Edinburgh Neuroscience
Research Culture Survey 2025

Thematic Analysis of Open-Text Responses

April 2025 | 87 Respondents

Executive Summary

This report presents a thematic analysis of open-text responses from the Edinburgh Neuroscience Research Culture Survey 2025, which received 87 responses from staff and postgraduate researchers across the Edinburgh Neuroscience – the majority were from the Institute for Neuroscience and Cardiovascular Research but a notable minority responded from other Schools too. Ten themes were identified through systematic review of qualitative responses across all open-ended questions.

The analysis reveals a community that is broadly aware of its cultural challenges and often reflective and constructive in its critique. Positive aspects — including strong collaborations, supportive individual supervisors, and genuine enthusiasm for open science — coexist with persistent structural concerns around equity, transparency, and wellbeing. The most frequently raised issues centre on the 'hidden curriculum' of academia, uneven access to opportunity based on social networks and identity, and the wellbeing costs of an 'always-on' research culture.

Summary of Themes

Theme	Mentions	Summary
1. Unwritten Rules & Hidden Expectations	~18	Lack of explicit guidance on norms around networking, self-promotion, hierarchy, and career navigation.
2. Diversity, Inclusion & Fairness	~16	Concerns about representation in senior roles, discrimination, favouritism, and systemic inequity.
3. Supervision, Feedback & Management Quality	~14	Variable supervisor quality: inconsistent feedback, unclear expectations, and lack of structured support.
4. Academic Hustle Culture & Wellbeing	~13	Pressure to overwork, publish-or-perish norms, and the mental health toll of precarious employment.
5. Workload, Deadlines & Flexible Working	~12	Tension between rigid institutional expectations and the need for flexibility, especially for carers.

6. Open Science Practices	~10	Mixed adoption of preprints, data sharing and pre-registration; awareness and cultural buy-in vary.
7. Career Progression & Precarity	~10	Job insecurity, opaque promotion pathways, and lack of recognition for non-PI career routes.
8. Social Culture & Community	~9	Social events that exclude those with caring responsibilities; cliquey or isolating group dynamics.
9. Research Metrics & Assessment (DORA/CoARA)	~8	Low awareness of responsible metrics commitments; scepticism about whether principles are enacted.
10. Neurodiversity & Disability Support	~8	Inadequate institutional support, masking demands, and bullying experiences reported by some.

Detailed Thematic Breakdown

Theme 1: Unwritten Rules and Hidden Expectations

This was the single most cited concern in response to Question 17 ('which topic is most important'), and arose repeatedly across several open-text fields. Respondents expressed frustration that the informal norms governing academic life — how to network, how to self-promote, how to navigate supervisory hierarchies, and how to position oneself for funding or promotion — are rarely made explicit and are disproportionately accessible to those with insider knowledge or privileged backgrounds.

> *"Whether the 'unwritten rules' of academia are explained or left to be guessed matters a lot. Networking, self-promotion, and especially dealing with hierarchy are not just soft skills. They affect who gets good advice, collaborations, and opportunities. If these stay hidden, people without insider connections are at a real disadvantage. Making these rules explicit is about fairness."*

> *"In a lot of ways, we go in blind. Helping younger researchers navigate the unwritten rules and social expectations of the research environment is crucial."*

Several respondents connected this directly to class and socioeconomic background, noting that researchers from academic families have an invisible advantage. Others highlighted that the lack of explicit career guidance was particularly harmful for early-career researchers (ECRs), who may not know how to construct a promotion case, navigate grant cycles, or build mentoring relationships without informal sponsorship.

One respondent shared a striking personal account of being discouraged from applying for promotion by their line manager, only to be successfully promoted after independently seeking support — likely losing several years at the higher grade in the process. This illustrates the high stakes of unspoken norms remaining unspoken.

Theme 2: Diversity, Inclusion, and Fairness

Questions of fair treatment, representation, and discrimination were prominent across the survey. While quantitative responses to Question 1 (fair treatment of everyone regardless of protected characteristics) were broadly positive, the open-text responses revealed more nuanced and troubling experiences. Respondents described first-hand experiences of LGBTQ+ discrimination, witnessed racism, and patterns of promotion and opportunity that appear to favour those already embedded in powerful networks.

