to include People, Culture, and Environment, increasing the weighting for this component from 15% to 25%. The new REF 2029 People, Culture, and Environment statement will place greater emphasis on collaboration, inclusivity, integrity, engagement, open research, and career progression.

In today’s landscape of competitive research funding, complex research challenges, and shifting policy priorities, there is a growing need for a unified collective focus, enhanced collaboration, and research that reflects and leverages the diversity within our research community.

Research Culture at Ulster

“At Ulster University we recognise that research thrives when researchers feel that they are part of an engaging, fair, and collegial environment in which people help each other to succeed.

This reflects core values of the university, where we value not only research successes but also how these successes are achieved.”

Professor Sonja McIlfatrick,
Chair of the Research Culture
Steering Committee.



Co-production of Ulster's Research Culture Framework

Developing and prioritising a positive research culture is essential. Understanding our strategic focus and priorities in this area is paramount.

Surveys like The Wellcome Trust's 'What Researchers Think About the Culture they Work in', which gathered responses from over 4,000 UK researchers, provided valuable insights into the key factors contributing to poor research culture. These include a lack of openness, unhealthy competition, pressure to publish, limited career development pathways, and job insecurity. Recognising these issues, the Wellcome Trust has been actively supporting universities in developing their research cultures and assisting higher education institutions in implementing meaningful changes and better practices.

In a recent Pilot Research Culture Survey of a number of UK Universities by Vitae (2025), respondents most frequently identified areas for improvement such as collaboration and engagement, recognition and visibility, professional and career development, interdisciplinarity, team-based research, and equity, diversity, and inclusion. Similar concerns were also reflected locally at Ulster, where through various forums such as – the Valuing Voices survey, Research & Innovation strategy working groups, research surveys, town hall events, and discussion groups – our research community have identified the need to support and foster a more positive research culture.

To help address this, the Research and Innovation directorate established our Research Culture Steering Committee to explore and develop a roadmap for a more positive research culture at Ulster. It was crucial that this committee represented the diversity of our research community, ensuring that everyone had a voice in shaping and driving forward our strategic priorities and actions. This diverse committee includes representatives from across our community, including professional services, technicians, PhD researchers, Faculties, Early Career Researchers (ECRs), Contract Research Staff (CRS), Concordat, Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), and People and Culture (P&C).

When developing our research culture priorities and action plan, we were cognisant of the many existing successful research culture initiatives and foundations in place. We aimed to build upon and complement these efforts, including for example:

- The strong foundation of existing standards of excellence and frameworks, such as our HR Excellence Award, Concordat for Research Integrity, and Researcher Development Concordat.
- Alignment with the strategic direction of the university, such as our University Strategy, [People, Place, and Partnership](#), [Research & Innovation Research Strategy](#), and Wellbeing Strategy, as well as complementing and building on other current university policies and action plans.
- Aligning with the broader university initiatives and potential growth opportunities of Northern Ireland [City, Region and Growth Deals](#).
- The integration of commitments and aims outlined The Declaration on Research Assessment, Open Research Position Statement, and the Technicians Commitment, which foster a diverse community and promote knowledge sharing.
- Alongside respective Faculty operational plans and Faculty specific research initiatives focused on developing research culture and community.

As noted previously, our Research Culture Action Plan is also shaped by external factors, including changes and developments in areas such as REF 2029, funder requirements, government strategies, global challenges, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The needs of our Research Community, together with both internal and external standards, drivers and enablers have helped to shape and define our Research Culture Strategic Priorities and Action Plan.



"A strong research culture at Ulster thrives on representation from across our university community including academics, professional services staff and students who together collaborate with a shared commitment for meaningful impact."

Professor Lynsey Hollywood,
Manager, Food and Drink
Business Development Centre

Research Culture Action Plan Context and Enablers

Strategic Context



Research Culture Action Plan

Informing & Enabling



Towards an Inclusive, Collaborative & Thriving Research Culture – Our Strategic Priorities

A positive and thriving research culture is one that is supportive, inclusive, and fosters a sense of safety, support, and celebration for all staff. It is an environment characterised by openness, collegiality, and a steadfast commitment to maintaining the highest standards of research integrity.

In advancing this vision, and through our collaborative and co-designed approach, we have identified five key strategic priority areas. These priorities will guide the focus of our action plans over the next four years.

It is important that we acknowledge the scale and complexity of some of the issues that we face. There are many multi-faceted challenges facing the institution and the sector, that may require a range of actions, acknowledging that enhancing a research culture cannot be considered in isolation. Therefore, we need to adopt an agile and iterative approach to the implementation of the strategic priorities, with the flexibility to amend, add or remove actions informed by feedback mechanisms and other external factors.

