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Pride, Prejudice and Provocations: building inclusive research cultures

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Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

Background. The framework and principles for the next UK wide Research Excellence Framework (REF) have been published. The new People, Culture and Environment component forms 25% of the whole and is the focus of this paper.

Aim The research environment is a complex eco-system that is vital for nurturing excellence, vitality and sustainability. This paper considers pride and prejudice as barriers to inclusivity in research cultures. It aims to inform and inspire research leaders to prepare living and dynamic research strategies that prioritise inclusivity in talent management and succession.

Discussion and conclusion. The discussion draws on the evidence of disadvantage, personal knowledge and experience as a research leader, insights from challenging the status quo, as a former member of REF 2021 Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel. It sets out provocations, which will shape an agenda for promoting inclusive research cultures to ensure organisational readiness for REF 2029.

Full paper

Introduction

The evaluation of research quality is a feature of most advanced higher education systems. Research is central to notions of prestige in academic life and drives competitive advantage and university reputations (Blakemore 2016). Evaluation methods of judging research quality vary internationally and are the subject of debate, for example how to improve current systems and make them work for everyone. In the United Kingdom there is increasing recognition that successful research depends on developing the right culture and equality of opportunity, which enables researchers to thrive and do their best work. This paper focuses on how UK universities can promote inclusivity in readiness for the next REF cycle.

Pride and Prejudice

While there is a well-deserved pride in the strength and excellence of research across the UK, the UK Research Councils rightly want to ensure that all available research talent is developed in order to benefit the economy, society and the public. The UKRI EDI Strategy (2023) sets out four principles for growth and change: diversity, connectivity, resilience and engagement. These are set out as fundamental for a high-quality research system that is "by everyone for everyone". However, despite pride in the ambition, the reality often reveals prejudice and disadvantage. If we take funding for fellowships as an example, although the gender gap has narrowed in recent years, with half of fellowships awarded to women, there remain stark and stubborn disparities for people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and for people with a disability (NIHR 2022). There is uncomfortable evidence of barriers facing researcher development, progression and promotion of colleagues from global majorities such as in doctoral training, postdoctoral research and leadership development.

In this paper, I acknowledge the issues of pride and prejudice that emerge from the evidence on disadvantage and specifically ask how inclusivity in research cultures may enable opportunities, or unintentionally close barriers to staff with protected characteristics (for example gender, race, disability, those with long term health conditions, caring responsibilities)? Thirdly, I set out some provocations to stimulate a pathway to change. These will be fleshed out in the presentation.

1. Developing talent and succession planning

Provocation: What quick and longer-term change can leaders introduce to ensure the culture and environment supports a development pipeline for researchers from groups with protected characteristics eg from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. This might be bridging funding, bespoke fellowships, talent management, support for writing, leadership development mentorship etc.

2. Who judges research quality in the REF?

Provocation: leaders should think strategically, inclusively and proactively about preparing and positioning the next generation of academic leaders for roles in research assessment and peer review by identifying opportunities to build esteem and develop personal impact by arranging support and milestones for learning (eg as observers on panels). As these things take time, they should start now.

3. Bringing the outside in

Provocation – *What more should leaders and universities do to integrate researchers, senior leaders and public representatives into research teams, establishing funded fractional contracts and establish progression pathways for these individuals?*

4. Using data for improvement

Provocation – *for REF 2029, research activity in universities must focus on demonstrating cultural change through data and evidence. Leaders should focus on improvements for all*

groups with protected characteristics, challenge themselves by being critically reflective and avoid well meaning, descriptive, aspirational sound bites. Ask questions like what do we want to do? What can we do? What are the measures that will tell us what difference we are making and over what timescale? How is our inclusive research culture creating benefit for patients, families and the healthcare system?

Discussion and conclusion

The paper will conclude with some personal reflections on the REF as a powerful lever for change. Universities will comply and dance to its tune, because success influences league table position in the competition for students, funding, reputation and prestige. Therefore, as the next REF prioritises research culture it gives the higher education sector a real incentive to challenge pride and prejudice and accelerate activity towards creating more equal environments.

References

References

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