> *"I have experienced explicit anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination within the university, and witnessed racism."*

> *"There is a lot of bias at the university in terms of cliques and certain people who are promoted ahead of others. Blindingly obvious when some people are promoted and the reasons for this. Very unfair and very biased. Not usually based on merit."*

Representation in senior leadership was a recurring concern. Several respondents called for active hiring to diversify senior roles (e.g., "*hire a non-white senior member*"), and noted that current representation of women in leadership, while improved, does not extend to broader dimensions of diversity. Clinical academics reported feeling excluded from certain internal funding routes, with access appearing to favour those with strong ties to particular networks or fellowship programmes.

One respondent raised the issue of socioeconomic class as an underacknowledged dimension of diversity — one that strongly predicts academic success but is often absent from institutional equality conversations. Another raised the absence of microaggression reporting mechanisms and called for more awareness training targeted at senior staff who may be the source of the behaviour.

Theme 3: Supervision, Feedback, and Management Quality

Across Questions 6, 7, and the open-text responses, supervision quality emerged as highly variable. Quantitative data showed that a majority of respondents found supervisor expectations 'somewhat clear' but not 'very clear and documented', and that feedback was moderately but not consistently constructive. Open-text responses highlighted specific concerns: lack of regular check-ins for senior staff, absence of structured annual review, and supervisors who are poorly equipped to handle mental health disclosures.

> *"There are no 'regular check-ins' for more senior members of staff. Counselling services at Edinburgh Uni are awful."*

> *"The issue of meaningful annual review was raised as particularly important."*

Several respondents praised their immediate supervisors for being supportive, warm, and receptive to feedback — illustrating that the problem is not universal but rather unevenly distributed. However, the structural absence of accountability mechanisms (e.g., no systematic way to assess whether mandatory training in EDI or unconscious bias is actually being applied) means that poor supervisory behaviour can persist without challenge.

One respondent in the mental health section noted being asked what support they needed during a period of difficulty but receiving no follow-up — highlighting the gap between intent and action in supervisory responses to distress.

Theme 4: Academic Hustle Culture and Wellbeing

Responses in the mental health section and Question 14 (deadlines and wellbeing) paint a picture of a community significantly affected by the structural pressures of academic research. Precarious contracts, the publish-or-perish imperative, and an implicit expectation of overwork were described as sources of chronic stress. Imposter syndrome and competitive culture were identified as moderate-to-major stressors for many respondents.

> *"The 'publish or perish' policy in science is the one change that would make the biggest positive difference to my mental wellbeing."*

> *"The general 'hustle culture' of academia negatively impacts my mental health."*

A recurring concern was that academic culture normalises overwork — "*it seems to be a given that everyone works more than their hours*" — and that this creates pressure on part-time workers, carers, and those with disabilities or health conditions who cannot match this pace. Respondents also noted that while deadlines can be motivating, the framing of all time pressure as adversarial stress perpetuates unhelpful narratives.

Several respondents flagged concerns about the adequacy of institutional mental health support. Counselling services were described as oversubscribed and inaccessible, and one respondent described being told their history was too severe for university services but not severe enough for NHS support — a troubling gap. Others noted that support exists primarily for PhD students and is less visible or available for postdoctoral researchers and other early-career staff.

Theme 5: Workload, Deadlines, and Flexible Working

Flexible working was the most commonly cited structural change that respondents felt would improve their research environment. Question 15 showed that 85% of respondents had access to flexible hours — but the open-text responses contextualised this: flexibility often depends on individual PI goodwill rather than institutional policy, can be informally 'frowned upon', and is inconsistently available across teams.

> *"As a part-time worker, regardless of how well one may preplan, deadlines can pressurize one into working multiple unpaid hours, especially when part of an international collaborative application team and one cannot let the side down."*

> *"A university-wide push to adopt flexible working hours and locations — rather than individual PIs making decisions — would make the biggest positive difference."*

Workload management support was another gap: respondents reported feeling unsupported in strategies for managing open-ended tasks like writing and reading, with 24% feeling 'not supported' or 'not at all supported' in this area.

Theme 6: Open Science Practices

The open science section of the survey revealed a community that is broadly receptive to preprinting, data sharing, and pre-registration, but with significant variation in practice and awareness. The primary motivation for using preprint servers was speed — getting work visible quickly for grant applications, citing during review processes, and establishing priority — rather than ideological commitment to open science per se, though many did frame it as good practice.

> *"It allows me to make my research visible much faster than waiting for formal publication. I think it is our responsibility to share results widely and immediately."*

Barriers included time pressures, concerns about being scooped, and the perception that preprints are not yet valued as outputs on a par with peer-reviewed publications, especially in life sciences. Several respondents noted that the perceived esteem of preprints still lags behind journals for purposes of hiring and promotion. One respondent cautioned about AI use of preprint data and the risk of uncorrected errors becoming embedded in the literature.

