

Consultation on the draft UKRI Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

1. Introduction

1. The Microbiology Society is a membership charity for scientists interested in microbes, their effects and their practical uses. It is one of the largest microbiology societies in Europe with a worldwide membership based in universities, industry, hospitals, research institutes and schools. Our members have a unique depth and breadth of knowledge about the discipline. The Microbiology Society's role is to help unlock and harness the potential of that knowledge.
2. We welcome the opportunity to share our thoughts on the UKRI's draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy. We note that our submission reflects the views expressed by ten members of the Microbiology Society who have responded to our call for input. Most respondents shared similar perspectives on the UKRI's current approach to EDI and on the ambitions highlighted in the draft strategy.

2. Ambition

2.1 Is the EDI strategy's proposed ambition clear? If not, please provide brief details on what was unclear.

3. While a clear sense of enthusiasm comes across when reading the draft strategy, we are unsure about what it actually proposes and regret that phrases such as, 'we will be open, transparent, and inclusive in our approaches', are not accompanied by tangible plans and measurable outcomes.

"I'm not sure it's clear to me that much of this strategy is about driving real change as opposed to giving the impression that EDI is a serious part of the UKRI agenda." – Microbiology Society member.

"I found it hard to understand how change will be demonstrated by UKRI [...]. I'm unsure what it proposes." – Microbiology Society member.

2.2 What do you like most about the EDI strategy's proposed ambition?

4. We commend the proposed ambition and note that it is a step forward, showing UKRI's commitment towards embedding EDI in its organisation.
5. We also welcome the opportunity to work with UKRI in addressing inequalities in the current system and ensuring that all researchers feel valued, respected and supported to develop their talents to the full.

2.3 How do you think the EDI strategy's proposed ambition could be improved? Are there any significant gaps?

6. In its current draft, the strategy does not set out a truly revolutionary vision to make the sector more equitable overall. In order to achieve 'a research and innovation system by everyone, for everyone', UKRI must play a key role in developing new policies that enact real change. We recognise that UKRI 'does not hold all of the levers for change', however, institutions are unlikely to embed change without key principles set out by UKRI.

"What disappointed me about this strategy is that UKRI didn't really acknowledge or take responsibility for driving the change that is needed. The approach seems to be to push much of the onus on institutions and stakeholders." – Microbiology Society member.

7. The current academic research system is inherently competitive and, without clear policies and incentives from funding bodies to promote the implementation of EDI across institutes, progress will be stalled. Rather than focusing on a call to action for the sector, we urge UKRI to take further responsibility to widen access to opportunities and reward diversity of thoughts, people and ideas in its proposed ambition.

"Throughout the document, the networks that have been established are clear, but how these networks will be feasibly leveraged in such a way that doesn't entirely shift the burden of responsibility is not clear." – Microbiology Society member.

"A lot of the planned actions are actually about reforming UKRI as an institution (for their employees) rather than UKRI using its position to improve the sector, which is I think what people would like to see." – Microbiology Society member.

8. While we recognise that the draft 'does not attempt to set out in detail all the actions [UKRI] will take to bring about change', we regret not seeing concrete approaches to implement the strategy, as well plans and metrics for monitoring and evaluation purposes.

"This consultation (albeit a draft) requires ring-fenced money to ensure that the objects and aims (the cornerstones) are met correctly so that there is meaningful and permanent change." – Microbiology Society member.

"I would have preferred to see more concrete action plans, rather than a 'call to action' from UKRI stakeholders." – Microbiology Society member.

3. Our cornerstones for change

3.1 Thinking about UKRI today, how well is UKRI exhibiting the behaviours set out in the cornerstones?

9. *"UKRI is an enclosed, elitist academy which appears to use reviewers and panels who show strong elements of unconscious or conscious bias. UKRI are not exhibiting the inclusive behaviours set out in the cornerstones."* – Microbiology Society member.

Cornerstone 1: We will foster an inclusive, equitable, just and diverse research and innovation system by championing and focusing on systemic and structural change.

