Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding

Barriers and Delivering Change

Executive Summary

Authors: Jennifer Gladstone | Lisa Schipper | Thandiwe Hara-Msulira | Tanita Casci

Project Team: Kirsty Allen | Haley Carter | Jennifer Gladstone | Thandiwe Hara-Msulira
Zoë Lee | Jennifer Lockie | Lisa Schipper

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Background

A successful career in UK academic research currently depends on several key elements, including securing a post, publishing research, and securing research funding. These elements are interdependent, with success in one facilitating success in another. A growing body of data has exposed inequalities in the research funding awarded to different groups of researchers: women, racially minoritised, and/or disabled researchers[1], and, despite more limited data, researchers who are LGBTQIA+[2]. For example, the success rate for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic applicants to Wellcome Trust is 6% lower than that for White applicants[3], with UKRI data showing that aggregated ethnicity data masks deeper problems for researchers racialised to certain ethnic groups (particularly Black applicants)[4]. For UKRI, the success rate by value for disabled applicants is 7% lower than that for non-disabled applicants[5].

This study explores the barriers to securing research funding that these groups experience, and proposes practical actions for change. The findings and recommendations are based on a detailed analysis of a sample of UK funding schemes, a review of international literature on equality and business practice, supported by sector-wide discussions with colleagues with expertise in EDI, and focus groups and interviews with individuals from the target groups within the University of Oxford.

Achieving an equitable and inclusive funding system requires coordination across all parts of the sector, including universities, academic departments, funders, academic societies, academic publishers, and individuals. Although some inputs of the study are domain-specific or career-specific, the recommendations represent good practice that can be applied to organisations globally.

1.2 Findings

Researchers in marginalised groups face systemic barriers to securing research funding that are created and controlled by funders and universities. The following specific barriers were identified:

- Barriers to access, including inaccessibility of documentation and systems, and requirements (eg around deadlines and eligibility) that exclude researchers in marginalised groups;

- Disparities in the availability of information, eg about opportunities and selection criteria, due to conversations being held in closed groups, access to which is typically based on existing relationships;

- Vulnerability to bias of both schemes and decision-making;

- Failure to account for structural inequality in decision-making;

- Assessment against a career trajectory and characteristics unrelated to research quality;

- The scale, importance, and low availability of support at all stages of the funding cycle;

- Limited understanding of EDI issues by decision-makers; and

- Increased burdens on researchers in marginalised groups.

Researchers experience these themes as cycles of inequality, both within the research funding system and more widely in the research ecosystem, leading to ever-increasing impacts on individual careers, and contributing to the lack of diversity evident at senior levels of academia.

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1 UKRI, 2021; UKRI, 2021; Wellcome Trust, 2021
2 (Boustani & Taylor, 2020)
3 (Wellcome Trust, 2021)
4 (UKRI, 2021)
5 (UKRI, 2021)

1.3 Recommendations

The systemic nature of the lack of equity requires a systematic, coordinated approach from universities and funders, and the support and engagement of individual participants in the system. The recommendations in this report are intended as a prompt to enable universities, funders, and other organisations to reflect on how they may redress disparities and improve equity. Stakeholder feedback has highlighted the importance of review and accountability, and, critically, of co-production with researchers in marginalised groups. Recommendations are summarised in the table below, and stratified into those that may be readily implemented, those that require targeted effort, and those that may require higher levels of effort, providing opportunity for sector-wide collaboration.

Many universities operate internal funding schemes, and the recommendations for funders apply equally to these schemes as to external funders.

FOUNDATIONAL, OR LEGALLY REQUIRED

Universities	Funders
■ Collect data on any disparity in the characteristics of research funding applicants; ■ Provide adjustments and support, where required, for applying for research funding and carrying out research; ■ Ensure transparency, inclusivity, and accessibility of all opportunities, and events, and policies (eg on eligibility); and ■ Ensure that academic leaders, including PIs, are equipped and supported to deliver the highest standards of inclusive leadership.	■ Adapt documentation, systems, processes, requirements, and events to ensure that they are fully accessible and inclusive; ■ Adapt research funding information to ensure universal availability and access, and that they are sufficient for all applicants; ■ Ensure that community consultations are fully accessible, inclusive, and transparent, so that the outcomes benefit from a diverse range of voices; and ■ Use open recruitment for selecting reviewers and/or members of Peer Review Colleges.

REQUIRES TARGETED EFFORT

Universities	Funders
■ Support researchers to develop effective networks, including mentoring and sponsorship; ■ Provide research funding guidance and support targeted to the needs of researchers in marginalised groups; ■ Ensure that criteria and processes for internal selection are inclusive and fair, and are as simple and flexible as possible; ■ In decision-making at all stages, take steps to prevent bias and to account for the impact of structural inequality; and ■ Create research funding opportunities targeted at researchers in marginalised groups.	■ Minimise complexity (including the amount of support required) and increase flexibility of selection processes; ■ Rebalance assessment from past achievement towards potential to deliver the project, valuing a broader set of contributions to research; ■ Take steps to prevent bias from impacting decision-making, including minimising ambiguity in scoring systems, and checks to ensure that judgments adhere closely to assessment criteria; ■ Incorporate accounting for structural inequality into review and assessment; ■ Review policies that prevent submissions to address disproportionate impact on marginalised researchers; ■ Fund a broad range of accessibility project costs; and ■ Create research funding opportunities targeted at researchers in marginalised groups.

HIGHER EFFORT, PROVIDING OPPORTUNITY FOR SECTOR-WIDE COLLABORATION

Universities	Funders
■ Incorporate considerations around structural inequality in career development reviews for researchers in marginalised groups;	■ Develop a range of inclusive and accessible tools and events to support researchers with networking, including both online and in-person, text and oral;
■ Establish and implement Universal Design principles specific to application processes and requirements for research funding schemes;	■ Establish and implement Universal Design principles specific to application processes and requirements for research funding schemes;
■ Ensure that staff, including researchers, are empowered to recognise their own biases, to understand the impact of diverse circumstances and the impact of structural inequality, and to implement this within their role(s); and	■ Ensure that those involved in the decision-making process are empowered to recognise their own biases, to understand the impact of diverse circumstances, to understand the impact of structural inequality, and to implement this within their role(s); and
■ Provide support for researchers who suffer mental and emotional consequences from discrimination.	■ Trial novel mechanisms for funding, such as hybrid lottery systems and anonymisation.

1.4 Conclusion

Change will take time and commitment from all organisations, but should deliver a more equitable and inclusive research funding system, as exhibited in a vignette in section 7.

The authors' hope is that this study will prompt senior managers at relevant organisations to examine their policies and processes and commit to collaborative actions appropriate for their context and transparent accountability for progress.