



RESEARCH CULTURE AT THE HEART OF N8 COLLABORATION: SELECTED CASE STUDIES

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The N8 Research Partnership universities are committed to a healthy and collaborative research culture which recognises the contributions made by all members of the research body including Postdocs, Technicians, Research Software Engineers, Librarians, Archivists, Research Administrators, Performers and the Public.

Supporting healthy, collaborative environments has been a priority for the N8 for many years, with early work focusing on postdoctoral careers leading to the development of the Prosper Portal, a free-to-use online hub with a wealth of information, tools and resources for Postdocs, their managers and their universities.

We have built a strong regional partnership and forum for sharing of learning and good practice to enable us to build healthy research cultures at pace and scale. Our Library Directors have contributed to national negotiations with academic publishers that allow researchers to publish their work in a way that is more cost-

efficient and straight-forward, while retaining their rights in the research that they create. The N8-European Research Culture Observatory, launched in 2023, provides a forum for international knowledge exchange. N8 is also a key partner in the Research England funded Institute for Technical Skills and Strategy (ITSS).

Our ambition is that wherever in the N8 they work, members of the research body experience a supportive and healthy research culture; and that as a result N8 universities collectively are a community of excellent research practice.

This brochure showcases a selection of inspiring case studies on practices across the N8. It highlights the many benefits of fostering healthy research cultures, dispelling myths and sharing valuable insights on how to cultivate them more broadly. The scope of such work within the N8 is truly remarkable, and while this brochure only scratches the surface, we hope it encourages you to delve deeper into our resources and stories available at www.N8research.org.uk.



Prof. Charlie Jeffery

Vice Chancellor, University of York
Chair, N8 Research Partnership

“When researchers feel valued and supported, amazing things happen.”

A great research culture is the foundation of all research, but not simple to create. Cultures are multifaceted and complex, comprising the values, norms, and practices that combine to create a challenging yet supportive environment in which researchers can fulfil their potential. Universities have always been places where ideas flow, collaborations bloom, and breakthroughs are made possible – but the creation of a culture where researchers feel valued and supported enables these things to happen more quickly.

Research cultures shape every step of the research process, from brainstorming ideas to sharing findings with the world. All too often, researchers have been held back by research cultures where harassment and bullying are widespread. Thankfully, these issues are less common than they once were, as universities have acknowledged the detrimental impact of hypercompetitive environments. It is incumbent on those of us in leadership roles in universities to continue to push for zero tolerance policy on such behaviours.

In the N8 we know that a positive, inclusive, and supportive research culture is the best formula to make research more relevant, reliable and impactful than ever before.

This is why I am very proud to provide the foreword for this publication, which highlights some of the excellent initiatives we are taking to improve research culture across the N8 universities.

As the Vice Chancellor of the University of York and Chair of the Board of the N8, I have the privilege of seeing up close the incredible impact a positive research culture has on the quality and scope of our work.

The way our researchers conduct themselves has the potential to attract and retain talented colleagues, promote diversity and inclusion, and

enhance the reputation of our institutions. The values, integrity and creativity of those looking to make our research-intensive universities even more effective are evident within these case studies, and I thank everyone involved for sharing their stories with us.

Research culture is the heartbeat of the N8

The N8 is the North of England’s leading university research alliance, united by a shared ambition and a commitment to collective action. Together, we achieve far more than any single institution, making a powerful and lasting impact through collective action. We fuel innovation, deliver impact, and create jobs of the future.

N8’s critical mass of expertise enables us to tackle major societal and economic challenges, forging partnerships that drive growth and opportunity. Our strength lies in our networks and relationships, underpinned by world-class research and education which fosters the culture of trust and collaboration across the N8 universities.

Research culture is the engine driving the N8 and its members: the foundation of our strategy. Through our mission and our actions, our commitment to fostering a supportive and dynamic research culture is not just a policy – it is who we are and what we stand for. It is a testament to our dedication to advancing knowledge, tackling global challenges, and nurturing future generations of researchers.

It is where and how we can craft spaces where ideas can be exchanged freely, where voices from diverse backgrounds harmonise to create something truly new. It’s where integrity isn’t just practiced; it is celebrated.

Leading the way in research culture

The N8 is leading the way in building research

cultures that foster excellence. Through our collaborative efforts, we’ve shared our learning and developed practices that will enable researchers to flourish, not just in the UK but around the world.

The N8-European Research Culture Observatory and our #N8ResearchCulture campaign of 2024 demonstrate our collaborative approach to leadership and commitment to improvement at pace and scale.

Looking ahead

As we move forward, the N8 is committed to fostering a research culture that supports excellence, innovation, and integrity. The world’s challenges are complex and require aligned, interdisciplinary approaches.

By continuing to invest in collaboration and building great research cultures, we’re not only enhancing the quality of our research but also ensuring it has a lasting, positive impact on society.

Thank you to everyone who is working across the N8 to change our research cultures for the better. From working to secure greater inclusion to thinking carefully about changing reward and recognition strategies, addressing issues of fairness in employment and careers, people in all role types and at all levels are engaged with these initiatives. By establishing an inclusive environment, removing barriers to progression for our staff and students and creating physical, virtual and cultural spaces that facilitate rich and dynamic exchanges, we transform perceptions and enable a culture of possibilities where new knowledge is generated and everyone can thrive.

Together, we’re setting new standards for research culture and paving the way for a brighter, more innovative future.



The evolving landscape for research technical professionals



In February 2024, the N8 published its response to the TALENT Commission report. The N8's intervention reflected its commitment to strengthening technicians' vital role in teaching, research and development, in turn boosting the UK's research and innovation capabilities.

Published in 2022, the landmark TALENT report was the result of 20 months of research and stakeholder engagement, including the largest survey of UK technical staff working in higher education and research ever undertaken and outlined a set of principles and 16 recommendations, with further specifics to target stakeholder groups. The N8's statement can be read in full on our website.

Professor Andrew Filby is Professor of Enabling Biomedical Technologies and Deputy Dean of the Biosciences Institute at Newcastle University. As part of N8's research culture campaign, Andrew spoke to the N8 about what a positive research culture is, and the importance of the N8's response to the TALENT commission.

“Our people are our most valuable asset, and their diverse experiences, expertise and ideas are central to achieving our missions and goals.”

