



Sent by email: addy@ladders4action.org

9 September 2021

Response to open letter

Dear Dr Addy Adelaine, Dr Chisomo Kalinga, Dr Furaha Asani, Dr Ruth Ngozika Agbakoba, Natasha Smith, Dr Olumide Adisa, Janine Francois, Dr Michelle King-Okoye, Paulette Williams, Dr Ruby Zelzer,

Thank you for your open letter and for your commitment to on-going engagement, which has been insightful and has helped us to understand how best to respond to the issues raised. These conversations, as well as discussions with others across multiple sectors, have helped us to continue to develop and shape our actions and approaches, and to reflect critically on our systems, processes and ways of working. We decided to delay publishing an open response to the letter during this active and ongoing dialogue. As a result, our public response has taken much longer than is desirable and we apologise for any negative consequences of our decision. We welcome engagement and dialogue, which informs our ambitions for a thriving and inclusive research and innovation system and helps us to challenge ourselves, and the sector, to make change.

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are essential for a creative, collaborative, dynamic research and innovation system. We recognise we have a lot more to do to tackle the long-standing and pervasive structural and systemic inequalities that are holding back the full potential of the UK's research and innovation endeavour.

We have published examples of our work to increase participation and address under-representation. This programme of work continues, and we remain committed to developing solutions, trialling interventions and creating inclusive participatory and accountability structures. We also continue to work in partnership with the government and the sector to create more inclusive research and innovation environments. We have recently set out some of our near-term actions in response to the Government's People and Culture Strategy¹ and work is in progress on UKRI's EDI strategy, which we will publish in late Autumn 2021.

Of particular relevance to the concerns you have raised in your open letter and in subsequent discussions with us, we will be undertaking an end-to-end review of peer review, exploring the principles, policies and processes that underpin it. The community is impatient for change, as am I, but this is a significant body of work that will take time, not least because of the vital importance of ensuring that all voices are heard. The research and innovation system is large and complex with many different interacting issues underlying the structural and systemic inequalities within it. I want the changes we make to be effective, and to minimise the risk of unintended negative consequences. This will require not only deep consultation but piloting of interventions, such as the recent use of an anonymous-applicant review stage in the EPSRC New Horizons funding opportunity.

¹ [UKRI welcomes government's R&D People and Culture Strategy – UKRI](#)



Below I respond to the recommendations for action in the open letter.

1. Transparency in peer review

The letter calls for UKRI to be transparent and publish the panellists and selection criteria involved in forthcoming research call assessment. Information about our funding opportunities, including how applications will be assessed is published on our website². Information about how we make peer review decisions is also available³.

We agree that transparent criteria are important, and these should not be too restrictive or they risk crushing the very diversity we are seeking to support. UKRI, in partnership with National Research Foundation, UK Forum for Responsible Research Metrics and the Global Research Council, has published a report on Responsible Research Assessment that encourages the adoption principles to create more inclusive assessment and support a diverse research culture⁴

Following discussion with other funders, we are introducing a narrative style CV, the Résumé for Researchers and Innovators, as our standard CV format. This will allow applicants to set out their contributions to the research and innovation system in a way that does not restrict them to prescribed lists that do not capture the full range of relevant contributions, or value diverse career paths.

We do not currently uniformly publish information about the composition of our assessment panels. There is some debate in the community about whether publishing the names of panel members before the panel meeting is good practice, since it can open panel members to lobbying. This is an issue we are keen to explore and we acknowledge and welcome this challenge to be more transparent in our decision making.

2. Collection and publication of equality data

The letter calls for UKRI consistently to collect equality data without exception and to publish these data in a manner that allows for disaggregated consideration of race, ethnicity and other protected characteristics. We are responding here to both the near-term and longer-term recommendations set out in the letter.

The failure to collect EDI data for early rounds of our rapid COVID calls was a failing for which I sincerely apologise. We have learned from this mistake.

