

Embedding Inclusive Cultural Change Through Community Voice: UCL's Research Culture Community Steering Group

Mary Assad¹ & Natalie L. Marchant²

¹Research, Innovation and Global Engagement, University College London, UK

²Division of Psychiatry, Faculty of Brain Sciences, University College London, UK

Correspondence: ¹m.assad@ucl.ac.uk; ²n.marchant@ucl.ac.uk

ORCID: ¹[0009-0008-0214-3204](https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0214-3204); ²[0000-0003-0669-6910](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0669-6910)

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Abstract

This Critical Reflection explores how University College London's (UCL's) Research Culture Community Steering Group (CSG) integrates the individual voices and lived experiences of the research community and encourages researchers' direct participation in governance as a way to foster a sense of belonging and promote inclusion within institutional research culture change. Launched in January 2024, the CSG works in partnership with the UCL Research Culture Programme (RCP). This article considers the CSG's first two years, examining how member feedback in 2024 and 2025 shaped strategic priorities and plans, contributed to projects, and revealed systemic barriers relating to equity, wellbeing and research environments. Using change-management frameworks, it reviews the challenges of implementation, including the complexity of governance and balancing competing priorities within a large, decentralised institution. The analysis shows how early engagement, inclusivity and structured feedback loops build trust and support sustainable, people-centred organisational cultural change. Finally, the article considers how the CSG model informs UCL's next phase of the RCP through strengthening alignment with governance structures, clarifying member roles, and sharing learning and best practice. It offers transferable insights for research-intensive universities embedding inclusive community voices within decision-making and strategies.

Keywords: research culture; community-led change; change management; lived experience; higher education governance; inclusion

Introduction: Research Culture Context and Sector Drivers

In the UK higher education sector, funders and government increasingly recognise the importance of fair and inclusive research cultures that support and retain talent in order to achieve responsible research excellence (**Moran et al., 2020; Shift Insight et al., 2024**). This priority is reinforced in the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2029, whose Strategy, People and Research Environment (SPRE) guidance will account for 20 percent of assessment, an increase from 15 percent from REF 2021. This underscores expectations that institutions demonstrate supportive, inclusive and well-governed research environments alongside outputs and impact, while also acknowledging different resource capacities (**REF, 2025**).

Across the sector, universities face persistent issues, including inequities in the progression and recognition of researchers (**Woolston, 2021; Advance HE, 2024**), pressures associated with hyper-competition (**Naddaf, 2025**), the uneven visibility of professional services and technical contributions (**Toogood, 2025**), increasing workloads, and decreasing researcher wellbeing (**Pace et al., 2021; Gewin, 2022; Stead et al., 2025**). Many institutions are developing strategies in response to these challenges to foster collaborative and responsible research environments. However, initiatives imposed without sensitivity to local contexts can generate resistance, particularly in decentralised, research-intensive environments where change is rarely linear. Aligning institutional direction with local realities is therefore essential to build the capability for positive change.

Sustainable cultural change requires both strategic leadership and community ownership. In higher education, bottom-up approaches are often emphasised; however, without complementary top-down leadership, alignment and resourcing, their impact can be limited. While process-based approaches (such as the REF) incentivise standards and accountability, they cannot fully capture the relational and context-specific nature of research culture (**O'Connor et al., 2026**). Culture is enacted through everyday interactions, decision-making and informal norms influencing environments. It therefore encompasses behaviours, incentives, relationships and lived experience—not simply policy or strategy (**The Royal Society, 2017; Canti et al., 2021**).