Professor Andrew Filby of Enabling Biomedical technologies and Deputy Dean of the Biosciences Institute at Newcastle University

For me, a positive research culture recognises that effective research and teaching requires a multi-disciplinary team that should embody and include diversity in all senses of the word. While it must be goal-focused and results-driven, it should also be respectful and nurturing with recognition and reward for all who play their parts effectively.

At Newcastle University, we recognise how a positive research culture underpins our aspirations to deliver excellence, innovation and creativity in research and research-led education. Our people are our most valuable asset, and their diverse experiences, expertise and ideas are central to achieving our missions and goals.

Widening the focus

Traditional views of research are still dominated by the idea that the large grant awarded to a single principal investigator (PI) is the only way to be successful, and is how success is measured. It is my hope that the funding agencies move further away from this model and outdated view, as if they do, universities will have to follow suit. This will mean, hopefully, we see better recognition and reward for everyone involved in delivering excellent research and teaching and not just the sole PI who “won the money”. This will also encourage better practices with data generation toward solving issues with reproducibility and repeatability. It would also improve the retention and career development opportunities for technicians.

Regarding giving technicians the platform they deserve, the N8 statement of support for the findings and recommendations of the TALENT commission was very encouraging. It is my hope that this leads to member institutions adopting these recommendations and helping to create a culture and workplace where technical staff are recognised and rewarded for excellence. This should hopefully lead to defined career pathways

for technicians and to attract a new generation to these roles.

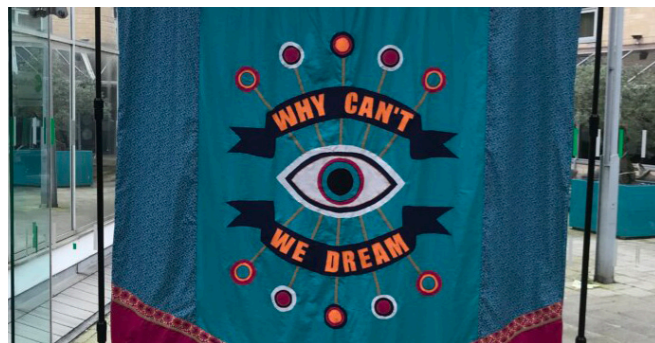
The benefits of collective strength

As an example of what can be achieved by team science, during the COVID pandemic, my team and I were part of the UK Covid Immunology Consortium, working to use advanced tissue imaging technologies to further our understanding of how the virus was causing fatal lung pathology.

This was a wonderful example of team science as it involved both research technical professionals, clinicians and academic researchers. It also involved a consortium of other institutes and universities. Each person in the team brought specific, essential skills and knowledge to the project and really highlighted the role of technical staff in delivering high-pressure, cutting-edge research.

There has never been a more exciting time to be a technician in the UK. I would like to see more Institutions engaging with the newly formed UK Institute for Technical Skill and Strategy (UK-ITSS). This is a wonderful example of how the landscape has changed for technicians over the last few years and will build on the TALENT report recommendations and the work of the Technician Commitment, an initiative that aims to ensure visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability for technicians.

At Newcastle University we have also established NU TechNet – a network run by and for our technicians – which is a major part of identifying and driving some of the initiatives within the Technician Commitment. Through NU TechNet we are leading the way in recognising and celebrating the professionalism of our technicians, and also providing vital peer group support.



In this article – prepared for the N8 research culture campaign - the team that received the grant discusses its work tackling ableism in academia. This article was written by Dan Goodley, Lucy Dunning, John Flint, Richard Franey, Rhea Halsey, Helen Irvine, Melanie Knight, Antonios Ktenidis, Rebecca Lawthom, Kirsty Liddiard, Katherine Sarah Taylor, Meera Warriar, Runswick-Cole, Lauren White (Affiliation: The University of Sheffield), Hamied Haroon, Jacquie Nicholson (Affiliation: National Association of Disabled Staff Networks) and Kelly Scargill (Affiliation: Disability Sheffield). At the University of Sheffield, we seek to contest the harmful ideology of ableism. We are one of 24 institutions funded by the Wellcome Trust to research, develop and enhance research culture within their universities (see Lewis-Wilson et al, 2023). WAARC brings together disabled and non-disabled academics at Sheffield – working together with disabled people’s organisations – to find and promote anti-ableist practices.

We find ourselves doing this work in the midst of an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) revolution as universities, funders and researchers have begun to recognise that university research cultures are exclusionary. And yet, disabled people, as students, researchers, professional services colleagues and in other roles, have yet to experience the benefits of this EDI revolution.

As well as supporting individuals in specific roles, N8 universities also seek to improve conditions for those who face barriers to success. In late 2023, the team at the University of Sheffield was awarded an Institutional Fund for research culture award from the WellcomeTrust; Wellcome Anti-ableist research culture (WAARC). Ableism is an ideology that idealises able-bodied-and-mindedness.

Centring disability and contesting ableism

As such, their hopes, dreams, aspirations and rights are yet to be fully realised. WAARC works to address this omission by bringing together researchers at all career stages and professional services colleagues from across the University – working collaboratively and in co-production with disabled people’s organisations – to develop a suite of activities that centre disability and contest systemic ableism in relation to three Priority Areas:

- Environment will experiment with new ideas for inclusive recruitment and employment.
- Development will produce new guidelines on accessible research events and deliver a new course on inclusive research methods to raise capacities of Postgraduate Researchers and Early Career Researchers.
- Collaboration will put disabled people front and centre and in collaboration will offer funding, via an open call, to other researchers and professional services colleagues to produce their own inclusive research projects and we will revisit the Concordat on Researcher Development to ensure inclusivity.

WAARC aspires to promote and enable an anti-ableist research environment – within our own university. Through a process of exploration, we

want to fundamentally re-imagine and re-create a research culture driven by the premise that disability is always a desirable, creative and collective force for research, theory and practice. We have a number of aims and deliverables:

Aims:

1. To work in collaboration with disabled researchers and disabled people’s organisations while being intellectually underpinned by critical disability studies theory and research.
2. To pilot a number of activities that will be evaluated and scale up in relation to three Priority Areas: Environment, Development and Collaboration.

