



Push to cut red tape hits equality schemes

Government tells major funders to disregard awards such as the Athena Swan Charter

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The UK government has launched a major drive to reduce red tape in research, saying that many funding rules have “added limited value, or in some cases led to negative behaviours or consequences”.

The government cited “a wide variety of organisations which offer voluntary membership awards or other forms of recognition to support or validate an organisation’s performance in particular areas”. It has asked UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) to “ensure they place no weight upon the presence or absence of such markers or scheme memberships in any of their regulatory or funding activities”.

The move comes as some major award schemes on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are undergoing their own reviews, and there is disagreement over how helpful they are in improving research culture—a stated focus of this government.

UKRI told Research Fortnight that it would continue to use awards that recognise achievement of its own aims as an organisation. “UKRI has made clear that embedding EDI in all our processes is critical to supporting our commitments to address barriers and inequalities, and drive transparency and accountability,” a spokesperson said. “In that context, UKRI will continue to utilise recognition awards where they contribute to the achievement of our aims.”

An NIHR spokesperson said that although membership of such schemes would no longer be assessed, organisations should consider how initiatives such as the Race Equality Charter and Athena Swan, which recognises institutions’ commitment to gender equality in research, may help them demonstrate commitment to EDI.

They added that they still “expect organisations that apply for any NIHR funding to demonstrate their commitment to EDI and a healthy research culture more generally, and this will be considered as part of the overall assessment process”.

Rachel Hewitt, director of policy and advocacy at the Higher Education Policy Institute, said she was concerned about the consequences for gender and race equality in research. “Incentives do drive action, particularly when

universities are juggling competing demands,” Hewitt said.

But Deborah Gabriel, founder and director of Black British Academics and a consultant on race, media and educational equity, said institutions needed to move beyond charters and implement specific policies and practices to stem inequality.

“Neither Athena Swan nor the Race Equality Charter are geared towards addressing inequality but serve a superficial purpose in making institutions appear progressive,” she said. Staff and students “must continue to demand policies and practices that build race and gender equity in teaching, research and professional practice”.

Both Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter are undergoing reviews to keep them “fit for purpose”, according to organiser Advance HE.

This article also appeared in Research Fortnight

- 23 Sep 20, 09:00
- By Fiona McIntyre

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