

ARMA response to UKRI EDI draft strategy consultation

Introduction

ARMA (UK) is the professional association for research management in the UK. We represent research leaders, managers and administrators, offering professional development and opportunities to build networks, knowledge and skills.

With around 2,500 members, we work with UK-wide and international bodies to influence and understand the changing research management agenda, translating the impacts of that change for our members. We work with others to promote public trust in research, communicating its benefits and value. Most of all, we work to enhance research management as a professional partner in the UK research environment.

Equity, diversity and inclusion are important to ARMA; to our leadership, to our team and to our community. We recognise that we are part of an ecosystem that is calling out for cultural change and that we need to be part of the response. It is a central pillar to our current strategic plan and we are working closely with our community to progress our own practice, as well as to empower and equip that community to drive change within their own practice, organisations and networks.

The development of this response has been led by Sapna Marwaha, Deputy Chair of ARMA and Chair of the EDI Advisory Group. We invited our membership to participate in a workshop. We had thirty responses, of which approximately 60% were able to attend the virtual workshop and input into our survey responses. All volunteers and the ARMA EDI Advisory Group were then able to comment on the draft prepared following the initial workshop before preparation of this final response.

Of the volunteers, 53% had experience of barriers to inclusion, 83% had professional experience of identifying barriers to inclusion and 60% had professional experience of reducing barriers to inclusion. The draft was further shared with ARMA's EDI Advisory Group which brings together a wealth of lived and professional experience in EDI from across the sector and is representative of each of the protected characteristics under consideration.

Accessibility

As a document, how accessible is the draft EDI strategy?

Overall, everyone was able to access the document but many found the 'online first' format challenging, particularly when individuals sought to convert to pdf or to print. We appreciate that UKRI did make the questions available in a pdf format upon request. There was strong feedback that members would have liked all documents to be accessible in a variety of formats from the outset. For instance, including some visual representations of the plans as well as a narrative would have made it more accessible to different groups.

Did you use assistive technology to read the EDI strategy? If so, were there any issues?

Not applicable.

Ambition

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

There were mixed responses to this question. While 11% indicated that they found the ambition very clear, the majority indicated to varying degrees that they felt there was room for improvement. 27% indicated that it was not very clear.

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

The ARMA community warmly welcomed UKRI's decision to develop this strategy. There was strong support for the breadth and scale of the ambition, that it seeks to drive change across the whole research and innovation system.

Members felt that there was a recognition that there is a significant road to achieving this ambition demonstrated by its characterisation as a long-term commitment, rather than a short term plan.

There was strong support for UKRI stepping up to take its position as a leader on these issues, recognising its unique power and influence, leading by example and taking responsibility for its role in driving change across the whole sector.

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

We asked workshop participants to assess how comprehensive the strategy was on a scale. All respondents felt that there were some gaps in the ambition with 24% expressing that the gaps were very significant.

Many of the comments centred around giving the ambition greater context and detail. We felt that it would be helpful to connect the ambition more clearly to the impact that it should generate. Increased fairness, better representation and enhanced inclusion within the research and innovation sector should ultimately reduce the extent to which protected characteristics are a determinant of health, social and economic outcomes in wider society and connecting to this purpose enables progress.

A strong emphasis arose on the need to name the challenges we face, such as ableism, racism, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia in the sector. It is critical that there is a shared understanding of the problems we are trying to solve if we are to succeed in working collaboratively towards the shared goals of solving those problems.

It was felt that this could be enhanced further by sharing some of the reflection that has happened within UKRI, including qualitative and quantitative data and analysis. It is also important that the research and innovation community can have confidence in UKRI's understanding of these issues. Greater transparency here lends itself to building trust with the groups that have been historically excluded from the system.

It would be helpful to see explicit reference to the barriers and challenges that have been identified, the plans for continuing to identify such barriers and challenges, and to have insight into how priorities may be set in response to this information. We recognise that any plan will need to balance the important and the achievable and historically, the sector has always leant towards the latter, limiting overall progress. Expressing a clear step change in responding to these issues will also be a critical factor in building trust.