Deliverables:

1. Case studies of innovative and inclusive employment practices.
2. A set of guidelines for hosting anti-ableist and inclusive hybrid research events (e.g. conferences, seminars and workshops).
3. A new Inclusive Research Methods course for all researchers at the University.
4. Funding for a number of research projects delivered in collaboration with disabled people’s organisations.
5. Crippling the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (centralising disability in considerations of development).
6. An evaluation framework and set of Key Performance Indicators to document and benchmark progress towards delivering anti-ableist university environments at the University and other institutions.

Enabling disabled and non-disabled applicants alike to flourish

One way of understanding our work is through the notion of depathologising the university, which we understand as a model that embraces disability as possibility rather than problem in order to create university and research cultures that are places where we all would like to work. At the time of writing, we are in the early stages of the Environment phase; experimenting with new ideas for inclusive recruitment and employment.

Our focus has been on experimenting with and create new processes, concepts and practices that create an Anti-Ableist research culture at the University of Sheffield. Early work has started on delivering evidence of successful inclusive job creation and recruitment practices. Any engagement with the very idea of inclusive recruitment necessitates an entanglement with the complexities of ‘knowing disability’ and the ‘new wave of disability’. Recruitment into a university is of course a deeply bureaucratic process but it also demands a community response and we have already made some progress here.

We are driven by an aspiration: to create positive, inclusive and welcoming universities that invite, welcome and hope to include disabled and non-disabled applicants in their pursuit of accessing and then flourishing within the University environment.

Are you with us?

Goodley, D. (2024) Depathologising the university, *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, DOI: 10.1080/14681366.2024.2316007

Lewis-Wilson S, Towers S and Wykeham H. (2023). The Luck of the Draw: Wellcome’s Institutional Fund for research culture [version 2; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]. *Wellcome Open Res* 2023, 8:525



Lancaster reimagines sustainability, ethics and inclusion in research practices



Wellcome Trust funding has helped a team at Lancaster University address cutting-edge issues in research culture and practice. In an article produced especially for this brochure, Project Manager Catriona Gold talks us through the initiative, entitled “Reimagining research practices: toward a sustainable, ethical and inclusive future”. It is one of 24 projects funded by the Wellcome’s new Institutional Fund for Research Culture (IFRC), with £1m granted over a two-year term.

This project aims to transform institutional and sectoral practices across three core intersecting pillars:

1. Sustainability of evolving research practices
2. Ethical risk mitigation in research methodologies
3. Enhancing inclusion in our research practices.

Central to its approach is analysing the gap between ideal and actual research culture to pinpoint areas for improvement. Led by an interdisciplinary team of academic and professional services staff, this project centres the experiences of individuals across all career stages and roles, including professional services, researchers, and technicians.

Analysing research and sustainability

The project’s first pillar is sustainability. Alone among IFRC-funded projects in its emphasis on sustainability, this project responds to growing concerns about the environmental implications of research practices.

Geographer Professor Phil Barker of the Lancaster Environment Centre leads this pillar of the project, supported by Postdoctoral Research Associate (PDRA) Dr Seth Robinson and working closely with Lancaster’s Head of Sustainability, Dr Georgiana Allison.

Complementing the University’s commitment to reaching net zero by 2035, this team’s research and engagement will support the production of a final report (co-produced with Becky Gordon, Head of Research Quality and Policy) intended to guide University sustainability strategy. In an example of the cross-disciplinary collaboration involved in this project, Psychology PDRA Dr Samuel Finnerty is also organising a workshop series for an external network of academics who are publicly engaged in sustainability issues.

Meanwhile, a Psychology team comprising co-investigators Drs Heather Shaw and Richard Philpot, Professor Mark Levine and PDRAs Dr Yingnian Tao and Dr Samuel Finnerty, is investigating the ethical implications of new forms of digital research data and research techniques.

Deploying data

Researchers on this team are using their expertise in the research use of data from emerging and evolving digital technologies – from CCTV and mobile phone data to AI and facial recognition – to design a programme of research evaluating researchers’ understandings, use and approach to new forms of digital research. To this end, Yingnian Tao and Samuel Finnerty will be data mining past research and ethics applications to gain an understanding of research practices. Tao and Finnerty are also jointly leading the project’s initial information-gathering exercises and evaluation, producing both initial and concluding surveys for circulation among Lancaster’s research community to evaluate both current attitudes to research culture and the project’s impact. In addition, Tao is undertaking a qualitative policy analysis of existing university documents pertaining to the project’s three pillars.

The ‘inclusion’ pillar of the project is led by Co-Is Elaine Sykes (Library) and Carlos Lopez-

Galviz (Lancaster Institute of Contemporary Arts aka LICA), supported by PDRA Dr Nuri Kwon (also LICA) and Project Manager Catriona Gold (Research and Enterprise Services). This team seeks to improve the inclusivity of community-based research, broadly defined. In particular, this team is concerned with researchers’ approaches to working with communities – particularly marginalised or hardly reached communities – and responsible approaches to citizen science, a research method of growing interest.

Nuri Kwon is leading workshops with academics to explore both, with all team members collaborating on deliverables including developing a citizen science toolkit and graphic novel. Further demonstrating the close interdisciplinary collaboration involved in this project, Co-I Heather Shaw will be leading an initiative to develop Micro:bit devices for citizen science research, supported by one of two Software Developers dedicated to this project.

Professional Services staff are essential to the planning, development and implementation of this project. Becky Gordon is a co-investigator and led the development of the research proposal. She will also be leading the development of university strategy for each of the three pillars. In addition to serving on the project’s ‘inclusion’ pillar, I am working alongside Becky to develop the project’s final report and internal and external communication strategies. I will be liaising with Lancaster’s central research culture team and establishing of a Northern network of IFRC-awarded institutions (including N8 members Sheffield, Durham, York and Newcastle alongside the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine).



Dr Chris Harrison, Newcastle University astrophysicist

To provide further insight into how the N8 is committed to inclusivity in research culture, Sera Atlintas, MSci student at The University of Manchester spoke to Dr Chris Harrison, an astrophysicist at Newcastle University, who discusses his work on sonification – the process of converting data into sound.

The world of scientific discovery has no bounds. From the analysis of atoms to planets, science allows limitless discovery of the universe surrounding us. However, the accessibility of science often does not share this vast nature.

Through many different circumstances, individuals may encounter barriers when exploring science, creating an element of exclusivity to research and knowledge. Dr Chris Harrison however, through his pioneering work, exemplifies how aiming for inclusivity and accessibility of science goes hand in hand with expanding our horizons, rather than confining them.