Disagree (tick box)

10. Despite a few examples of good practices, our members strongly expressed that UKRI currently fails at fostering an inclusive, equitable, just and diverse research and innovation system. Below, we highlight key areas where issues have been raised:
11. **The grant and fellowship review processes:** The grant and fellowship review processes are currently viewed as being unfair and biased, with a sense that researchers are only awarded grants if they know a panel member, belong to an already successful UKRI-funded lab or work at a Russell Group University. Our members expressed that the existing policies enable the status quo to be maintained, without opportunities for diverse ideas or people to be valued. In addition, they highlighted that there is a lack of sensitivity when it comes to both questioning and feedback, which disproportionately affects minority groups as they are held to a higher bar of excellence. Finally, the lack of diverse representation on panels made applicants feel isolated and less likely to be awarded grants or fellowships.
12. **Recognising barriers to opportunities:** Our members reported that there is currently a lack of understanding and recognition of the systemic barriers that underrepresented groups face. For example, while UKRI have announced that they will consider the impact of COVID-19 on individual researchers, one member explained that their experience from sitting on funding panels is that applicants still need to provide a significant amount of data which is disadvantaging women (who were often burdened disproportionately with childcare during the pandemic), early career researchers, and many other under-represented groups.
13. **Lack of long-term initiatives:** While UKRI has implemented initiatives aimed at improving racial diversity in the sector, such as modifying its Future Leaders Fellowship scheme to ensure that applicants are treated equitably and that due allowance is made for diversity issues, many initiatives come across as reactionary, responding to external pressures rather than aiming to create structural and systemic change.

Cornerstone 2: We will be open, transparent, and inclusive in our approaches by listening, influencing and working in partnership.

Disagree (tick box)

14. Our members highlighted the grant and fellowship review processes, in particular, as ‘the opposite of open, transparent or inclusive’.

“The reviewers are often condescending. Some have limited experience in the areas for which they review applications. Being on the receiving end of such review responses can really damage the confidence of certain researchers, especially those who are from a minority background and have no support.” – Microbiology Society member.
15. While we encourage UKRI to work in partnership on EDI matters, we strongly recommend that these collaborations extend to a variety of institutions and go beyond Russell Group Universities.

“It seems as though UKRI reviewers and panels appear to favour the Russell Group in what I can only describe as misplaced, old fashioned academic snobbery. The Russell Group and certain academics end up having a monopoly on the entire field due to this lack of EDI.” – Microbiology Society member.

Cornerstone 3: We are committed to leading, taking action and being innovative. We will use evidence, data and learning from ourselves and others to inform our actions and how we work.

Disagree (tick box)

16. Although UKRI has made substantial efforts to make their diversity data available and transparent, the data at present reveals that under-representation of minorities is widespread across UKRI and this should have already prompted urgent action to embed EDI at the heart of the organisation.

“Given some of the past behaviours of UKRI in collecting data of LGBTQ+ students, I am not sure I can offer any positive remarks.” – Microbiology Society member.

17. Our members highlighted that UKRI have been more active around issues surrounding gender equality compared to other EDI traits, as illustrated by the draft strategy mainly highlighting examples of initiatives tackling under-representation of women. We welcome the fact that UKRI is pushing for its funded institutes to be beacons of change on that matter. However, further leadership is needed to expand this across the sector.

“There is zero mention of support for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (from any ethnic background).” – Microbiology Society member.

“Equality is for all and that is something that UKRI and many academics should remember.” – Microbiology Society member.

18. We recommend that data is used to train reviewers in order to change what appears to be a lack of fundamental understanding of the challenges faced by many researchers when applying for grants and fellowships.

“PIs with large, well-funded groups who are well connected and who can afford to publish in good journals are able to support early career researchers’ career development, meaning that those people appear to get awarded grants via UKRI rather than those who have not had support. The reasoning is that they are better published, which, according to UKRI reviewers, means that their projects should be funded. In that way, UKRI is automatically awarding privilege. There is a lack of fundamental understanding that this is not a level playing field.” – Microbiology Society member.

Cornerstone 4: We expect every individual in UKRI to be inclusive in all that they do, and we will hold ourselves to account for our actions as individuals, as leaders, partners and as an organisation.

