

EQUaL4C Enhancing quality and adoption of lab handbooks

by empowering local Champions to Catalyse Culture Change

Daniel Toddie-Moore¹, Ronnie Lu¹, Jennifer Crawford², Emma Hall¹

1. Institute of Genetics and Cancer, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK,
2. School of Biodiversity, One Health & Veterinary Medicine, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK



1. Why Lab Handbooks?

Research culture operates at several levels; from the wider community to individual groups. Local group culture influences research success, career development and wellbeing. Often **local research culture** is passed on **implicitly**, leading to a 'hidden curriculum' of unwritten rules, particularly disadvantaging first-generation academics, neurodivergent individuals, and interdisciplinary researchers (Backwell, 2025).

Lab handbooks are flexible documents that define a research group's culture and by clearly outlining roles, behaviours, and best practices, they offer equitable access to information (Tendler et al., 2023). By making local cultural expectations **explicit**, handbooks have the potential to disrupt the passing on of less positive research cultures both **within and outwith a traditional lab context**.

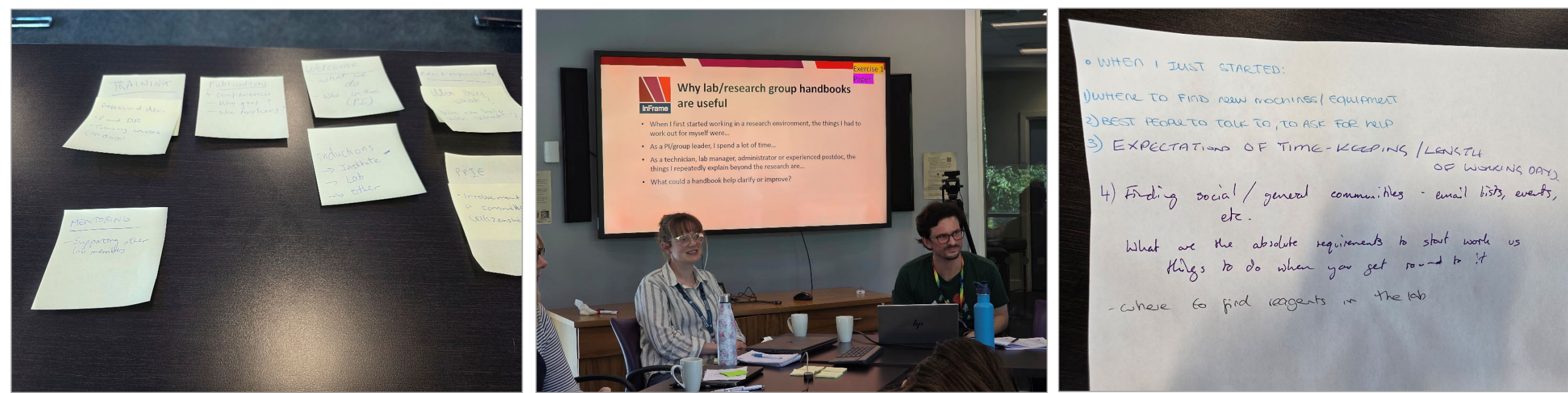
- Lab Handbooks aim to transform implicit unwritten rules to explicit, defined positive research culture.
- Lab Handbooks are useful beyond labs – **Research Group Handbooks**

3. Workshops

Aim: Promote lab/research group handbook uptake

*"So having a lab/research group handbook is the **norm** rather than the exception"*

Prof Julia Dorin, Associate Dean of Research Culture, CMVM, University of Edinburgh



"Train-the-Trainer" Lab Handbooks Champion workshop with MY Consultants

Attendees: 10 researchers/research-support staff from University of Edinburgh and St Andrews (lab handbook champions)

Covered:

- Developing or updating a lab handbook.
- Workshop facilitation – how to deliver a workshop that engages colleagues in co-creating or refining handbooks

Lab Handbook Champions then held hands-on, practical workshops at their local research institute/school to promote and facilitate lab handbook uptake: 5 held/planned so far, training >70 researchers across three institutions, receiving excellent feedback

2. Research Outline

Research Questions:

- How are expected behaviours and practices currently communicated?
- What would benefit from being made explicit?
- How do lab handbooks influence local research culture?
- What are the obstacles to implementation, and how can they be overcome?