For dataset deposition, effort and uncertainty about the right repository were the main barriers (62% cited effort; 38% cited not knowing which repository to choose). A respondent in professional services noted that size limits, repository fees, and lack of persistent identifiers (DOIs vs. URLs only) were practical obstacles for those managing data deposition.

Pre-registration awareness was modest: 32% were unfamiliar with it, and the most common reason for not pre-registering was that the model did not fit the exploratory nature of the research. Those who did pre-register found it valuable primarily for accountability and transparency, though one respondent found it too restrictive in early-stage research.

Theme 7: Career Progression and Precarity

Job insecurity, opaque promotion processes, and the invisibility of non-PI career pathways were recurring themes. One particularly detailed response from a long-serving research professional highlighted the structural disadvantage of being on open-ended-but-funding-contingent contracts: inability to formally supervise PhD students, blank spaces on CVs, and decades of valuable specialist work unrecognised by institutional career frameworks that are oriented towards the PI route.

> *"I wish UoE would do more to accept and even value people who do not want to become PIs or professors. I have valuable, specialised skills and I like to use them at work —*

> *people with my skill set are often described as 'like gold dust', but all the careers advice and pathways seem geared towards becoming a PI."*

Other respondents raised nepotism and favouritism as underacknowledged barriers — both in hiring and in access to informal mentoring and promotion support. The distinction between benign dual-hire nepotism and harmful cronyism was made by one respondent, who called for safeguards even where some forms of preferential treatment are considered acceptable.

The expectation of geographical mobility was identified as a barrier for researchers with disabilities, caring responsibilities, or healthcare dependencies, potentially forcing talented researchers out of academic careers unnecessarily. Several respondents also flagged that ECR promotion support is more readily available to those embedded in influential male professional networks, while others — particularly women and those outside dominant social circles — must navigate this largely alone.

Theme 8: Social Culture and Community

The social culture of research groups was described in varied terms: some respondents felt their immediate group was warm, inclusive and reciprocally supportive; others described isolation, cliquishness, and a social culture that is difficult for those who are introverted, neurodivergent, or have caring or dietary needs that make standard socialising inaccessible.

Social events were flagged as a specific site of exclusion for those with caring responsibilities. The monthly 'pizza and beer' event on Friday at 4pm was mentioned by multiple respondents as inaccessible for those with childcare pickups. One respondent had raised this concern but received no response. The language and framing of social events (e.g., 'beer and pizza' vs 'drinks and pizza') was also noted as subtly exclusionary.

Theme 9: Research Metrics and Assessment (DORA/CoARA)

Awareness of DORA and CoARA was notably low: 52% of respondents had not previously heard of these frameworks, and only 11% felt confident they understood what the commitments meant for their own evaluation. Many open-text responses on this topic were brief, reflecting genuine unfamiliarity rather than disengagement.

> *"I discovered those things with this survey and I think it is very important and relevant. Maybe it just escaped my attention, but I think those things are insufficiently promoted by the University."*

> *"I think it is a good thing and important — but not sure if this is necessarily a commonly held view among senior researchers in power. I worry that as ECRs we can do the right thing by DORA/CoARA and be penalised — e.g., by prioritising open access journals rather than impact factor when publishing."*

The gap between institutional commitments and lived experience of evaluation was a concern: several respondents questioned whether DORA principles are genuinely applied in hiring,

promotion, and grant decisions, or whether impact factor and journal prestige continue to dominate. The suggestion was made that the P&DR (staff review) system could be used to systematically track whether responsible metric principles are actually being applied.

Theme 10: Neurodiversity and Disability Support

The neurodiversity and disability sections received smaller response sets (9–26 respondents), but the qualitative responses were notably candid and, at times, deeply concerning. Masking — concealing neurodivergent traits to conform to neurotypical expectations — was reported as frequent or constant by the majority of neurodivergent respondents. One respondent disclosed active and repeated bullying by their boss and colleagues due to their neurotype, and reported feeling unable to safely disclose or report this.

> *"The University is all talk about neurodiversity. It always comes up in all the right places in awareness or training courses, but means nothing until people actually consider it in their interactions with others. Any training or awareness is there so that the University can proudly say it delivers it, not to improve interactions between people."*

For disabled researchers, the most consistent barrier was the pace and intensity of research — cited as a moderate or major barrier by 42%. Lack of awareness among colleagues and leadership was also prominent. Flexible working was identified as the most helpful accommodation. One respondent with ME/CFS noted that their energy constraints are fundamentally incompatible with the expectations of academic culture in many settings, limiting where they can realistically apply for roles.