Chris Harrison has many roles at Newcastle University including coordinating the Wider Astrophysics and Observational Cosmology Research Group.

Harrison's recent work on Sonification, which is the presentation of data through sounds rather than visuals, highlights his belief that for a research culture to flourish, everyone should feel included and part of the knowledge. This has informed his current work, which is to try and get individuals from underrepresented groups involved in science.

Making science accessible

He began to investigate the sonification of data by considering how he could make his work more accessible to visually impaired individuals. He had considered how to engage this group, since they cannot view the traditional images usually presented with astronomy. In collaboration with James Trayford, who led the development of the sonification code named STRAUSS (Sonification Tools and Resources for Astronomers Using Sound Synthesis), they created a project named [Audio Universe](#).

Their project is a collection of tools and resources that aims to support scientists, educators, students and the general public to represent scientific data and concepts with sounds. Their website contains links to examples of their work, such as the [“Sonification of Sun Light Reflection During Earth’s Rotation”](#) and [“Hearing black hole winds”](#); both can be found on Audio Universe’s [Youtube Channel](#).

This incredible work began with the intention of making science more accessible but has now sent Dr Harrison down a new avenue of research. He explained that whilst completing this project, he found that it was sometimes more efficient to present his data using sound. He now has had successful grant applications towards investigating this new frontier further and works with new research teams on this topic. He highlighted that by fostering an inclusive research culture within his work, he broadened the scope of his own research.

Enriching science through diversity

One of the key takeaways from Dr Harrison's work is the notion that making science more accessible does not diminish its complexity, rather, it enhances our understanding and appreciation of it. Moreover, by prioritising inclusivity and diversity, we enrich the scientific community with fresh ideas and talent from diverse backgrounds. By inviting everyone to the table, we not only expand our collective knowledge but also expand the landscape that research can take us.

As Dr Harrison aptly puts it, “If you're not doing research in a healthy and positive way, then you're not doing it well, irrespective of how innovative or clever you might perceive yourself”.



Dr Francis K. Poitier, Teaching Fellow in International Health

A topical yet challenging issue in research culture today is decolonising research. Working with a strong values-led approach can feel isolating when your research methods and practices seem to be the exception, rather than the standard practice. N8 universities seek to move this conversation forward with events like the Decolonising Research Methods showcase, held in February 2024.

This event developed as a result of a collaboration between the Horizons Institute and Leeds Social Research Methods Centre. This article was written by members of the Horizon Institute for the N8 research culture campaign.

On the day itself, 18 speakers from five different faculties presented at the sold-out event, with 70 colleagues attending from across the University. The day also linked colleagues with other initiatives, such as the Decolonising Research Framework and the Belonging and Success Research Group.

Panel chair, Jennifer Philippa Eggert of the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, had three key reflections from the event: “Firstly, there is incredible diversity of approaches and richness in practice when it comes to working towards decolonial ways of producing research and evidence. Second, there is a need to consider positionality and adopt intersectional approaches, as what research methods are appropriate will change depending on who implements them, where and with whom. Finally, it takes courage to do things differently.”

The importance of understanding different methodologies to decolonisation

Throughout the day attendees learned about new research techniques, such as body mapping and narrative approaches that they could apply to their own work. Crossing disciplinary boundaries is key and should be encouraged in

Jennifer Philippa Eggert, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities



Carolina Montoya Pachongo, School of Civil Engineering in the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences

all decolonising work. Broadening our scope and research lens adds value in conceptualising and conducting impactful research.

Presenter, Francis Poitier from the Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development in the Faculty of Medicine and Health at Leeds, discussed the importance of the cross-disciplinary approach: “The showcase allowed us to reflect on diverse research experiences. It was incredibly valuable to learn from other scholars in how they decolonise methodological approaches in research.

Throughout the day, researchers shared their research and exchanged contacts.

Elsewhere on the day, presenter Carolina Montoya Pachongo, from the School of Civil Engineering in the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences, welcomed the opportunity to broaden her understanding of different methodologies: “As a researcher in water security I found this event very inspiring because of the diversity of topics and methods in education, art, and social studies in the Global South.”

Presenters and participants alike reflected on the systemic issues researchers face in every aspect of their work, particularly on working within existing systems that prevent the development of equitable partnerships. Cross-disciplinary challenges were voiced, such as writing bid applications and in publishing research findings.

While there were plenty of tough questions posed throughout the day, it was encouraging to see these being asked and answered in a respectful and supportive way.

Panel chair, Ariana Phillips-Hutton, from the Leeds Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures, said: “There are questions we need to keep asking through this work. How can we prioritise

developing the relationships that are needed to decolonise research methods within the pressures of the university system? There is also a danger of reducing ‘decolonising’ to a buzzword, or tacking it on as an afterthought – how do our perspectives influence how we go about our research? And how do we make the processes that exist responsive to what we need?”

Different disciplines, different methodologies

The work at the centre of the presentations was highly diverse in terms of research area and approach, but key to the event was the focus on methodologies, which provided a means of finding commonalities across disciplines.

“The day gave a fascinating insight into how colleagues from different disciplines develop approaches and methodologies to collect and analyse data in very different ways to understand complex problems,” said Horizons Institute Research Manager Kate Kellett.

“Understanding research methods can be a way of unlocking some of the barriers that exist between researchers in different disciplines, continued Kate. “How someone collects and interrogates their data can give useful insights, uncover commonalities, and be a path of discovery to different approaches.”

Through the event and since, the Horizon Institute has had a lot of positive responses about the event, and some welcome critiques too relating to frustrations around perceived limitations of the day, and the lack of representation from some disciplines.

But the opportunity to make new connections, to find commonalities and to create a community of practice in a space provided to reflect and listen, seemed to be of value to those involved.

Ariana Phillips-Hutton commented that: “the primary value of events such as this is the opportunity to find solidarity with others, sometimes in unexpected places, who care deeply about questions such as ‘what does justice mean in research?’”

At the end of the event Jennifer Philippa Eggert concluded: “Events like this are fantastic because they allow us to learn from each other, but we also need to think about how we can collectively work towards long term, systemic change”.

There may be some way before we can answer questions like this, but, as with all work within the decolonising agenda, this event could only ever have been a small part of the movement to address this challenge. The real success of the day can only be determined in the longer term, if the new connections flourish to create a community strong enough to make a values-led decolonising approach the standard, rather than the exception.



