

Developing good practice to advance equality in research careers: taking a research informed approach

Equality and Diversity: Progress and Challenges in Leading Researchers 26 January 2015

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Staff experiences of REF equality processes and of equality issues in research careers

Qualitative research: 32 one-to one semi-structured interviews with a sample of self-selected academics working in four different institutions (27 females and 5 males)

Desk review of a small sample (14) of final equality impact assessments for REF 2014

Key research questions:

- *Did academic staff feel that the equality guidance for REF 2014 was well communicated?*
- *What were their experiences of having equality-related personal circumstances taken into account?*
- *What are their experiences of equality issues which may affect their research careers beyond the REF?*
- *What lessons can be learned from the implementation of the equality guidance for REF to develop good practice to advance equality in research careers?*

The context for the REF 2014: Changes in the legislation

- Equality Act 2010
- Equality Duties

s149 EqA 2010

- (1) A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—
 - (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;...

Staff experiences of REF equality processes

About half of our participants were able to comment about the differences between RAE 2008 and REF 2014 and their views are summarised below:

REF 2014 equality guidance was better communicated compared to RAE 2008: *“It has been a lot more visible this time”*

The REF process more transparent: *“There has been a much more supportive culture around this REF...It is all very transparent...”*

The equality guidance helped to put equality issues in research careers on the agenda: *“these topics [equalities] are on the agenda... that can only be a good thing...we talk too little about equality issues in research”*

The process highlighted that there are more complex gender issues: *“ [there are] much bigger problems than simply women’s careers being disrupted by maternity leave”.*

Staff's experiences of having equality-related personal circumstances taken into account

Several benefitted by having clearly defined personal circumstances
e.g. maternity leave

Equality-related personal circumstances handled with greater care
and sensitivity:

- *We were told who would and who would not be able to see that information, who would review it etc. and that nobody in your unit would know."*

Disability/illness – reluctance to disclose because fear stigma, eg,
mental health issues; lack of support, eg. for dyslexia:

- *'the signals that it might send in terms of my professional identity, my capacity and capability' 'making excuses for herself'.*

Culture among academic staff of *'carrying on'*

Equality issues beyond the REF

Lack of work-life balance disproportionately disadvantages academics with caring responsibilities, disability and long-term medical conditions:

“I think there is a culture in academia which assumes that people will work at the weekend and the evening which just isn’t possible when you’ve got little children and you are a single mother”

“I’ve never been married and I am childless, so I can stay here [at work] until half past nine...or I can work until midnight at home...when I have had caring responsibilities – my father became ill last year – it really did reveal how much of my own time and headspace I was drawing on...it felt that my own working life was crashing down around me like a house of cards and that I was risking my research status”



Progressing the equality agenda in research careers

Consultation and engagement with research leaders to identify measures to provide on-going support for equality and diversity (not just for REF!)

Key recommendations:

Equality impact assessment to be undertaken at local level e.g. department/school/faculty

On-going equality training for research leaders to build up capability to advance equality in research careers (e.g. workshops to consider lessons learned from implementing the REF equality guidance); raise awareness about equality implications for methods to assess research e.g. metrics

Develop a series of initiatives to support staff at critical times in their careers:

- *Teaching buy-out to allow staff returning from career breaks or absence due to illness to catch up with their research*
- *Make good use of 'keep in touch days' for staff on maternity leave – extend it to career breaks*
- *Clarify support and options available to staff when dealing with “complex circumstances”*

Raising awareness among all academic staff about equality guidance for future REFs

Integrate equality in HEIs research strategies

Thank you for your attention

Questions/comments?