We routinely collect and publish EDI data for principal investigator (PI) and co-investigator grant applicants and recipients, fellowship applicants and awardees, and PhD studentship starts. There are four protected characteristics in the data set: age, disability, ethnicity, and gender.

Harmonised diversity data for all seven UKRI disciplinary research councils are published annually⁵. We have also published disaggregated ethnicity category data for UKRI funding applicants and recipients⁶ and will publish the data to include the financial year 2019-2020 in Autumn 2021. These

² [Opportunities – UKRI](#)

³ [How we make decisions – UKRI](#)

⁴ [UKRI publishes new report on responsible research assessment – UKRI](#)

⁵ [UKRI-300321-DiversityResultsForUKRIFundingData2014-20.pdf](#)

⁶ [UKRI-15122020-DetailedEthnicityAnalysisOfFundingApplicantsAndAwardees2014-15to2018-19.pdf](#)



disaggregated data make clear the under representation of Black people among applicants, and even greater under representation among awardees.

We are committed to expanding our data collection and analytical capabilities to understand better the likely causes underpinning these inequalities, where interventions are needed, and to monitor the effectiveness of these interventions. With the development of the new Funding Service⁷, we are working to improve our collection of diversity data. We are piloting this through the AHRC New Generation Thinkers 2022 Opportunity⁸. We will continue to develop our EDI data collection, building on the recent ONS census questions and through our Funding Service user research. We are also learning from data leaders, such as the ONS Inclusive Data Taskforce, about additional improvements in analysis. We also note that this is not just about collecting information but using data to harness and drive change and decision-making.

We recognise the importance of collecting and publishing our data to help our understanding of inequalities in the research and innovation system, to improve transparency, and provide analysis and insight for our sector. We continue to develop our data capabilities to understand whom we fund and how we fund. We acknowledge that there is not only more work for us to do, we also need to work together as a whole sector. UKRI is talking with other public bodies about our disaggregated dataset and working to encourage more reporting and analysis across the sector. We are keen to work with others on how best to do this sensitively and with the utmost care of the data.

3. Management of conflicts of interest

The letter asks for UKRI to take action to remove any panellist from the call assessment process if they are also associated with applications in that specific call.

The management of conflicts of interest is part of the process of peer review, and we ask assessors to identify if they have an interest that may, or may be perceived to, influence their decision making. The conflict of interest may be managed by excluding the individual from the assessment of any application with which they have a conflict of interest, or from the entire assessment process. While we acknowledge the call for change, this is a challenging area because apparently simple rules can lead to perverse outcomes. For example, it is important that we improve the participation of under-represented groups on assessment panels. Particularly in specialist calls, this can limit the selection of panel members from minoritised and marginalised communities with appropriate expertise to very small numbers of people. Asking these individuals to forgo applying for funding in calls in their specific area to serve as assessors may have significant impacts and the unintended consequence of potentially reinforcing inequalities in the system in terms of awardees. However, these situations are likely to be exceptional, and we recognise the need to develop a clear and transparent policy in this area as part of our review of peer review.

Our overarching aim remains to achieve consistently high standards of integrity, underpinned by the Seven Principles of Public Life, in our assessment and decision-making processes. Reviewing and

⁷ [Do you have a UKRI Funding Service account? - UKRI Funding Service](#)

⁸ [Develop programme ideas with the BBC: New Generation Thinkers – UKRI](#)



examining the impact of our own processes and policies is an important element of our work to drive change in research and innovation, and we are currently reviewing our conflicts of interest policy⁹.

4. Safeguarding

The letter recommends that UKRI introduces safeguards so that Black academics and other marginalised individuals can speak freely about their concerns and the challenges they face without concern for retribution or discrimination in future applications.

We recognise that the injustices and inequalities that exist throughout the research and innovation system can result in individuals and whole communities being and feeling excluded and vulnerable. We are undertaking work to create conditions for enabling equitable and safe dialogues. This requires a distinct and ethical approach – not only for UKRI, but for the whole sector, if we are to create and build trust. We are and will continue to work with our communities to co-create principles for equitable engagement and dialogue, and we expect to announce more about this work in Autumn 2021.