It would be helpful to be more explicit about the type of action or approach that UKRI will adopt, for instance, to specify whether UKRI will adopt an intersectional approach or decolonise its practice. It is known that positive action is underused across the sector. It would be helpful to understand the appetite to champion such tools within the sector. There is a concern that a failure to do so will limit its ability to drive progress and lead to the continued exclusion of those most marginalised by the system. On the positive side, such commitments would help to illustrate the leadership role that UKRI intends to take.

Our cornerstones for change

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

To explore this question, we asked members to provide examples of where UKRI either had or had not met their expectations regarding each cornerstone.

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

It was recognised that UKRI has published significantly more data and in turn has raised awareness that systemic and structural problems exist within our ecosystem. The release of data would be enhanced by greater levels of evaluation and context, demonstrating a deeper understanding of the problems that such data expose and the intention to address such problems, backed up by leadership and resources.

There was recognition of initiatives to influence changes such as the Resume for Researchers. Participants cited several practical interventions at an individual council level such as EPSRC enabling ongoing applications to join peer review colleges. There were also examples of where councils had failed to fully consider the EDI implications of decision making such as the AHRC EDI Fellowships where time was not funded.

There were concerns that with action plans being developed at a council level, there may be missed opportunities to take a consistent and strategic approach to change, learning from one another and accelerating progress. Further, it feels that there has been a missed opportunity in not integrating the EDI strategy with other strategic planning activities across UKRI, such as the newly released strategy and the FRAP. Taking a more integrated approach would have significantly increased the potential impact of the strategy.

There is a concern that the systemic and structural problems have not been named and there is not a clear allocation of resources to address such problems. We would like to see greater clarity around how UKRI will identify structural problems and resource the solutions that deliver an inclusive, equitable, just and diverse research and innovation system.

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

We welcome the opportunity to feed into this process and we are really pleased that UKRI is running such an open consultation process for such a critical issue. We would appreciate greater transparency on how consultation responses will be used to inform the final strategy and a commitment to continuing levels of consultation as the more detailed plans evolve.

A key concern among the community is the structure around accountability. While it is helpful that there be an internal board of experts to oversee and drive progress, it would be beneficial to recognise the community interest and to commit to transparency with regular externally facing communication on progress. We would hope to see communications in the form of detailed progress dashboards, as well as more accessible blogs and announcements.

There was universal concern around the delayed and limited response to the open letter from Black female academics and subsequent follow up discussions led by Dr Addy Adelaine. This letter expressed serious concerns about racial inequity in the funding system at the same time as the pandemic was demonstrating in real time the impact of such systemic failures. The lack of a full response has reduced confidence in UKRI's ability to engage effectively when sensitive issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion are being discussed and when the research and innovation community reaches out to UKRI to discuss how we can all do better. The more recent example of Innovate UK deleting tweets in relation to International Women's Day and their Gender Pay Gap was cited as evidence of an ongoing culture of shying away from discussions on these topics, rather than owning the facts and committing to doing better.

We would like to see greater ambition in this cornerstone, with a more robust commitment to co-development and co-creation with the communities most affected by the structural and systemic problems that are prevalent within our ecosystem. We recognise that underrepresentation exists across the system and success is dependent on reaching beyond traditional parameters to counteract the limitations of our current system.

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.

There was strong support for the ongoing release of data and information including awarding data and gender equality statements. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the community strongly supports an evidence-based approach. We also support the adoption of new ways of working including the narrative CV.

Most examples of innovative practice cited were within individual research councils and it was noted that there were missed opportunities in these practices not being adopted across the whole of UKRI. For example, colleagues mentioned expanding the ESRC New Investigator grant eligibility from strict 4 year post-PhD time bound rule, to a self-defined case for why a person identifies as an early career researcher.