In order to build the capacity for meaningful change, ongoing collaboration between academic leaders, change-management professionals and research communities is critical to test assumptions, identify unintended consequences and refine interventions in real time and to align lived realities with institutional priorities. Evidence indicates that active sponsorship from leaders, adequate personnel and financial resourcing,

and participatory approaches involving the community are key to driving institutional change at scale (**Lines, 2004; Hiatt, 2006; Marshall, 2025**). Empowering the research community to co-create change—rather than just being subject to it—promotes shared commitment and integrates lived experience into institutional processes. Such participatory approaches can strengthen trust and support sustainable change by aligning strategic ambition with the needs and experiences of the research communities they seek to serve (**Clarke, 2013**). While in principle, the embedding of community voices within decision-making is essential, the practice remains uneven and difficult to sustain. Under leadership of the Director of Research Culture, UCL established the Research Culture Community Steering Group (CSG) to connect community insight with institutional planning and delivery in response to both sector expectations and priorities beyond assessments.

The following Critical Reflection draws on the complementary perspectives of co-authors Natalie Marchant, an associate professor in the Faculty of Brain Sciences and inaugural Chair of the Research Culture Community Steering Group (CSG) at University College London (UCL) and Mary Assad, *Change Manager* for UCL's Research Culture team, Office of the Vice-Provost for Research, Innovation & Global Engagement (RIGE). Launched in January 2024, the CSG works as a strategic mechanism within the UCL Research Culture Programme (RCP).

UCL's Research Culture Roadmap and Governance

In recognition of the importance of research culture (and several years prior to the changes announced for REF 2029), in 2021 UCL undertook extensive consultations with its research community to understand its strengths and areas for improvement. These insights informed a ten-year Research Culture Roadmap, aligned with UCL's Strategic Plan 2022–27, to guide UCL to enhance its research environments, reflecting a whole-institution approach and a long-term framework for cultural improvement (**UCL, 2023; UCL, 2022**). The Roadmap brings together new and existing strands of activity based on five key themes: (1) transparent and fair career development, (2) people-centred leadership and management, (3) opportunities to collaborate and innovate, (4) openness and integrity in our research and innovation, and (5) supportive and inclusive environment.

UCL's RCP delivers and supports multiple institutional and locally led grassroots projects and initiatives that have been designed to progress the implementation of the Roadmap and promote shared ownership across the research community. Promoting shared ownership reflects a growing

emphasis on participatory approaches that connect institutional strategy with the experiential realities of day-to-day research practice (**Rees & Todd, 2024; Todd, 2025**). This is integral, for as one of our colleagues observed, 'There is no research culture without human experience'.

The RCP is led by a dedicated Research Culture team at UCL, reflecting the scale and complexity of coordinating cultural change across one of the UK's largest research-intensive universities. Additionally, a Research Culture Programme Board has been established, comprising Vice-Deans (Research) representing all eleven faculties alongside senior leaders across research-related domains, to provide strategic oversight and align delivery with the Roadmap priorities.

Designing a Community-Led Mechanism

Origin and demand

In this context, the Research Culture CSG was formed in 2024 to intentionally include the lived experience of people from across the research community and to foster shared ownership in positive change in research culture (**UCL, 2025**). Designed as a community-led group, it offers localised, inclusive perspectives on the strategic delivery of institutional changes to culture, providing insights and advice to the Research Culture Programme Board while ensuring strategic priorities remain grounded in the realities of research practice.

Co-author Natalie L. Marchant was appointed the CSG chair via an open recruitment process from within the research community and serves as the independent academic lead. Another open call invited self-nominations to join from within UCL's research community. In total, more than two hundred staff and researchers across faculties, roles and career stages applied, signalling strong interest amongst academic, research and professional services staff to actively shape research culture change. Of these, twenty-two 'core' members were selected by the chair, ensuring all eleven faculties and relevant Vice-Provost (VP) offices were represented and spanning diverse roles, disciplines and career stages. These volunteer core members commit to attend term meetings, provide insight on RCP initiatives, and act as a bridge between local research communities and programme activity. Additional involvement is optional; the role is designed to be light touch in consideration of existing workload and responsibilities.