Dr Simon Manda, lecturer in International Development, University of Leeds



David Kent, Professor in Stem Cell Biology at the University of York

How can a positive research culture have a real-world impact? Sera Atlintas, MSci student at The University of Manchester, speaks to Professor David Kent, a Professor in Stem Cell Biology at the University of York, to find out more about how inclusivity supports his work in transplantation biology and cancer research.

In the world of research, the focus on looking after the wellbeing and progression of everyone within a team, not just the senior members, is essential. With only 29% of researchers in the UK feeling secure to pursue a research career according to Wellcome, it is crucial leaders address the issues present in research culture before there is a potential loss of talent.

Stemming the growth of cancer

Professor Kent’s research focuses on blood stem cell biology, spanning from fundamental stem cell work to its clinical applications, particularly in transplantation biology and cancer research. A recent development in his work has been a novel approach to tracking stem cells in people in an unbiased fashion.

Through this, he explained his team can create ‘family trees’ of how different blood stem cells are related to one another. Through this, they are able to estimate when and at what rate a cancer has developed. As a result of Professor Kent’s work, major questions within cancer research have been addressed in some of the world’s leading journals such as Nature and Nature Medicine.

Professor Kent emphasised the importance of fostering a positive environment that enables scientists as individuals to thrive. One key aspect of a healthy research culture is prioritising the development of individuals as opposed to mere data production. He highlighted the role of mentorship in shaping

young scientists, stressing that the ultimate product of a PhD should be a “well-rounded researcher equipped with critical thinking skills, rather than just a collection of research findings”.

Central to Professor Kent’s approach to leadership is the promotion of teamwork and collaboration. His lab projects are driven collectively, with PhD students and postdoctoral researchers working together.

Openness and transparency are valued, with frequent joint meetings to allow everyone to be involved in the decision-making processes and project evolution. He emphasised the importance of creating a supportive environment where researchers feel valued and motivated to collaborate towards common goals. Professor Kent also believes his shift towards a collaborative approach serves to equip members of his team with the relevant skills to flourish in the world of science.

Job security for future generations

His collective mindset follows through as he addressed challenges such as career precarity among research technicians and assistants in Biology as well as many other fields. Professor Kent advocates for institutional support and stability for technicians, who are often on short-term contracts. He highlighted initiatives within his department to provide permanent positions for them rather than contracts that are fixed or rely on the next grant to come in. These changes not only allow the individuals to have financial security but “security knowing that the faculty has their back and that they’re a valued member”. Like the pieces of a puzzle, every member contributes to the final product and their position within a faculty must represent that.

Looking ahead, Professor Kent emphasised the need for collective action to challenge stereotypes and promote a culture of inclusivity

and collaboration in research. A factor that Professor Kent explained motivates this drive for collaborative research is a sense of “guilt” towards those that fund the research (largely charities and government). He explained that within medical research, he has a responsibility to work for the collective good, rather than focus on individualistic gains. His outlook challenges the stereotypical dog-eat-dog mindset that research has sometimes gained a reputation for.

By prioritising individual development, transparency within his team, and advocating for institutional support, Professor Kent is an example of how striving for a healthy research culture can serve to promote excellent research. His prioritisation of the development of researchers as individuals benefits not only the researchers he works alongside, but the progress of their important research. research culture should look after every member no matter how senior; the new researchers of today are the leaders of the future. By taking inspiration from his principles, research institutions can create environments where scientists, technicians and all other team members can thrive, ultimately driving innovation and advancing scientific knowledge.



The Team Research Operations Team

N8 researchers are undertaking vital work on issues such as treating cancer, as well as climate change, tackling poverty and many of the other biggest dangers to our society.

These knotty, complex challenges need input from a variety of domains, bringing complementary expertise, perspectives, knowledge and skills. The University of Manchester’s Team Research Operations Team here discusses how it uses Team Research to get results across boundaries, disciplines, organisations and geographical areas. The article was written for the N8 research culture campaign by members of the Team Research Operations Team: Ruth Norris (Project Co-Lead), Charlotte Stockton-Powdrell (Project Co-Lead), Nicola Telfer (Program Manager), and Karon Mee (Project Coordinator).

Our definition of Team Research, created with and for our community is:

“a collaborative effort to address a common goal using the strengths and expertise of a diverse team where contributions of all team members are encouraged, acknowledged, recognised and valued.”

We deliver a suite of training and development activities and resources to enable a collaboration-led research culture across the whole community of academics, researchers, technicians, professional services and citizen contributors. [Our short animation gives an overview of the Teams Build Dreams approach.](#)

Our programme, which is funded by the Research England Enhancing research culture scheme, fosters a collaborative research environment by championing teamwork principles; an approach that dismantles

disciplinary silos and ignites innovation through interdisciplinary working.

Below, we share examples of how our vision, approach, and activities are supporting those seeking to harness the power of collaborative research.



Gaining traction: listening & building foundations

Launched in early 2023, we began with a pilot phase with the Christabel Pankhurst Institute and the NIHR Manchester Biomedical Research Centre communities. Working with our community members, through awareness events, workshops and surveys, we listened to their experiences and built our understanding of current attitudes and experiences of working in teams. We explored the benefits, challenges, barriers and solutions to useful teaming.

This was invaluable in understanding community needs and identified a pull from the community for ongoing efforts to raise awareness and build capabilities, not only equipping researchers with the necessary knowledge and skills but also driving a cultural shift that embraces and celebrates collaborative research endeavours.

Building a multifaceted suite

Drawing on the insights gained from the pilot phase, the Team Research Programme developed a comprehensive programme that empowers staff and students from all

backgrounds and disciplines to thrive in a collaborative environment:

- **Training for all:** A cornerstone of the Team Research Programme is our training suite. This suite caters for all: researchers at all stages of their careers, academics, professional services and technical specialists.
- **Empowering with Knowledge:** We understand that access to the right resources is crucial for successful research collaborations. To address this need, we curated a comprehensive online toolkit. This offers a diverse set of resources to implement team research principles – from best practice for building effective research teams to practical tools for facilitating communication and collaboration across disciplines.
- **Investing in collaboration:** Recognising the importance of nurturing new connections, the Team Research Programme established a micro-catalyst funding scheme. This year, we have successfully funded six projects, each fostering novel ways of working to drive research collaborations and laying the groundwork for impactful discoveries.
- **Fostering a vibrant community:** Building a strong, engaged community is central to our vision. We achieve this by giving invited talks and workshops across our community; and by hosting a series of bespoke events including awareness raising and networking, to provide opportunities to develop skills, expertise, connections, share ideas, and explore potential collaborations.