Disagree (tick box)

19. We wish to share the below case study with UKRI. We hope that reading about the unacceptable challenges that some researchers face when applying for UKRI funding will keep encouraging the organisation to not only develop an ambitious EDI strategy, but, more importantly, to ensure that significant and permanent changes occur in the very fabric of UKRI.

20. **Case study.** Our member, an Asian Muslim female from an under-privileged background, has over ten years post-doctoral experience and has published seven papers as a corresponding author and twenty as an author. A few years ago, she was awarded a UKRI grant with

industrial partnership. Our member solely initiated, developed and managed the partnership and led on all aspects of the grant. However, she was listed as a 'co-researcher' on the grant, the PI who had allowed her to lead being a white male. She has since worked hard to pursue independence by applying for several fellowships. She was told by UKRI that she had not considered how she would use the fellowship to further her independence, leadership, and career development as well as deliver an excellent project. This had not been picked-up by the five academics who peer-reviewed her application, in fact the opposite was stated by all of them. Our member deplored that such statements are continually offered up as feedback to minoritised groups, suggesting that the bar for excellence is much higher for those candidates. At her fellowship interview with UKRI, there were no minority ethnic background representatives on the panel or in the room. Better representation would have helped to reveal the critical nature of her interview and might have prevented that feedback being delivered to her. Another comment from UKRI was that she had 'rehearsed her answers'. UKRI needs to understand that, if many minoritised people continually practise their talks, spend a lot of time on their slides and practise answers to possible questions, it is because they know from experience that they will have a much harder time than their privileged, white male colleagues. These experiences, and others, have led our member to the harrowing realisation that it is impossible for someone like her to pursue a successful career in academia, even though she is a talented researcher with much more to offer. She is now left with only one option, to apply for a standard UKRI grant with a white male academic as PI, in spite of the work effectively being all hers.

"Gaining independence in my own right is impossible in academia because of the racism that I face from UKRI. It would be great if UKRI could be stronger in their actions as otherwise, the next generations of female Asian scientists are not going to benefit from this strategy and they too will drop out of academia before their time." – Microbiology Society member.

21. We want to emphasise that the above is not an isolated comment and that many have shared similar experiences, sometimes to the point of abandoning the idea of working with UKRI completely.

"I personally stopped applying to UKRI funded grant calls because of the obvious nepotism and bias among reviewers. I have more confidence in getting funding from industrial partners than from UKRI. Someone like me, a BAME female who is self-made has no chance. Generally, UKRI do not support self-made academics who have had no support and they do not understand the true meanings and implications of EDI and privilege." – Microbiology Society member.

4. Strategic objectives

4.1 Fostering an inclusive and diverse research and innovation system, 'by everyone, for everyone'

How do you think this proposed objective could be improved?

22. It is crucial that the concrete actions associated with this objective serve to ensure that UKRI treats academics equally and recognises when some are being rejected or side-lined by the system. There must be a mechanism in place for long-term accountability. While there are

sections in UKRI application forms where academics can discuss EDI issues that may have affected their performance, the new strategy should make it clear that those cannot be ignored by reviewers who tend to acknowledge scientific outputs only.

What opportunities can you see for you or your organisation to work with UKRI in achieving this proposed objective?

23. **Sharing good practice.** Over the years, the Microbiology Society has taken steps to be more inclusive; when in 2013 we realised that the representation of women in our activities was very low, we introduced a target for participation, particularly for our conference speakers. Over time, this has improved significantly. We have invested in our Annual Conference to include nursing and prayer rooms and a creche as well as support grants to help members to attend and to cover caring responsibilities. We introduced a Code of Conduct to protect members and ensure everyone is aware of the Society's values and our expectations of participants in Society activities.
24. **Opportunities for collaboration.** The Microbiology Society proposes to start a constructive dialogue with UKRI on what we have learned so far that could be of value to the organisation. Each year, we take a snapshot of those participating in our activities in order to assess inclusion and make recommendations to Council to address any areas that require intervention to ensure all members, regardless of their background, feel welcome to participate in our activities. We encourage UKRI to carry out a similar exercise and would welcome the opportunity to further discuss the process and how it has been supporting us to constantly learn and improve, while acknowledging that we too still have a long way to go.