5. Equity in decision making power

The letter asks that UKRI commits to ensuring equity in decision making power, especially when it comes to the allocation of funding.

We are committed to increasing the representation of Black and other under-represented communities throughout our work, including in our funding and assessment processes. We continue to review our policies and practices to support expert assessment that recognises a diversity of ideas and knowledge generation and drives fairness and creativity in the process. To achieve this our councils continue to invite participation from a wider range of people from across the sector into our expert review process, and we continue to seek greater representation and diversity from across the research and innovation system. For example, councils have recently undertaken work to increase diversity and representation and to explore barriers to participation that will help inform the ongoing development of our approaches. This work includes the NERC Collaborative Inclusivity Roundtable series¹⁰, which focussed on listening and valuing lived experience, sharing best practice and identifying actions to improve equity, diversity and inclusion in the environmental sciences; and EPSRC's race equality surveys¹¹ and university dialogue that will be used to inform actions towards reducing barriers identified related to EPSRC opportunities and processes. A report on the NERC roundtable series was published in August 2021 and the outcomes of the EPSRC surveys and proposals for action will be shared firstly with EPSRC's Council in December 2021, and then publicly.

6. Transforming the research and innovation system

The letter calls for UKRI to focus on and direct structural change for Black, Asian, indigenous, women, disabled, impoverished, LGBTQI+ and other minoritised and marginalised communities that involves researchers from these communities and clear steps to ensure that culture change happens at institutions that hold UKRI funding.

⁹ [Conflicts of interests – UKRI](#)

¹⁰ [NERC publishes Collaborative Inclusivity summary report – UKRI](#)

¹¹ [Ethnicity and race equality in our portfolio - EPSRC website \(ukri.org\)](#)



UKRI was formed in 2018, bringing together its 9 constituent parts, all of whom have a wealth of experience of the EDI issues most relevant to their particular stakeholder communities. We have a unique opportunity to pool this knowledge and expertise, learning from what has worked and what has not, and to reach across the whole system to foster an inclusive, equitable culture.

We continue to develop actions to drive inclusivity in our funding systems and processes. Our approach is to shift research culture to a more positive and inclusive model, rather than trying to eliminate individual biases. We recognise that this will take time, a variety of interventions and actions, and will need contributions from all parts of the research and innovation system. Our actions include our work to increase representation and participation, target funding to address inequalities, and our work to change our structures and processes, ensuring that we incentivise the culture change that is so important for successful research and innovation. Examples of our actions are available on our website¹² and we will update this information in Autumn 2021.

Although UKRI can influence culture change in institutions, and we acknowledge our responsibility and stewardship role in achieving this, we cannot do this alone. We welcome the publication of the government's People and Culture Strategy and its call for the whole sector to create research and innovation cultures that are inclusive and attract, retain, develop and value a full diversity of people.

Our goal remains to work collaboratively to transform the sector. We welcome the commitment that the authors of this letter and many other stakeholders have shown to challenging us to achieve this transformation. We need to ensure that everything we do recognises and supports a diversity of people, ideas and approaches. UKRI will continue to take action and forge the partnerships needed to catalyse change and co-create a thriving, inclusive research and innovation system.

To summarise the key near-term actions in this response, we will:

- Publish the UKRI EDI strategy in late Autumn 2021
- Publish disaggregated EDI application and award data for 19-20 in Autumn 2021
- Update our website with examples of our action to address under-representation – Autumn 2021
- Share information about developing principles for equitable engagement – Autumn 2021
- Share the EPSRC survey outcomes with the EPSRC Council – December 2021, and then publicly in Spring 2022

We will also conduct an end to end review of peer review, as part of our commitments in the People and Culture Strategy¹³.

¹² [Addressing under-representation and active participation – UKRI](#)

¹³ [R&D People and Culture Strategy \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)



**UK Research
and Innovation**

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Ottoline Leyser', enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser

Chief Executive, UK Research and Innovation