The perception is that while there is leadership in sharing information, UKRI has taken a less robust position in acting upon that information. There is an opportunity to provide context to the data being shared, articulating the problems being demonstrated and the steps that are being taken along with the resources being deployed to address such problems. For instance, AHRC have shared that they have awarded no Fellowships to Black academics in last 5 years but they have not yet announced actions to address these disparities.

We would again suggest a need for greater ambition in not just learning from others, but engaging, involving and co-creating with them. The open letter was once again cited as a missed opportunity where the community showed a willingness to engage but this was not clearly and openly reciprocated. There was an absence of commitments and action that followed.

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.

We are pleased to see the role being played by UKRI leadership and we were happy to welcome both UKRI CEO Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, author and Dr Karen Salt, Deputy Director, R&D Culture & Environment as keynote speakers to our conference last year, which centred on this topic. It is essential for behaviours to be modelled from the highest level before they can be expected throughout the system.

We also want to recognise the openness and transparency around the bullying and harassment allegations within MRC. While it is always disappointing to hear that such behaviour has taken place, we know that bullying and harassment are commonplace within the sector and it is important for UKRI to model how such instances should be handled. This has been reassuring and is a strong indication that cultural change within UKRI is underway and accountability is improving.

We recognise that this is the beginning of a journey and there remain opportunities for progress and growth. We would like to see the expectation extended to the broader UKRI community, including awardees, peer reviewers, committee members and other stakeholders. There are further opportunities for greater transparency and accountability, ensuring that the community remain informed and engaged throughout.

Strategic objectives

Are the proposed EDI strategic objectives clear? If not, please provide brief details on what was unclear.

There were very mixed responses on the clarity of the objectives. One and two were regarded as the least clear. We feel that each are laudable goals. We asked participants about how they would improve each objective and there were many common themes throughout the responses.

- **Name the problem** - It is critical to identify and articulate the problem that an objective is seeking to address. This would reassure the community that UKRI understands where it is on its journey and the steps needed to drive progress.
- **Name the people** - It is important to identify who is included within certain definitions as while the overall ambitions are broad, there is a tendency to move between internally and externally facing objectives, rather than consider the whole ecosystem in each.
- **Make them SMART** – There was consensus that all objectives should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.
- **Articulate what success looks like** – This helps to foster accountability and drive momentum towards these collective goals.

Objective 1: fostering an inclusive and diverse research and innovation system, ‘by everyone, for everyone’

The following questions are asked about each of the four strategic objectives:

- **what do you like most about this proposed objective?**

There was consensus that the objective had been set with the right intentions and spirit. There was strong support for the 'by everyone, for everyone' tagline and it was felt this would be

helpful for broad communications. We like the holistic and ambitious goal of targeting the whole system.

- **how do you think this proposed objective could be improved? Are there any significant gaps?**

There is an opportunity to increase the ambition, to not only foster greater inclusion and diversity within current parameters but to reimagine the system and rebuild one that has these values at its core. The phrases could be open to interpretation and the community would take greater reassurance from a firmer commitment to improving representation from underrepresented groups and co-developing solutions with the communities most affected by barriers to participation. This cannot be achieved without reaching outside the current system and calling underserved groups in. UKRI holds significant power and in tackling these issues, must redistribute that power. We would welcome recognition of the need to redistribute power as well as resources.

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

ARMA and its members are keen to work with UKRI. This could be through formal participation in further consultations, creative workshops and knowledge exchange events. ARMA are also happy to engage regularly through our EDI Advisory Group to provide support to UKRI initiatives. Our members are keen to share their experiences, as well as their knowledge and expertise. They would welcome more opportunities to discuss these issues with UKRI directly and to engage in the co-creation of resources for the benefit of the whole community. ARMA and its members are happy to connect you to our own networks to help extend UKRI's reach within the community. We have all been working to tackle these issues and while no-one has solved the problem, there is much to be gained in sharing our learning. Within our discussion, members expressed many ideas for change and there is a strong appetite for more avenues to be able to share these ideas and work more closely with UKRI in tackling these issues.