4.2 Advancing equality and inclusion through our investments and how we work

How do you think this proposed objective could be improved?

25. As previously highlighted (see points 6 and 7), UKRI should use this objective to demonstrate strong ownership and responsibility over enacting true, sustained EDI change across the whole research and innovation sector. UKRI must acknowledge its unique position for setting out clear policies and incentives that will bring about improvements. By focusing on calling others to action, the current draft risks fostering unequal progress across the sector.

What opportunities can you see for you or your organisation to work with UKRI in achieving this proposed objective?

26. **Sharing good practice.** The Microbiology Society is ensuring that equality of gender, career stage, ethnicity and disability are appropriately embedded and prioritised across its structure and activities. For example, we have introduced a Council and Committees Shadowing Scheme as we know our decision-making bodies do not reflect the wide diversity of our membership. Since 2021, all of our Committee members have the opportunity to feed into EDI activities at the Society to ensure a welcoming experience for everyone participating. By creating an environment where everyone has a voice, we enable a healthier discussion around EDI issues and support.
27. **Opportunities for collaboration.** As mentioned in point 24, a membership society of our scale, that is in constant communication with its members, can contribute to a dialogue with

UKRI and share some of its knowledge. But this will only happen if UKRI proactively seeks those long-term partnerships with a variety of stakeholders beyond reviewing responses to this consultation. Several of our members have already offered to meet in person with UKRI representatives to share their experiences as applicants from a minority background. We encourage UKRI to accept those meetings as hearing directly from individuals who have felt mistreated by the organisation will be a lot more impactful than reading abstract or impersonal stories.

4.3 Everyone who works for UKRI will feel included, valued, and able to contribute and participate

What opportunities can you see for you or your organisation to work with UKRI in achieving this proposed objective?

28. **Sharing good practice.** In 2020, we established the EDI Staff Action Group to oversee the delivery and implementation of improvements and actions that will support all Society staff to feel welcome and included. By fostering this culture, the Group ensures that all staff feel they have equal opportunities while working at the Society and are empowered to advocate for EDI in everything they do, including driving EDI in membership activities. We hope that by facilitating an environment of equality and diversity, this creates a sense of inclusivity which paves the way for us to build our capacity to support microbiology now and in the future.

29. **Opportunities for collaboration.** See points 24 and 27.

4.4 To develop approaches to monitor, measure and evaluate change

How do you think this proposed objective could be improved?

30. Please refer to points 3 and 7. While we recognise that ‘the draft does not attempt to set out in detail all the actions [UKRI] will take to bring about change’, we regret not seeing concrete approaches to implement the strategy, as well as plans and metrics for monitoring and evaluation purposes. More thought should go into developing this objective so that UKRI can evidence that it is taking EDI seriously and can build on its successes and address areas where it is falling behind.

What opportunities can you see for you or your organisation to work with UKRI in achieving this proposed objective?

31. **Sharing good practice.** Since 2018, we have asked members to anonymously tell us about themselves. The results help us to determine if our activities properly reflect the community we represent. From that point, we expanded our data collection to ethnicity, disability and career stage, and in 2021 we started to ask members if they identified as LGBTQIA+, as we know that there is far more to diversity than gender. These insights have allowed us to put measures in place across all our activities to make them as welcoming as possible. We began planning for LGBTQIA+ focused networking events at the Annual Conference 2022. We implemented an inclusive name-change policy across our journals so that anyone who wanted to change their name would feel welcomed when publishing with us. We also established a Members Panel as a way to bring the voice of underrepresented groups to the fore throughout all levels of decision making at the Society. The co-Chairs will work with the

Society's General Secretary's Group (a group made up of the co-Chairs of all Society Committees) to ensure that EDI matters continue to be appropriately considered at the highest level of Society governance.

32. **Opportunities for collaboration.** See points 24 and 27.

5. Final remarks

33. In closing, we would like to reiterate our strong intention to explore these conversations further with UKRI and we would be very happy to facilitate connections between UKRI and our membership to help with further planning and implementation of the strategy as required.