Roughly 180 'pool' members form the wider CSG network. The CSG model intentionally balances structure with adaptability. While the group was not originally planned at this scale, high interest in the research

community allowed the network to encompass broad institutional connections, providing an engaged pool of members for core member rotation and optional participation in RCP consultations, workshops and activities where relevant. Together, core and pool members form a distributed network supporting engagement and insight across UCL's research community. This approach enables a broadly inclusive culture while maintaining operational coherence across a large, decentralised institution. Additionally, its scale and diversity of participation strengthens the group's legitimacy and breadth of insight, although it also introduces administrative and expectation-management challenges, which we explore later in this article.

Role of core members

The CSG core members are positioned not as formal representatives but as local facilitators and champions of change, amplifying community perspectives and connecting personal insights with RCP priorities through their networks.

CSG core members' remit is to:

- **amplify community voices:** reveal lived experience within local research environments, highlighting barriers, enablers and positive practice;
- **inform initiatives:** contribute insights and disciplinary expertise to shape RCP projects, programmes and tools;
- **support engagement:** share key messages, opportunities and consultations through local networks, encouraging participation and awareness of RCP activities;
- **act as champions:** model inclusive behaviours and collaboration through their own practice.

Core members also connect with pool members and faculty leaders, strengthening local engagement and extending reach across networks.

Principles underpinning CSG cohesion

Principles of co-production shape how the group operates, fostering a sense of cohesion and shared ownership (**International Association for Public Participation [IAP2], 2017; Scottish Co-Production Network, 2024**). These principles emphasise psychological safety and distributed leadership, enabling members to challenge constructively when necessary

and to contribute diverse perspectives grounded in local realities while supporting trust, inclusion and shared responsibility for shaping research environments (**Shift Insight et al., 2024**). The scale and diversity of this participatory ethos strengthens legitimacy and breadth of insight but also introduces complexity in coordination, expectations and role clarity.

Approach, Implementation and Reflections

The following sections examine early impacts, emerging tensions and operational challenges, as well as the conditions required for sustainable, community-engaged cultural change. We also identify transferable knowledge for institutions seeking to embed community voices within their governance and decision-making structures, through a reflection on lessons learned (see Appendix and Future Directions). Together, this reflective collaboration mirrors the broader premise underpinning the CSG: that meaningful, sustainable and positive cultural change requires the continual sharing of relational insights, leadership skills, organisational challenges, and professional expertise.

Approach: Embedding community voices into governance

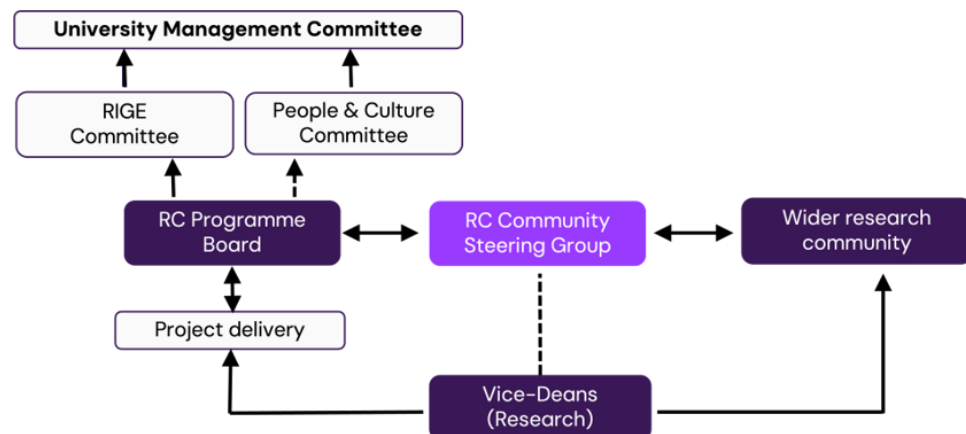
The CSG provides bidirectional information flow between the research community and senior leaders via Vice-Deans (Research) and the Research Culture Programme Board. This strengthens board decision-making by ensuring the lived experiences of research community members inform priorities, complement data and governance processes, and build capability for locally enacted change across faculties.

