UKRI EDI Strategy – GW4 consultation response

Since 2013, GW4 Alliance has brought together the research-intensive universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff, and Exeter to drive and inspire collaborative research, development, and innovation. We establish and support new collaborative ways of working that generate multifaceted and innovative answers to major societal and governmental challenges and priorities. GW4 is unique among regional alliances for its institution-funded, dedicated programme of support for postgraduate researchers, early career researchers and technical staff. We deliver sector-leading professional development programmes that cross career stages, job families, and disciplinary silos to support our talented people.

To that end, our expertise and activities speak directly to the UKRI *Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy*, which is currently out for consultation. To put it simply, we challenge UKRI to drive sector change immediately. The sector needs to stop discussing the need for change and start implementing it. We need to work in an agile manner, testing solutions, disseminating what works across higher education institutions, research institutes and beyond, while being brave enough to jettison ideas that prove ineffective.

GW4 can work in partnership with UKRI to implement systematic and structural change drawing on our extensive experience of delivering cross-institutional activities and matching it to UKRI's ability to fund innovative programmes and drive and share best practice.

Where we see value and needed improvement in UKRI's EDI Strategy

This strategy provides much needed leadership from UKRI to address the pervasive EDI challenges in research and innovation and we welcome the ambition and boldness that UKRI has offered to tackle systematic and structural cultural change.

Still, we feel there are areas for improvement. Feedback from staff networks across GW4 universities has highlighted a lack of clarity in the main objectives of the strategy. Partly this is due to the breadth of the objectives, but also due to the lack of discussion about what challenges the objectives are trying to address. Clarifying the intended outcomes of the objectives and mapping them against the cornerstones for change would create an overall framework for the strategy that could be more easily understood and acted upon across the sector. There is an excellent example of such a framework in the recently published *UKRI Strategy 2022-2027: Transforming tomorrow together* demonstrating how the strategy all fits together (p. 50), which could be used as a template for the EDI strategy.

We also encourage UKRI to embed their EDI aims into the *UKRI Strategy 2022-2027*, which emphasises 'Diversity' as one of its organising principles for change. However, 'Diversity' in UKRI's five-year strategy diverges from its meaning in the EDI strategy and seems to concern diversity of career paths rather than diversity of identities and backgrounds. While we do need to better identify and support the ability of researchers to move freely across academia, industry, and the public sector, which is a concern also identified in the Department of Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) *Research & Development People and Culture Strategy*, the fact that the UKRI corporate strategy avoids directly engaging with the challenges of diversifying the research and innovation workforce is an unfortunate omission and lost opportunity. Bringing the two UKRI strategies into alignment would confirm to the sector that UKRI is genuinely committed to enabling change and that it has a clear roadmap to deliver on its promises now and over the next five years.

To develop this framework and roadmap, the 'cornerstones for change' provide a useful starting point for activities. UKRI's willingness to interrogate internal recruitment practices to ensure it has the diversity of people needed to be an excellent organisation is commendable. Considering that UKRI is the largest funder of UK research, ensuring that the staff and senior leadership who manage research funding are themselves

diverse is crucial and demonstrates a willingness to lead by example. If learning from these activities was then collated and implemented across the sector, we could drive further change.

How UKRI deploys its funding mechanisms to incentivise change needs attention as well. We appreciate UKRI's commitment to embed EDI in its approaches to allocating funding, but also notice that there have been recent examples of questionable practice. While the Research England Enhancing Research Culture Funds had admirable aims, the spend timescales meant that institutions had to prioritise existing activities. Not only did this limit innovation, but also disadvantaged those with caring commitments or part-time working patterns from engaging with this opportunity. Future calls need to allow for longer development time to support innovative practices and new collaborations as well as include those who cannot or should not be expected to work to such short timescales.

The acknowledgement that cultural change needs to happen in partnership with individuals, communities, and organisations is applauded. There are sector-leading practices happening within our institutions, such as the University of Bristol's Be More Empowered (BME) for Success programme or the EDI Deep Dives initiative run with staff EDI networks at the University of Exeter. These activities need to be disseminated across the sector but there is currently no route to enable this.

Clearly, UKRI has a role to play in building an evidence-base to justify activity. To that end, we welcome the importance placed in UKRI's EDI strategy being data-led and we hope this will include support in addressing the challenges of collecting EDI data, especially in regards to self-reporting. There are existing challenges across the sector in capturing this data, for example, the low-reporting on sexuality by international students or socioeconomic diversity that is not routinely captured. Greater promotion from UKRI on the value of self-reporting, alongside mechanisms to ensure data confidentiality, has the power to transform this from a tick-box exercise to one that could provide more information needed to drive systematic change.

This emphasis on being data-led will also only catalyse change if it is open and shared. What is missing from UKRI's intention is a sense of how accessible this information will be and how it will be disseminated across the sector. Baseline measures for comparing institutional data and sharing examples of local best practice beyond UKRI are both necessary to enable systematic change. We encourage UKRI, therefore, to demonstrate leadership by opening its evidence-base and acting as a repository of best-practice.

Where GW4 can work in partnership with UKRI

GW4 can work collaboratively with UKRI to drive change now. We have extensive experience convening key academic and professional services leads from across the four institutions to share practice and coordinate activities at a regional level. The GW4 PGR Policy Forum began in April 2020 as a mechanism to coordinate GW4 responses to the UKRI Covid extension scheme for DTE students and has continued as a forum to discuss PGR strategy, share best practice and work in collaboration to coordinate PGR activities across GW4. Our recent activities to convene EDI-leads from across the GW4 universities will offer a mechanism to harness the wealth of expertise within our institutions and deploy that knowledge to effect change.

As a provider of professional development programmes, GW4 also offers examples of sector-leading best practice that can be shared via UKRI's evidence base. Since 2017, GW4 Crucible, a leadership development programme for early career researchers across the four universities, has created opportunities for ECRs to develop their collaborative and interdisciplinary skills. In 2021, the University of Bristol launched Elevate in partnership with the universities of Bath, Cardiff, and Exeter, while the University of West of England, Bristol joined in 2022. The leadership development programme offers a unique opportunity for Black, Asian and minority ethnic academic and professional services staff (who identify as female) to reflect, explore and grow through connecting and building solidarity together.

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In 2022, GW4 successfully bid to lead a consortium of nine universities to deliver a British Academy Early Career Researcher Network in the South West. The mixture of GW4 research intensive universities together with five post-92 teaching-led universities (Bath Spa, Bournemouth, Gloucestershire, Plymouth, UWE) has created a unique opportunity to address socio-economic challenges by sharing resources and levelling up researcher experience across the region.

We can engage these mechanisms to test practices and share solutions. With the support of UKRI we can ensure that we move from talking about change, or fixating on gathering evidence, to implementing solutions. To do so, we need UKRI to lead and create the conditions and incentives that will foster change so that both top-down and bottom-up activities work together to drive forward promises of systematic and structural change.

Conclusion

Collaboration is at the heart of GW4. We know that we have the greatest chance of enacting change if we work in partnership with UKRI and other sector leaders. We encourage UKRI to reflect on the challenges made above, and particularly, consider how it can lead to drive change now. We recommend UKRI to invest in the development of the sector evidence base through the deployment of funding mechanisms like the Research England Development (RED) Fund, but with a recognition that timescales need to allow institutions to experiment, innovate, evaluate, and iterate. We advance the belief that UKRI needs to harness the wealth of local practice and champion its dissemination across the sector. We are eager to drive forward this agenda for change together with UKRI.