N8 gives its support to established (mid-career) researchers



The N8 held a workshop for established (mid-career) researchers to help define the terms of the statement

“We’re committed to working with established (mid-career) researchers to enable them to achieve their personal ambitions while simultaneously advancing research culture across the north.”

In May 2024, the N8 published a first-of-its-kind statement that set out our collective commitment to advancing the culture and environment for established (mid-career) researchers. But who are established (mid-career) researchers and why did we feel this statement was needed?

The N8 defined an established (mid-career) researcher as a researcher who has achieved an independent research reputation but has not yet attained the status of Professor. There are approximately 10,000 such researchers in this career stage within the N8 universities, each having individual needs for career advancement and support.

While it was agreed there were examples of good practice across the N8, there was no common benchmark for supporting researchers at this career stage.

This statement, therefore, acts as a collective commitment from the N8 to improve the ecosystem for established (mid-career) researchers. Commitments made in the statement include:

- “We will ensure that promotion and progression pathways are transparent, inclusive and equitable. We will provide opportunities to enable established (mid-career) researchers to progress in their careers in a way that realises their own ambitions, as well as maximising their contribution to institutional goals.”

- “We will work with established (mid-career) researchers in each of our universities to ensure that resources and funding opportunities are clearly signposted to them. We will ensure that internal funding schemes are designed with an understanding of their needs and will work with funders and learned societies to support funding opportunities for researchers in this career stage.”
- “We will enhance our targeted training and development offer for established (mid-career) researchers, taking into account the context of their needs and experiences. We will improve the visibility and communication of this offer to further enhance their careers and enable them to realise their potential.”

Commenting at the time of the statement’s launch, Dr Annette Bramley, Executive Director of the N8 said:

“This is not just about improving pathways and protocols but also perception. One of the key findings in our research on this issue was perceived negativity around the term ‘mid-career’. Not only does this term not adequately describe the wide variety of roles it might refer to – from lecturer to senior research fellow – it also brings with it negative connotations of a career that has yet to take off, when even getting to this stage within academia is a major achievement in itself.

“The N8 will therefore use the term ‘established researcher’ with the aim of talking about this career stage using the positive and aspirational language that this talented cohort deserve.”

Ultimately, this statement is the N8’s means to enable our researchers to overcome the complex and systemic challenges in the workplace that they must navigate while also finding the time and energy for responsibilities and pursuits beyond work.

Too many talented people struggle due to the challenges faced at the established (mid-career) researcher stage. That is not only a cause of regret for the individuals involved, but collectively represents a cause of great harm to UK research culture as whole. The N8 wants to ensure that doesn’t happen at our universities – we’re committed to working with established (mid-career) researchers to enable them to achieve their personal ambitions while simultaneously advancing research culture across the north.

The statement can be read in full [here](#).



Flourish@Durham seeks to make research fun and fulfilling for its communities

“Flourish@Durham is committed to the cultivation of a research culture that is characterised by respect and care.”

N8 universities have a proven capacity to attract fantastic people across all of the activities that contribute to its research environment, but there needs to be a strong commitment to nurture and enable them. This is not only the right thing to do, but also ensures that researchers are able to do their best work. Here, we find out more about Durham University’s approach in a specially compiled piece for this brochure.

There is a need to redefine what success means for us as a university. Success meaning ‘better than everyone else’ implies we do not work effectively together in a culture that is about competition, not collaboration.

We need to be generous. Pursue equal partnerships, decolonise research, define our strengths as individual universities and work together to address the major global challenges.

The culture within which we operate as a research community at Durham profoundly influences our ability to achieve the above and how valuable our research may be to the wider community.

Research culture encompasses the structures and regulatory frameworks that govern our research. More importantly, it also includes the values we share, how we behave and relate to one another across those structures between academic, professional services and technical staff, students and postdocs and those who keep our research infrastructure and estate fit for cutting-edge research.

The evidence of a recent range of reports and surveys in the UK HE sector shows that poor research culture is adversely affecting the mental health and wellbeing of researchers. Too many people feel unfulfilled, poorly supported, and unclear about their futures.

A key issue is too great a focus on the outcomes (the what) of research and less on the process (the how). We need to focus more on the ‘how’: the quality of leadership, the processes, structures and policies that oversee university research as well as the environment within which research happens.

Principles and challenges

Culture change is not about an end point but needs to be thought of as a process of evolution and development: of people, of structures, and of environment, and it is something ongoing. It involves both regulation but also the idea of creative and spontaneous growth, nurtured by high quality leadership but engendered by the participants themselves.

Implicit in this are some challenges specific to research culture:

1. To marry the regulatory frameworks, we are committed and signed up to (such as The Concordat for Researchers, The Research Integrity Concordat, DORA) with the activity of developing our own unique research culture that fits Durham’s values and key research strengths.
2. To identify a set of values, ways of working, and norms of behaviour that are common across the range of research cultures at Durham, reflecting the diversity of disciplines, methods and ways of knowing and understanding that the University prides itself in.
3. To nourish and celebrate the diversity, creativity and freedom of individuals and research teams to develop world-changing research, while enhancing Durham’s reputation not just for the quality of our research but for the way in which we conduct ourselves.

Building to a flourish

Flourish@Durham is committed to the cultivation of a research culture that is characterised by respect and care; where diversity of person, career track and role are valued, encouraged, and supported and collaboration and interdisciplinarity are cherished. This programme seeks to ensure research is carried out in an atmosphere of creativity, excitement and fun where individuals and teams are dedicated to and enabled to do their best work.

Progress on this needs to be led from the front but also requires personal responsibility: those involved need to own the vision in order to take up and progress the actions and behaviours that will support it. It is also a shared endeavour which will engage all constituents of the research community: researcher, professional, and technical staff and research infrastructure colleagues.

Building a flourishing research culture involves not just addressing, but also influencing, these specific challenges to ensure that the way we achieve them supports our ambitions for research culture change.

