21 July 2020

Re: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and doctoral training

Thank you for your open letter, received on 29 June. I am responding on behalf of UKRI’s executive. In your letter you raise concerns about Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) on UKRI’s training grants. I would like to reassure you that we share many of your concerns. We accept that, as in wider society, there is deep, structural inequality in research. There is a vital role for organisations including us to play, working hand in hand with our partners.

We are unequivocal in our support of calls for equality and recognise that many in our community have been working toward this for some considerable time. We have funded work on anti-racism, protest cultures, resistance and other movements steeped in social justice. Our interests in inclusion and transformation go beyond our role as a funder. We want to steward a system that values the contributions of all and recognises that a diversity of ideas, opinions, knowledge and people enrich our work and enlarges our knowledge economy. We must continue to build a research and innovation culture that represents everyone and work with our partners to make this a reality.

We know there is much to be done. We recently published our diversity data report and the statistics are stark. I am sure that you have already seen this information and the related narrative and files. If not, you can access all relevant information through this blog post: www.ukri.org/about-us/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/the-importance-of-open-diversity-data

We know we can make changes that will help many people’s lives. We do not, though, work alone. Our research councils’ training grants provide funding for around 20 percent of the 35,000 people starting a PhD each year, but always in partnership with universities. Many UKRI students receive funding from multiple sources. While the letter focuses on
our studentships, we remain concerned about the entire system of doctoral training as we recognize that all the parts must work proactively together to effect change.

Across the sector, action is taking place. You suggest a range of practical ways forward to address barriers and underrepresentation and some of these are already in train. At UKRI, we welcome the sharing of good practice and the piloting of innovative solutions. Increasingly, we are calling on universities to demonstrate how they will widen participation when they compete to host doctoral training programmes.

The BBSRC-funded London Interdisciplinary Biosciences Consortium is one such example, which now offers a range of support to students from local universities, including funded summer placements in research laboratories. The scheme has driven an increase in applications from Black and minority ethnic students for fully-funded PhD studentships at these universities.

While the issues faced by each training programme, or indeed, student, will be different, we all need to make every endeavor to ensure access to our degrees are and remain fair and equitable.

For instance, UKRI’s Research England, working with the Office for Students, will shortly launch a joint funding competition to improve access and participation for Black, Asian and minority ethnicity postgraduate research students. We have provided grant funding to support the UK Council for Graduate Education to develop a policy briefing to analyse relevant data. We will very soon set out how UKRI will implement actions in the revised Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, and we are working to strengthen our commitment to the Technician Commitment.

The ways in which we assess excellence, and how we reward it, are questions challenging the entire sector. Since diversity is a core characteristic of a creative and innovative research community, it is essential that the criteria and methods we use support diversity. We know we – as individuals, as an organisation, and as a sector – have to do the hard work to transform our system. We also need to work with, be challenged by and co-develop these transformations with the sector. We will soon be announcing ways that we will revitalise our engagement programmes to bring underrepresented and marginalised communities into the heart of UKRI decision-making processes.

Doctoral training is one path to a career in wider research and innovation, or academia. When that way is blocked, we deprive people of a fulfilling career and society of the knowledge and ideas that a diverse and supportive community brings. We thank you for
your commitment and call on the wider system to take on this challenge to create a skills and training environment that benefits everyone.

We will publish a copy of this response on our website.

Yours faithfully,


Dr Karen Salt
Deputy Director, R&D Culture and Environment