Community feedback informs local research culture ‘dashboards’—faculty-level summaries designed to provide stakeholders with easier access to qualitative CSG insight and local priorities—bringing together key research culture themes in accessible formats alongside indicators of a responsible research culture. This highlights variation across faculties and complements quantitative data with qualitative responses, particularly from underrepresented groups such as those from minoritised-ethnic backgrounds or those on fixed-term contracts.

Regular updates (via email, online posts and website refreshes), workshops and resource-sharing promote knowledge exchange and local dissemination of RCP priorities. The exploration of the lived experience of research staff often reveals systemic barriers and informs the co-development of initiatives, indicators and success measures, while dashboards and opportunities to provide feedback reinforce transparency, trust and sustained participation. This creates clear pathways through

which multiple and diverse perspectives critically inform decision-making (Figure 1, below).

Figure 1: UCL Research Culture Community Steering Group (CSG) positioning within institutional governance structure



Approach: Change framework and engagement

The CSG strategy was informed by established change-management approaches to support shared understanding and sustained engagement across a large, decentralised institution (**Richard et al., 2021**). Drawing on Prosci's 'ADKAR' ('Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement') model (**Hiatt, 2006**), this strategy provides a flexible framework and shared language for navigating change rather than a prescriptive methodology. ADKAR is grounded in the principle that organisational change is realised through individual change. Examples of how this has informed the CSG's approach are outlined below (Table 1, next page).

This approach enables locally meaningful engagement while maintaining institutional coherence, emphasising ongoing feedback loops, barrier identification and reinforcement of ongoing change. While such models support sense-making and momentum, they do not address underlying structural inequalities or cultural hierarchies alone. Instead, they function as guiding tools that must be adapted to context.

Table 1: The ADKAR framework in a CSG context

ADKAR Stage	Concept	Actions	Outcomes	Learnings
Awareness <i>Why change? What happens if we don't embed community voice?</i>	Understand why research culture change is needed and the role of the CSG	Introduced CSG; dashboards; cross-faculty insight sharing	Raised visibility of priorities, extending reach, connecting silos, amplifying voices	Awareness varied; governance links and purpose not always understood, requiring ongoing communication
Desire <i>Fostering motivation and engagement through representation</i>	Motivation to engage and contribute to research culture change through representation	Open call; voluntary participation; cross-role involvement	Strong appetite for involvement, proactive ownership and shared purpose	Expectations differed; voluntary nature needs clearer framing
Knowledge <i>Equipping CSG members with tools, knowledge to engage</i>	Sharing and cascading change, key information and toolkits; clarifying roles and expectations	Workshops, briefings, Microsoft Teams channels, shared resources	Enabled learning, local conversations and knowledge flow	Risk of information overload; need for concise messaging
Ability <i>Enacting change by revealing barriers</i>	Applying insight to uncover barriers and shape initiatives	Lived experience input; early feedback on projects	Surfaced barriers early; improved initiative design	Structural constraints and workload pressures limit capacity
Reinforcement <i>Sustaining change through feedback review</i>	Sustaining change through visibility, feedback loops and reinforcement mechanisms	Dashboards, updates, feedback loops	Transparency strengthened trust and participation	Requires continuous feedback loops; role clarity and governance alignment to reinforce sustainability

Implementation and emerging impacts

During the group's initial phase in 2024/25, the CSG focused on building a shared identity, trust and a visible route for the research community to shape RCP work. Creating a feeling of psychological safety enabled open dialogue across roles, disciplines and faculties, while meetings and workshops surfaced systemic barriers affecting staff (such as heavy workload, burnout, hierarchical relationships, etc.), which were not always visible through formal surveys or governance routes. In the CSG's second

year, focus shifted towards strengthening contributions to the RCP, information flow and governance. Engagement remained high. Since the group's inception, core members have participated in six formal term-time meetings and three additional sessions, providing key feedback on current initiatives. They also participated in twenty one-to-one interviews with Mary, enabling the deeper exploration of local challenges and cultural barriers.