We know that developing a positive, supportive research culture is all about quality as much as about the right thing to do. At the centre of this is supporting the next generation of researchers to thrive and develop flourishing research. This requires us to develop an environment that is serious about supporting them, clear about what we commit to (and what we do not), with a research strategy that enables researchers to build sustainable and flourishing careers, whatever the destinations of this may be.

More information about Flourish@Durham can be found [here](#).



Professor Georgina Endfield, Professor of Environmental History, University of Liverpool

From the North East to the North West, our universities are committed to developing programs to improve research culture. Professor Georgina Endfield - Associate Pro Vice Chancellor for the Research Environment and Postgraduate Research and Professor of Environmental History Research, Partnerships and Innovation at the University of Liverpool – oversees postgraduate research across the University. As part of the N8 research culture campaign, she discussed her work building positive research culture and how being part of the N8 helps achieve this.

A positive research culture is one that is open, supportive, proactive, inclusive and where everybody feels they have a voice that is heard. It's important to create a positive place, or a context, which is a trusted space in which to work and where people feel that they can share their views. Clear lines of communication are vital so that people know how to express their views and how information will be shared.

In practice, a positive research culture will look like a space with clear policies and processes and with procedures in place to support and benefit everybody. There must be commitment to those principles and procedures so that they are considered unremarkable.

Helping researchers thrive, not just survive

I am one of the leads on a project called Thrive, a Research England Development funded project undertaken in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Advance HE. This entails a new model of teams-based working which includes diversity and inclusion as a pivot and a key part of teamwork.

Thrive is being designed as an alternative to the traditional PI model so that team convening is considered most important for when there's a complex project responding to societal challenges.

We're drawing on input and evidence from across the sector to co-design the model, with the aim of testing it through a live funding call with the Arts and Humanities Research Council. We want to interrogate what kind of systems and process changes need to happen in order to support this kind of teams-based model.

EDI is core to the ideas we are developing within Thrive. It is also about moving away from the traditional academic PI-led style of approach on projects to thinking about different kinds of leadership models within a teams-based research orientation. This enables shared or collaborative leadership and thinking about who is best placed to lead, which might not be the academic but other colleagues: technicians, professional service colleagues or partner organisations.

Building inclusivity through collaboration

Thrive has been evidence led and very inclusive by design, which has seen us work with colleagues across many different disciplines and institutions, both within HE institutions and with partner organisations. We have collaborated with technician groups, industry partners, non-

governmental organisations and charity groups, to identify what makes for an effective team. This has helped us answer questions such as "what does effective collaboration and inclusive collaboration look like?" and "how can we input that kind of experience into the shaping of the Thrive model?"

What I like about our process is it's inclusive by design. We've had very open invitations for people to share their experiences and discuss how people have worked before and what they'd like to see happen. It has been rewarding that people have felt that the conversations we've been having, both online and in-person, have been within a trusted space. For me, that's been an example of the way in which a positive research culture might work by making people feel that they can contribute. That they have a voice and that it matters.

The benefits of a critical friend

I'm fortunate to be a representative of Liverpool in the N8 research culture group. The N8 has been incredibly helpful in terms of sharing good practice and providing a body of people who are working on similar initiatives and that are trying to create a positive research culture in their respective institutions.

Some institutions are further along this road than others, but there is a lot of interesting work going on, and the N8 acts as a group of critical friends that adds value through shared learning and experiences which allows us to pool our collective knowledge. Having this community of practice around research culture has been incredibly rewarding and very valuable for me and I'm sure for others in the group.

Making positive research culture the standard

The activities that are currently associated with this culture need to become business as usual. We are undertaking a whole range of different initiatives in our institution. Some institutions are very similar but operating in different kinds of ways, however we are all trying to implement improvements in research culture in such a way that we don't think about this type of approach as being on the margins, but instead is considered the norm.

The way in which the N8 is enabling us to do that is through its commitments and information sharing. The N8 also has the potential to be an exemplar of positive research culture, normalising it and thereby making a significant difference in the context within which we're working.

There's a lot going on in this space right now and there's some really exciting initiatives that are happening. These projects are important because they are going to make a difference to people, giving them a voice and a presence. Thanks to this, we're going to be operating in a much more robust research environment.

Click [here](#) to watch a video of Professor Georgina Endfield discussing Thrive and her role in the project.

“N8 has the potential to be an exemplar of positive research culture, normalising it and thereby making a significant difference in the context within which we're working.”

Why N8 universities are taking a stand on Rights Retention



Professor Christopher Pressler at the launch of the N8 Rights Retention statement

Rights Retention is the next step on the journey towards a fully open access global research environment. It allows N8 researchers to retain copyright and intellectual property on their work and in so doing place that research immediately on publication in repositories regardless of publisher's embargoes.

In 2023, the N8 released a statement outlining its new stance on the importance of researchers being able to retain their original rights when their work is published in a journal. In a piece published on the N8 website shortly after the statement's launch event, Professor Christopher Pressler, John Rylands University Librarian at the University of Manchester explains why such a move was necessary to help protect N8 researchers.

Universities' resolve to address the many challenges the world is facing has never been more determined. Although the great breakthroughs and discoveries in research are the aspects of our work that make the news, the many processes and teams in the background that support this work are equally important.

The role of the library and our research offices are a part of that infrastructure and formal policies such as Rights Retention ensure that control over their ideas remains with the researchers who authored them.

Although the Rights Retention Statement adopted across the N8 universities originally began as a discussion between the N8 libraries, it is formally supported by senior leaders for research and Vice Chancellors throughout the N8. We believe that we are stronger when we act together and from the same position. This is the first consortium statement on this vital issue in the UK and draws on the very significant research power of the Northern research-intensive universities.

Launching the statement

It was fitting that the launch of the N8 Rights Retention Statement was held at The University of Manchester's John Rylands Library, one of the acknowledged great libraries of the world.

Such a library is representative of the role libraries play in society in terms of caring for historical knowledge in the context of influencing the future. This initiative is made possible by libraries and researchers working closely together within the vibrant context of the N8 and in so doing provides an example of leadership and collaboration in the ever-changing world of research publishing.

This is a new area of development and although there are some documented cases of pushback from publishers to academics asserting their rights these are rare. We assume it is because - although not historically standard academic practice - it has always been known that researchers or their institutions hold copyright on their work and not the companies that publish it.

Rights Retention is aimed at situations where gold access (where a publisher makes a research output available to the public for free on their website, in exchange for a fee) is not achievable whilst at the same time green (peer-reviewed research articles published in a digital archive – a repository – with free access to anyone who is interested) has been embargoed by a publisher.