Methods:

- Four role-specific focus groups: (technicians (n = 6), research staff (n = 5), principal investigators (PIs, n = 4) and professional-services staff (n = 4) from four institutions)
- Ten semi-structured interviews with researchers currently using lab handbooks from three institutions
- Thematic analysis is ongoing

Initial findings:

- Research culture knowledge is currently circulated through a **fragmented formal and informal** communication ecosystem
- Handbooks were most valuable at **transition points**, particularly onboarding
- Writing expectations down could support **reciprocal accountability, reflection** and more **equitable participation**
- Written guidance cannot eliminate ambiguity where expectations resist codification and require negotiation.
- A living handbook requires **active maintenance** to be effective



4. Handbook Toolkit

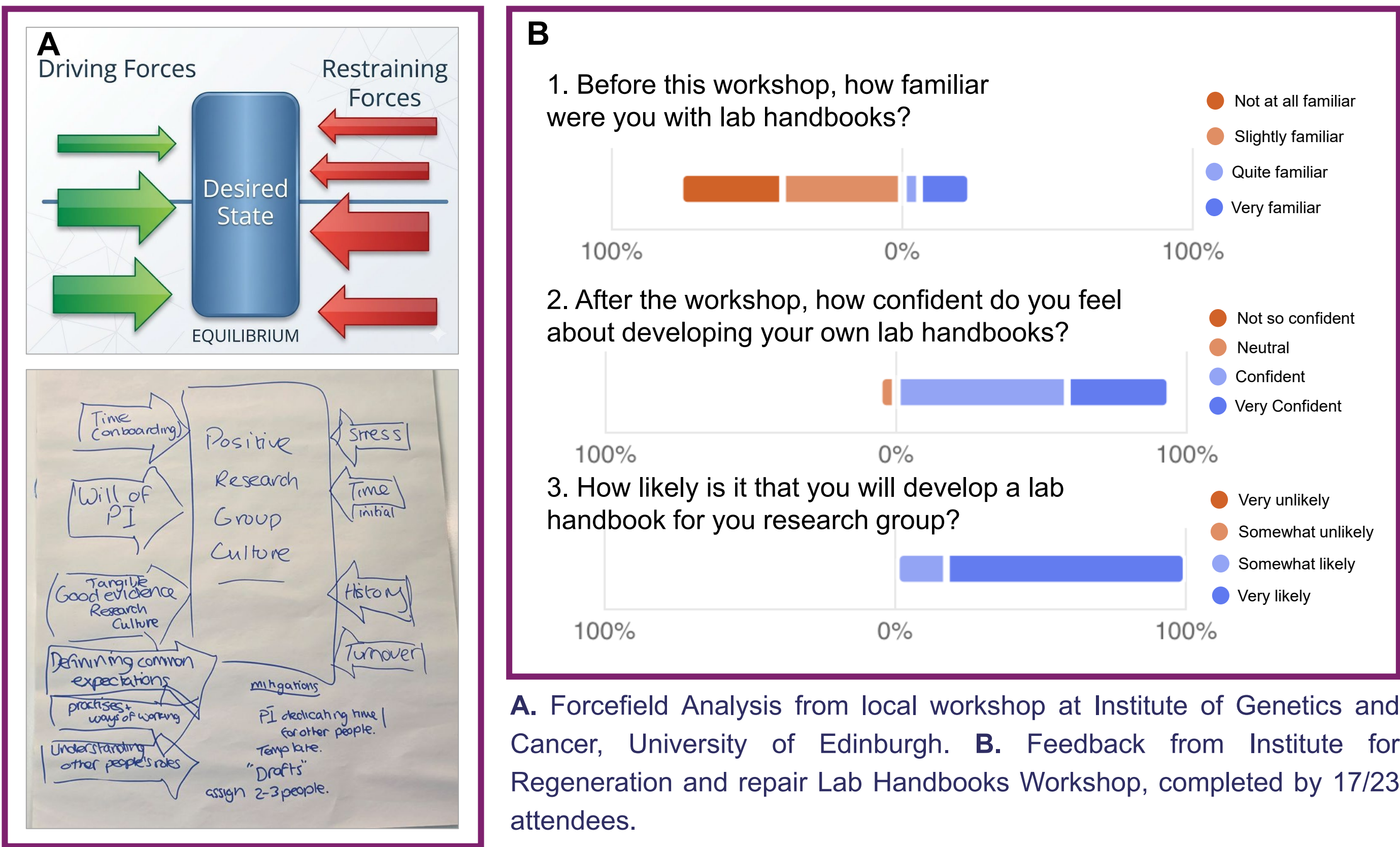
Making (Research) Group Handbooks Work
A Practical Guide for PIs, Research Group Leaders and Senior Postdocs
Ronnie Lu, Emma Hall, Daniel Toddie-Moore (University of Edinburgh)
Jen Crawford (University of Glasgow)
Robin Henderson (MY Consultants Ltd)
InFrame - Draft

Access Resources

<https://padlet.com/dtoddiemore/lab-handbooks-padlet-nya356m7jw8cmbz>

Informed by the project as a whole, together with MY Consultants we are developing a Lab Handbooks Toolkit consisting of:

- Links to existing handbook templates
- Guidance on developing and maintaining lab handbooks
- Tips for change management
- Link to our publication (watch this space...)



References

Benjamin C Tendler, Maddie Welland, Karla L Miller, The WIN Handbook Team (2023) Research Culture: Why every lab needs a handbook eLife 12:e88853 <https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.88853>
Backwell, L Visibilising the invisible: towards an inclusive Hidden Curriculum blog url: <https://drhiddencurriculum.wordpress.com/2025/04/17/visibilising-the-invisible-towards-an-inclusive-hidden-curriculum/> Accessed 08 May 2025.