Equality, diversity, and inclusion in research

Position Paper

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Context and background

In the spring 2022, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) undertook a comprehensive review of the 2018 ethical guidelines (4th edition). The BERA committee and the ethical guidelines review committee both acknowledged the significant changes educational research and society more broadly had undergone. They recognised that some key areas would need to be addressed to fill gaps in previous editions of the guidelines as well as to align the guidelines more explicitly with the developments that had occurred. This position paper regarding equality, diversity and inclusion in research was composed in connection with this review.

Having researched disability, chronic illness and neurodivergence in higher education under the umbrella project title of ableism in academia for several years, I happily responded to the commission of this position paper. I hope that my sharing of the many voices and experiences I had been privy to may offer an opportunity to raise awareness and institute change; change that cannot come too soon and cannot be too radical.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion

Higher education is awash with buzzwords and trend-topics, of which equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) is one. The attempt to improve equality, ensure diversity and foster inclusion is noble. Yet, unfortunately, in many contexts it remains an attempt or becomes a box-ticking exercise. I do not pretend that I get it right all the time and that I have answers to all issues and concerns. However, there are some key aspects we should all consider.

EDI is not only about one protected characteristic

Many researchers, stakeholders, and advocates focus on specific protected characteristics, often one singular characteristic, in their work. This is entirely appropriate, given the specialist knowledge required to understand and report on lived experiences. However, in the context of policies and guidelines equality, diversity, and inclusion must not be relating to one protected characteristic, only. Such an approach would not be accounting for the heterogeneity nor intersectionality of lived experiences.

EDI is not only about research participants

While it is important for researchers to explore how they can make research more equitable, accessible and inclusive these considerations are not sufficient. Equality,

diversity, and inclusion must also recognise that researchers themselves may identify as disabled, neurodivergent, from an ethnic minority and LGBTQ+, and the like. Unfortunately, in the practice of research and the academy there are significant trends at play that result in many researchers not disclosing their protected characteristics. As a consequence, awareness of researchers and their need for adjustments or consideration of intersectional experiences is often limited.

EDI is not always fully achievable

Due to the heterogeneity of experiences within each category of protected characteristics and across all categories, individual needs are often conflicting. As a result, full accessibility, diversity, and inclusion are not always achievable. Any measures must aim at promoting equality, accessibility, and diversity at the highest possible standard, but must not be to the detriment of individuals. For example, no person with a known protected characteristic should be expected or asked to carry out additional labour for a cause, as this is an extra burden that further disadvantages those individuals.

Conclusion

As a concept in higher education and within the context of research equality, diversity, and inclusion is of utmost importance. Unfortunately, EDI has become a buzzword that does not necessarily best reflect individual experiences, and that often focusses on students and research participants. For a future-proof approach to EDI within social sciences research, research must be made more inclusive and must become embedded within ethical guidelines.

For research to be more inclusive, it is not sufficient to ensure that participant groups reflect a wide, coherent demographic, to ensure buildings are accessible, or to make data collection methods more inclusive for participants. Policy-makers, grant funders, stakeholders and researchers themselves also need to bear in mind their own vulnerabilities and needs, as well as the need for time and support systems. Research is often contemplated in its dynamic relationship of a power hierarchy between researchers and participants with participants seen as weak and vulnerable. In reality, a researcher whose needs for adjustments, accessibility or equality are not met, may be more vulnerable. Institutions, grant-funders, learned organisations, and other stakeholders often unknowingly exercise additional pressures to that initial burden by insisting on particular timeframes or ways of working.

I therefore urge the British Educational Research Association to take a much stronger, more proactive stance when revising the existing ethical guidelines. I see it as our task to raise awareness of what it means to be "different" as a researcher, and to build an attitude of awareness into the guidelines.

Furthermore, I recommend that a bank of resources along with recommended readings be made available, which researchers may be able to draw on when designing an equitable, diverse, and inclusive research project.