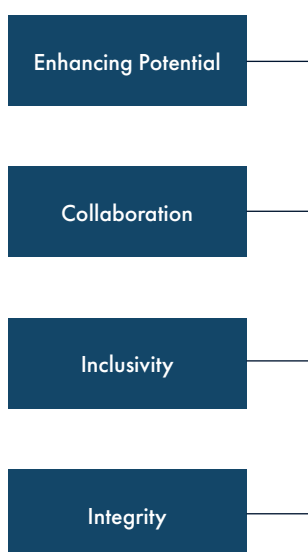
These research culture strategic priorities, align with our University's values of Enhancing Potential, Collaboration, Inclusivity and Integrity and are underpinned by core principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Wellbeing; Creativity; Sustainability; and Public Engagement.

"The Future Research Leader Champion Award highlighted my contribution to research progress in my School and the University and led to enhanced opportunities for collaboration, facilitating new partnerships with international institutions and industry. It supported career advancement by boosting my professional profile, leading to invitations and involvement in more external research opportunities. The award empowered me to mentor emerging researchers, fostering a collaborative environment and research culture."

Dr Amir Farokh Payam,
Senior Lecturer in Electronics
and Software

Our Research Culture Strategic Priorities

Our Values



5 Research Culture Strategic Priorities



Underpinning Principles



Collegiality & Collaboration

Creating a supportive, open, respectful environment where colleagues can interact, communicate and collaborate. We are committed to developing and promoting a supportive research culture, fostering cooperation and collaboration between researchers and our partners and nurturing interdisciplinarity between research groups.

Career Development

Creating the conditions, supports, frameworks and approaches to enable people to achieve and surpass their career aspirations and foster a truly inclusive research and innovation system that values and nurtures a wide range of careers and career paths.

Research Excellence, Integrity & Rigour

Our focus on academic excellence in research remains undiminished. Our pursuit of research excellence and the fulfilment of our responsibilities to participants in research and the wider community, require the maintenance of the highest standards of integrity and ethics.

Research Recognition

We will recognise and celebrate excellence in research across the wide range of contributors and diverse disciplines and outcomes, and the contribution to, and the development of, a positive research culture at Ulster.



Open & Responsible Research

We are committed to ensuring our research is conducted and communicated 'as openly as possible as early as possible'. Our aim is to ensure that Open Research and Innovation approaches are valued and supported across the university. We also aim to strengthen openness in research engagement with public and community audiences.

Research Culture is for Everyone

This action plan has been developed collaboratively, shaped by the needs and aspirations of our research community and the broader research environment. It is designed to create focus, drive, and institutional commitment to supporting research culture. However, a positive research culture is not built from the top down - it is nurtured, developed, and sustained by the collective efforts of the entire research community, with everyone playing an essential role.

Just as the design and delivery of this action plan is a shared responsibility, so too is the creation of a positive research culture. It is not the responsibility of one person or department alone, but of everyone working together to foster a supportive and thriving environment.

This action plan is not a static document. Its purpose is to provide direction and commitment, but as our research culture evolves, so will our actions. We will monitor our progress and update and change the plan to reflect ongoing developments and the wider context in which we operate.

This is a community-driven document, and your input is invaluable. To facilitate ongoing feedback, a virtual suggestion box has been created where you can share your comments, suggestions, and ideas on how we can continue to cultivate a positive research culture at Ulster. These comments will help to inform the Research Culture Steering Committee and future actions.

"As a technician, I didn't expect to have the opportunity to contribute to research in such a meaningful way. Presenting at a conference with my research colleague gave me an insight into academic research and methodology and a chance to reflect on my own past creative practice and consider how creative practice can answer questions and pose new ones. This has been pivotal to my career development, allowing me to actively contribute to research, build my academic CV, and open new doors professionally."

Jude Mullan,
Technical Services Co-Ordinator,
School of Communication and Media

VIRTUAL SUGGESTION BOX

Submit your suggestions



Governance

The Research Culture Steering Committee will oversee the governance of the Research Culture Action Plan, continuing to monitor progress and ensure ongoing updates.

Alongside feedback gathered through the virtual suggestion box, a dedicated Research Culture Survey will be launched to capture staff insights and establish a baseline for our future activities.

To support implementation, working groups will be established for each of the five strategic priorities. These groups will review feedback, identify gaps and opportunities, and develop proposals for further action.

Recommendations from these groups will be submitted to the Research Culture Steering Committee, the Research Leadership Team, and the Research and Innovation Committee for review, agreement, and implementation.



"During research participant interviews we are often supporting people to share with us what might be the hardest or most painful part of their personal story. That confers on us an important ethical and moral responsibility – from research design, through to implementation and presentation of findings. As researchers, ethical integrity is very important to us, and we become known for robust and careful standards. That in turn enhances our trusted position with future funders, partners and participants and underpins the credibility of our findings and recommendations to influence positive outcomes."

Dr Susan Lagdon,
Senior Lecturer in Psychology



Research Culture Action Plan

2025 - 2029



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