Engagement levels indicated a strong appetite to contribute to institutional change beyond formal role expectations. CSG Core and Pool members contributed voluntarily to over eleven Research Culture activities, including:

- **dashboards:** faculty-level summaries of qualitative CSG insights to support decision-making;
- **funding:** improving faculty- and seed-funding processes through CSG member connections and insights to inspire locally led initiatives;
- **priorities and projects:** shaping initiatives, including academic promotions, Responsible Research Culture Indicators and the UCL RCP Phase 2 Plan (2025–28);
- **toolkit:** influencing development of the Research Culture Toolkit, including grant and REF 2029 preparation guidance;
- **roadmap:** incorporating CSG feedback on the physical environment into Research Culture Roadmap goals, highlighting the influence and power of community voice on institutional priorities.

Early engagement with the research community through the CSG enabled faster identification of variations in need across faculties and reduced duplication of effort. Members reported that the CSG model felt authentic and motivating, encouraging transparency, trust and cross-faculty understanding and helping shift perceptions away from a centrally driven plan for change towards a more collaborative approach.

Enabling Community Voices Across Institutions

While the early impacts of the CSG demonstrate the value of embedding community voices, the implementation of the group surfaced tensions that provided important lessons for institutional level change. Below we document three main takeaways.

Integrating lived-experience insight into decision-making

The CSG highlighted the value of feedback from individuals within research communities. Qualitative insights drawn from individual interviews, meetings, workshops and project outputs revealed variation of micro-cultures across faculties and disciplines. While we strive to incorporate a diverse range of perspectives across faculties and VP offices, at a departmental level participation and representation remain uneven, reflecting the voluntary nature of the role and the organisational scale. However imperfect and partial, representation is still valuable—particularly for minoritised voices, such as those from minoritised-ethnic, neurodivergent, or disabled groups, often underrepresented in quantitative datasets.

While quantitative data offers structured, retrospective indicators, it is inherently partial and removed from day-to-day experience. Community insight, by contrast, provides grounded, real-time perspectives from within research environments, capturing how culture is experienced and evolving, and revealing issues that formal mechanisms may overlook. This creates a tension between openness and breadth of coverage; and in some cases, it creates uncertainty for faculty leaders about how such insight should be interpreted alongside formal data and governance.

However, qualitative insights anchored in human relationships are intended for use *alongside* quantitative metrics to strengthen holistic understanding and inform decision-making. Faculty leaders highlighted the need for clearer integration of the CSG qualitative insights and dashboard findings with existing data sources—such as staff survey results, Responsible Research Culture Indicators and Athena Swan metrics for gender parity—which are not aligned with faculty governance cycles, approval processes or decision-making routes, limiting their ability to support timely action and accountability. Strengthening alignment with existing planning rhythms would enhance their usability and influence.

Local context, perceived centralisation and the roots of resistance

As CSG engagement has matured, it has identified overlaps with existing faculty governance and research professional services roles. This highlights the need for greater alignment and clarity in roles and responsibilities, and improved communication and feedback routes. While relationships between the CSG, the Research Culture Programme Board and faculty structures remain clear at an institutional level, gaps have emerged locally between faculty leaders and their CSG representatives. As noted above, CSG members can often identify risks or opportunities earlier than formal feedback processes, but processes or routes for these insights to inform local planning were not always clear or standardised. Stronger integration

would enable earlier decision-making, reduce duplication and better support RCP delivery. This would enhance the CSG's credibility while giving faculty leaders real-time perspectives that complement formal, quantitative data.

Regarding role clarity, different faculty structures mean that responsibilities sometimes overlap between faculty leaders, research support roles and CSG members. This creates uncertainty in representation and information flow. Greater locally adaptable role clarity would reduce role duplication and support sustainable engagement, recognising we must remain context-responsive and adaptable to differing faculty and role configurations.

As previously mentioned, the scale of interest in joining the CSG led to the decision to create larger pool membership beyond the originally planned core member group. Over time, it became clear that some pool members were uncertain about their roles, and a few core members were unsure about their expected level of interaction with pool members. Work is ongoing to clarify engagement routes and role expectations while maintaining a light-touch approach, increasing opportunities to contribute and improving communication. Further clarity to the CSG Terms of Reference would help avoid confusion.

