

Government must set out ‘clear goals’ for research culture

Wellcome Trust policy adviser says research sector needs to work together to improve the culture

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The government must show it is serious about research culture by setting out “clear goals”, a policy expert at the Wellcome Trust has said.

The comments come after science minister Amanda Solloway said that institutions with widespread bullying and harassment problems should not benefit from public funding, ahead of the publication of the government’s People and Culture Strategy.

Reacting to the minister’s speech during a session on research culture at the Vitae Connections conference on 17 September, Ben Bleasdale, policy and advocacy adviser at the Wellcome Trust, welcomed the “external perspective” of the minister and former PR manager, who does not have a research background.

However, he said: “I think we need some really clear goals or direction—something that’s written on paper that we can hold people account to”.

With a government commitment to increase R&D funding to £22 billion a year by 2024 as part of its longer-term plan to boost overall research spending to 2.4 per cent of GDP by 2027, it is more important than ever to get this right, Bleasdale added.

“When you’ve got people making lots of complex decisions and...lots of new money flowing into the research system in the next few years, I think that is a moment where you really want to have clarity so that the decisions that are made put people at the heart of that rather than just trying to expand the existing culture.”

The Wellcome Trust is currently leading its own campaign to improve research culture, with a survey published by the funder earlier this year suggesting that nearly two-thirds of researchers have witnessed bullying or harassment in the workplace and almost half have experienced it themselves.

Reflecting on Wellcome’s campaign, Bleasdale said: “It’s going to be a long process and it will require some big changes from things that we’ve done in the past and in the traditional ways we’ve operated. But I do think that it’s not a choice.

“Trying to contribute towards a sustainable research culture is the only right option. And I think Wellcome would be kidding itself if it tried to continue on its current path without embracing the fact that it needs to change.”

However, he added, “big steps remain to be taken” about coordination in the sector.

“At the very beginning of this process I spoke to a researcher who said that if this change was only going to be at Wellcome then they would rather we didn’t bother because all we were going to do was make the already fragmented system even more complex to navigate. What it instilled in me is that we do need to try and work together as a whole sector.”

Katie Perry, chief executive of the Daphne Jackson Trust, a charity that helps return STEM researchers to their careers after a career break, was less enthusiastic about the government's signalling on research culture.

She described the recent decision to axe the requirement of institutions to have an Athena SWAN award in order to receive funding from the National Institute of Health Research as "very worrying". The charter recognises higher education institutions' commitment to gender equality in research.

"If you start dropping that Athena SWAN [requirement] it's going to allow some complacency to drop in with many departments. Think about the carrot and stick approach: some need a stick. The carrot is not enough."

- See more at: <https://www.researchprofessional.com/0/rr/news/uk/charities-and-societies/2020/9/Government-must-set-out-clear-goals-for-research-culture.html#sthash.DIW9Koyf.dpuf>