This situation is now in direct conflict with many funders' policies and the N8 Rights Retention Statement is designed to support researchers who find themselves caught between the two.

Why the statement was needed

The N8 Rights Retention Statement matters because for decades the sector has struggled

to initiate progress towards open access. At the root of this has been the transfer of intellectual property of submitted research outputs to publishers by researchers. This once standard practice has slowed progress in open science and public access to research.

Without Rights Retention, the sector is still giving research IP to publishers and buying access to it in perpetuity. It is an unhelpful model, as aside from journal distribution and marketing, almost all peer review and content development is also delivered by Faculty.

Rights Retention sits alongside long overdue mandates for immediate open access (OA), such as the UKRI OA Policy and is a significant step forward, not least in ensuring OA can happen on publication but also in redressing the unfortunate practice of universities giving away IP or copyright to publishers.

Empowering researchers

Rights Retention means researchers will for the first time have a strong hand in terms of control over their own work and transforms the position university libraries often find themselves in when negotiating with suppliers who claim ownership over content produced by those same universities.

In coordinating the eight universities' position on Rights Retention, this statement seeks to support all N8 academics if they find themselves caught between funders and publisher's policies. Each N8 university will have its own policy but this statement aims to support all our researchers in retaining their rights.

The statement can be read in full [here](#).



Dr Annette Bramley

One of the recurring themes throughout this brochure has been ensuring all members of a research team feel valued, and that they truly belong – regardless of their levels of experience. To conclude, Executive Director of the N8, Dr Annette Bramley, takes a deeper dive into the concept of ‘belonging’.

**“If I get to be me, I belong...
If I have to be like you, I fit in.”**

In her 2019 Netflix documentary, “The Call to Courage”, Brene Brown describes how a group of schoolchildren helped her define the difference between belonging and fitting in. “If I get to be me, I belong,” one told her. “If I have to be like you, I fit in.” Belonging at work can be described also as being able to bring our authentic selves to work, and to feel appreciated and confident for being who we are.

Belonging is inherently inclusive and is an approach to equality and diversity issues that both encompasses both majority and minority groups and also embraces intersectionality. It’s for this reason that belonging is being hailed as the evolution needed to progress equality, diversity and inclusion at work. We all have our ‘in-groups’ - people that we share particular qualities and values with; and our ‘out-groups’

- people that don’t. Teams and organisations where people feel a strong sense of belonging have bigger and more diverse ‘in-groups’ where people are not wasting time and energy trying to fit in, are able to address more complex problems and take more objective decisions with fewer unconscious biases.

Belonging also increases performance. People who feel a strong sense of belonging in their workplace are more productive, more likely to contribute at their full potential, more motivated and committed and more creative. People who feel like they belong in an organisation are less likely to leave and are more likely to speak well of their employer - thereby attracting more high-quality candidates for future roles.

So how does this translate to research and innovation and why is cultivating a sense of belonging important for our system in the 21st Century?

Many of the problems and challenges we face today are complex, multifaceted, and cannot be solved by one person working alone. As soon as we start working with others, i.e. [collaborating](#) (literally, co-labouring), we are trying to bring a collective intelligence to bear on these issues. To optimise our research and innovation system we need to create strong feelings of belonging to our professional relationships; to our teams, research groups, collaborations, departments, businesses and networks. We need to attract and retain the best researchers and innovators into our universities and businesses whatever their background, age and experience.

Whether we lead or are a member of a particular team we need to ask ourselves - does everyone in this team feel a sense of belonging? How do I behave around this team so that others know they belong? How do I make it safe for people in this team to bring their whole-selves to work?

Daniel Coyle in his book, *The Culture Code*, highlights the importance of ‘belonging cues’ - a language of belonging which matters more than words. Belonging cues are made up of small signals repeated again and again and again, signals like spending time together, listening, taking turns, mirroring and eye contact. He summarises them into three basic groups:

- **Presence** – investing energy in the relationship and the exchange that’s occurring. It can be made up of cues like spending time together, eye contact and physical cues like handshakes and mirroring.
- **Respect** – treating everyone as unique and valued, extending courtesies, taking turns, not interrupting, being curious and asking questions, and making sure everyone has equal airtime.
- **Future Focused** – emphasising the continuing nature and importance of the relationship, showing that you will meet again, that you are invested in the team and its success, that you make time for the people in it.

In considering the challenges of multidisciplinary and collaborative research, we often think about the different languages spoken by different academic disciplines. Could it be that by thinking about the language of belonging, we could start to [build collaborations](#) more quickly and more effectively?

Can we build a more diverse and inclusive research body by thinking about the belonging cues within our own teams, departments and peer groups?

I think we can. I believe that by adopting simple behaviours we can show everyone involved in research and innovation that they belong. This can be done by anyone but will be most effective when those in positions of real influence demonstrate these behaviours. Hearing something from a leader will not change the behaviour of others; it is seeing the leader communicate the behaviours through their own actions that makes the difference in the language of belonging.

So, behaviours that show that we are interested in what our colleagues have to say, that we care about them, that we are curious in their perspectives and experiences. By asking for feedback and for help, and by not allocating blame or “throwing colleagues under a bus” to spare our own blushes if things haven’t turned out as we hoped or planned. Behaviours that show that it doesn’t matter what school you went to or what your accent is or whether you have a doctorate, that you are important to our research and innovation system and that you have a role to play and will be encouraged to play that role to the best of your ability.

By drawing on all of our talent, by creating a culture of belonging, we can drive a new, more inclusive, more productive research and innovation system in the UK.

**“By adopting simple behaviours
we can show everyone involved
in research and innovation that
they belong.”**



The N8 Research Partnership is the leading university alliance,
based in the North of England.

We stand together, renowned for our shared ambitions and collective action,
powered by our networks and relationships, and underpinned by our
world class research, innovation, impact and education provision.

We seek to create an environment where universities, businesses,
policymakers and citizens build meaningful collaborations delivering impact for our region
and beyond, with the N8 universities as essential foundations in a dynamic
pan-regional innovation network.

Durham University
Lancaster University
University of Leeds
University of Liverpool
University of Manchester
Newcastle University
University of Sheffield
University of York

To find out more about our work on research culture,
please visit:



N8 Research Partnership



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