Sustainability, voluntary labour and expectation management

Participation in the CSG revealed the significant emotional and relational labour involved in community-led culture change. CSG members often draw on personal experience, professional commitment and values-driven motivation to sustain engagement, which builds trust and belonging, yet this work is not always formally recognised. Volunteer-led models risk creating an uneven burden and burnout, particularly where participation intersects with existing service roles, minoritisation and 'academic housework', the often-invisible, rarely rewarded labour that helps support an institution.

There is an ethical responsibility for institutions to ensure that participatory structures do not disproportionately rely on those with the particular lived experience of marginalisation. Ironically, without intentional design and recognition, participatory approaches risk reproducing the inequities they seek to address. Sustainability therefore requires clarity, proportionate expectations and visible recognition. In practice, this has meant maintaining a light-touch model, clarifying role expectations, and embedding engagement within existing faculty structures.

The CSG chair role, initially voluntary, evolved to include partial buy-out funded support from the RCP budget, recognising that effective

stewardship requires protected time and institutional investment. This support provides specified time for meaningful engagement while minimising impact on the chair's departmental responsibilities. This both redistributes workload and signals the role's importance, with arrangements tailored to the chair's individual commitments rather than being fixed.

The experience of creating and maintaining the CSG also highlighted the resource implications of coordinating participatory governance. Administrative demands proved greater than anticipated, underscoring the need for proportionate resourcing and scalable approaches for institutions of various size and capacity. Dedicated coordination capacity enables continuity, transparency and follow-through. However, resource constraints vary across institutions. Therefore, scalable approaches may involve integrating insight within existing committees, rotating facilitation roles, or adopting lighter-touch consultation mechanisms.

As seen across many voluntary equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives, participatory culture change cannot be sustained by relying solely on invisible or uncompensated labour. It requires balancing relational engagement with structural support, including allyship, senior sponsorship and appropriate resourcing. These tensions further strengthened our iterative, learning-based approach. Collectively, these reflections emphasise the need for relational engagement, shared understanding and adaptive implementation. The following section contains a bullet-point summary of practical lessons learned when embedding community voices in research culture.

Learning Outcomes and Their Implications for Practice

The first phase of the Community Steering Group highlighted several practical lessons for institutions seeking to embed community voice within research culture change. Together, these lessons highlight the fact that sustainable culture change depends not only on structures and strategy, but on establishing relationships, clarity in communication, and the creation of conditions that enable people to participate meaningfully:

- **Governance and participation must work together.** Community insight has the greatest influence when integrated within decision-making governance structures rather than operating in parallel to strengthen legitimacy, transparency and trust. It is not intended to be statistically representative but to complement quantitative data and inform discussion and action.

- **Direct engagement matters.** One-to-one and group conversations, facilitated by a member of the Research Culture team, strengthen trust, enable nuance and surface hidden concerns that may not emerge through written consultation alone.
- **How change is introduced affects engagement.** Early dashboard rollout demonstrated that complex or sensitive information shared solely via email can generate confusion or resistance. Phasing implementation through conversations and adaptation to local context improves understanding and acceptance.
- **Participation requires structure and role clarity.** Clear expectations, well-defined touchpoints and alignment with existing faculty processes reduce role duplication and help volunteers engage without an added individual burden.
- **Recognition and reward support sustainability.** Acknowledging contributions through visibility, career frameworks and protected time reinforces value and avoids over-reliance on invisible labour.
- **Culture change is contextual, not one-size-fits-all.** Faculties operate as distinct environments with their own norms, pressures and priorities. Flexible models enable alignment while respecting local contexts.
- **Feedback loops sustain motivation and trust.** Visible evidence of how contributions shape decisions, strengthen engagement and facilitate shared ownership is important.
- **Leader sponsorship and adequate resourcing enable change.** Active leader sponsorship and resourcing to protect capacity and coordination support are essential to sustain participation and translate insight into action.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Looking ahead, the next phase of this participatory approach will focus on strengthening CSG connections with faculty governance while preserving its community-led ethos. Scheduled check-ins between CSG representatives and their faculty leadership (e.g., research development leads, Vice-Deans (EDI), and research support teams) and Vice-Deans (Research) will provide protected time for local dashboard review, funding discussions and culture priorities. Flexible local adaptation will enable the integration of community members' voices into these faculty conversations and activities, balancing consistency with local autonomy to improve alignment, accountability and reduce duplication.