A consistent thread across both neurodiversity and disability responses was the call for better, mandatory, and meaningful training for supervisors and senior colleagues — not tick-box online modules, but genuine engagement with what disability and neurodivergence mean in practice, and what managers are expected to do in response.

Edinburgh Neuroscience Afternoons

The Edinburgh Neuroscience Afternoons received mixed feedback. A significant proportion of respondents (45%) had not attended any, most commonly due to time constraints or lack of relevant content. Suggestions for future sessions included career-focused talks, bioinformatics and data management, interdisciplinary collaboration, and discussion of AI tools in research and teaching, and ways to reform dysfunctional academic cultural norms such as honorary 'guest' authorship, over-reliance on senior authority, and the disproportionate weight of institutional brand in hiring decisions.

Cross-Cutting Issues

Several issues cut across multiple themes and merit specific attention:

Caring Responsibilities

The intersection of caring responsibilities with social culture, flexible working, and career progression appeared repeatedly. Both mothers and fathers raised this, and respondents emphasised that the impact of childcare on research participation is not solely a women's issue. Event timing, travel expectations, lab retreats, and grant deadlines all emerged as specific flashpoints.

Bottom-Up Culture and Peer Relationships

One respondent highlighted that research culture surveys typically focus on top-down influences (supervisor to supervisee) but neglect the influence that those being supervised can have on their supervisors' wellbeing and professional success. This bidirectionality of research culture is underexplored.

Whistleblowing and Reporting Mechanisms

Multiple respondents flagged the absence of clear, safe, and accessible reporting mechanisms for witnessing misconduct, discrimination, or poor research practice. The concern was raised in the context of bullying, discrimination, suspected research sabotage, and nepotism. Awareness of procedures — and confidence that reporting would be taken seriously — appears low.

Teaching Load and Research Equity

One substantive response argued that research culture cannot be divorced from academic culture more broadly, and that inequitable teaching loads — where those with unsuccessful grant applications absorb heavier teaching burdens, further reducing their competitiveness for future grants — create a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion from research. This structural issue operates largely invisibly within research culture conversations.

Conclusions and Recommended Actions

The thematic analysis points to a set of actionable priorities for Edinburgh Neuroscience. These are organised by urgency and feasibility:

Immediate Actions

- Publish an explicit 'unwritten rules' guide for ECRs covering networking, promotion processes, grant navigation, and career pathways.
- Review the timing and framing of social events to ensure inclusivity for carers, those with dietary needs, and introverts.

- Communicate DORA/CoARA commitments more actively, including what they mean for individual evaluation, and ensure they are applied in practice in hiring and review processes.
- Clarify and widely publicise procedures for reporting misconduct, discrimination, and bullying, with explicit guarantees of non-retaliation.

Medium-Term Actions

- Introduce structured, mandatory training for supervisors on mental health, disability, and neurodiversity — with practical scenarios and accountability built in, not just online modules.
- Review career development frameworks to create visible, valued pathways for researchers who do not aspire to PI roles.
- Establish a working group to address the specific challenges of part-time and caring-responsibilities researchers, including contract flexibility and event access.
- Strengthen and promote workload management support, particularly for ECRs navigating open-ended writing and reading tasks.

Longer-Term Actions

- Advocate at University level for open-ended contracts and fairer promotion criteria that do not penalise career gaps or disability-related reduced output.
- Consider a culture of ‘bottom-up’ feedback, giving junior researchers structured, safe mechanisms to raise concerns about group and institutional culture.
- Evaluate and strengthen pre-registration and data-sharing support infrastructure, including guidance on repository selection and cost-reduction for data deposition.

Note on Methodology

This thematic analysis was conducted by systematic review of all open-text responses across Questions 17, 18, 24, 26, 27, 31–32, 34–37, 45, 47–48, and the qualitative components of the health, mental health, and neurodiversity sections. Themes were identified inductively — that is, drawn from the content of the responses themselves rather than imposed in advance. Where relevant, illustrative quotations are included verbatim to preserve the voice and specificity of respondents. Mention counts are approximate, as many responses touched on multiple themes simultaneously. The analysis is qualitative and interpretive; it should be read alongside the quantitative results from the same survey for a full picture.

Respondents came predominantly from the Institute for Neuroscience and Cardiovascular Research (82%), with the remainder from PPLS, Health and Social Sciences, and other units. Roles ranged from PhD students to professors, with postdoctoral researchers and PhD students forming the largest groups.