Objective 2 – advancing equality and inclusion through our investments and how we work

The following questions are asked about each of the four strategic objectives:

- **what do you like most about this proposed objective?**

This objective is appreciated as a firmer commitment to action, ensuring that funds will be deployed to furthering these aims. It appears to be an acknowledgement of awarding gaps, pay gaps and their causes. It is reassuring that UKRI will support its goals with resources.

- **how do you think this proposed objective could be improved? Are there any significant gaps?**

It would be helpful to understand the scope of the ambition; is this an intention to direct more funding towards underfunded communities, to fund more research and innovation investigating and tackling inequalities or take steps to ensure that existing funds distribute funding more equitably. We would welcome and support action in each of these areas. It is important that action is taken at a strategic level to redesign funding structures and not just to push funding towards groups and topics for a limited period. We are keen to see lasting change. It would be helpful to see explicit reference to closing the awarding gaps and pay gaps within UKRI and

across the sector that see investments unequally distributed and inequalities continually reinforced.

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

Our members often run internal processes around the distribution of funding and they have given sustained consideration to how to make these processes fairer. We would be keen to participate as UKRI evolves its thinking on the subject to ensure that we grasp the opportunity to share knowledge and expertise.

Objective 3 – everyone who works for UKRI will feel included, valued and able to contribute and participate

The following questions are asked about each of the four strategic objectives:

- **what do you like most about this proposed objective?**

This is an important objective for any organisation. We strongly support fostering a more inclusive environment within UKRI. We regard staff within UKRI as our colleagues and we recognise that UKRI's ability to influence change across the sector is predicated on its ability to deliver change within its own organisation.

- **how do you think this proposed objective could be improved? Are there any significant gaps?**

It is notable that it is possible for individuals to feel included, valued and able to contribute and participate in homogenous environments. However, this would not generate the desired impact. We would welcome a strong commitment to addressing diversity and inclusion collectively, starting from the top of the organisation. Effective change requires leadership to model the behaviour they wish to see in others. We would also invite UKRI to interpret 'everyone who works for UKRI' broadly to include stakeholders such as those who are funded by UKRI, engage in peer review and participate in committees and working groups. It is important not only to bring those individuals in so that they feel the benefit of this objective, but also to set the expectation on their behaviours in how they engage with UKRI and its people.

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

As it is currently drafted, this appears to be an internally facing objective. We therefore regard our ability to input to be limited to sharing our knowledge and expertise on how we have sought to achieve similar objectives within our own organisations. Should UKRI choose to give a broader interpretation to this objective, we would also be happy feed into how this can be communicated and implemented more widely and to support that through our own channels.

Objective 4 – to develop approaches to monitor, measure and evaluate change

The following questions are asked about each of the four strategic objectives:

- **what do you like most about this proposed objective?**

We appreciate the strong commitment to being data and evidence driven. It feels like an acknowledgement in an area where our members have given significant feedback, noting the scope for improving and developing practice.

- **how do you think this proposed objective could be improved? Are there any significant gaps?**

Like objective 3, objective 4 appears internally facing and we would encourage UKRI to think more broadly in its approach. We know that current practices around data collection need evolution and we would encourage co-development of new approaches. We would also welcome UKRI going further in its aim, by committing to implementing the new approaches, to acting on the evidence they generate, to sharing what it has learned so that the benefits can be amplified and to continuing to review and revise practice in response to community feedback.

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

It is important that data captured be accessible. Our members would welcome UKRI EDI data being shared on a central platform, where research organisations can also contribute and compare data. This transparency across the system where data can be analysed by different parameters (organisation, council, scheme, characteristic) would drive greater system level change. Our members would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of innovative solutions to the data gaps.