Clear multi-directional routes of influence between the CSG, faculties and the Research Culture Programme Board will ensure community insight informs strategy while remaining connected to local priorities. Enhanced participation pathways will support pool members seeking deeper involvement while maintaining optional engagement and protecting volunteer capacity through existing structures and roles. This includes clearer routes for contribution (e.g., through targeted consultations, thematic working groups and feedback loops) and regular communication to maintain visibility without increasing individual burdens.

This model will be trialled and reviewed for effectiveness, sustainability and faculty variation, with monitoring of engagement, dashboard use and feedback loops supporting continuous improvement. While context-specific to UCL, sharing learning outcomes with peer institutions and engaging in cross-sector dialogue will support the development of participatory approaches to positive research culture change. This is important because research culture is also shaped by international and disciplinary networks beyond the institution (O'Connor et al., 2026).

This Critical Reflection highlights the opportunities and tensions involved in integrating community voices at scale within a large research-intensive university. The CSG demonstrates how embedding lived experience within governance can strengthen trust, transparency and shared ownership while ensuring institutional priorities remain grounded in research practice. This positions the larger research community not only as a mechanism for engagement but as a form of distributed governance shaping institutional priorities.

Early impacts show that participatory structures can improve decision-making, reveal systemic barriers and strengthen engagement when supported by the sponsorship of research leaders, adequate resources and clear feedback loops. At the same time, sustaining community-led change remains complex. Cultural transformation is relational, iterative and context-specific, requiring partnership, the balancing of strategic direction with local realities, the recognition of voluntary labour, and continual clarity regarding roles and expectations.

Ultimately, sustainable research culture change depends on partnership: between leadership and community, academic and professional expertise and institutions learning from one another. Embedding community insight within governance is not a one-off intervention but an ongoing commitment to listening, adapting and evolving. As universities continue to navigate shifting expectations and complex research environments, participatory mechanisms such as the CSG offer a transferable model for aligning strategy with lived experience, ensuring that research culture is shaped both for, and with, the research community.

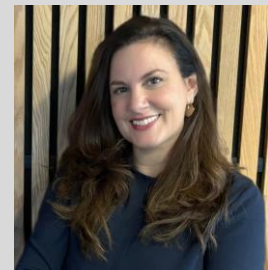
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[Mary Assad](#) is Change Manager in Research Culture at University College London UCL), where she empowers teams, stakeholders and networks to drive and embed people-centred change. She previously delivered multiple organisational, cultural and technology transformations across international teams in media companies, including M&C Saatchi, Clear Channel and ITV. Mary established and leads the change strategy for the UCL Research Culture Community Steering Group, creating a mechanism for the research community to influence research culture priorities. She is also co-lead of the inaugural UCL EDI Community of Practice, a network of more than eight hundred advancing equality, diversity and inclusion across UCL.



[Dr Natalie Marchant](#) is Associate Professor in the Division of Psychiatry, Faculty of Brain Sciences at UCL, where she investigates how mental, social and lifestyle factors affect the risk of dementia and conducts behavioural interventions designed to promote healthy ageing. She has authored more than one hundred research publications and is committed to improving research culture. She is a board member of the UCL Centre for Equality Research in Brain Sciences, chaired the EDI committee for the UCL Division of Psychiatry, and was inaugural chair of the UCL Research Culture Community Steering Group.



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