Strategic Consultancy Case Study

Institution

University of York

Project title

Evaluating EDI embeddedness into research projects

Background/Context

The University of York led two large research projects within media and creative industries, Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) and XR Stories, with funding from Research England and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Both projects sought to embed Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in all they did and throughout their duration.

Partly at the request of the funders, but also driven by a desire to understand how effective EDI embeddedness was in these large, multi-strand projects, project team leaders commissioned Advance HE as a neutral third party to undertake an external review by way of 'lessons learned'.

The review examined how EDI was defined and understood, as well as what practices and procedures were in place to ensure that it had been embedded from the start and throughout the projects. The aim was to identify practices that worked as well as areas in need of improvement when it came to embedding EDI both in project outputs as well as internal working practices.

Solution

Advance HE proposed a multi-pronged, mixed-methods approach to provide a holistic picture for this review. The following methods were used to gain insights into various aspects of how EDI was operationalised and embedded within the two projects:

1. An equality monitoring survey, open to all project staff (past and present), aiming to provide an overview of the projects' staff socio-demographic make-up, used as an evidence base of whether or not the two projects embodied the EDI 'best practice' approaches they would be recommending with regards to recruitment.

2. One-to-one interviews with senior project leaders and those involved in operationalising and/or integrating EDI in the two projects, to explore how was EDI defined and implemented into both the overarching projects as well as the various different strands within them, focusing on what had gone well and what was more challenging.

3. Focus groups with research staff members 'on the ground', to explore how they implemented EDI processes and considerations in the delivery of their own research, but also how they experienced EDI as part of the projects' working culture, focusing again on 'what works' and areas in need of improvement.

Outcomes

Advance HE produced a detailed report to present the research findings to the project leads. The review showed that EDI was most successfully embedded in terms of project deliverables and less so in terms of internal working practices. Multiple areas of good practice were identified, such as:

+ a successful project design, ensuring that EDI would be an intrinsic part of both projects;

+ successful collaborations with external organisations from a variety of backgrounds;

+ trusting and supportive relationships between managers and managees;

+ flexible working arrangements, accounting for individual's needs and preferences.

However, areas in need of improvement were also highlighted, including:

+ certain demographics being underrepresented across the project staff members;

+ the lack of a specific definition for EDI at the project application stage and subsequently, in terms of what this meant for project goals and implementation practices;

+ difficulties in team-building and the establishment of effective working relationships due to the pandemic as well as tensions between academic and professional and support staff.

Based on the research findings, Advance HE made a set of evidence-based recommendations, each accompanied by detailed action points, on how EDI could be more successfully implemented in future projects.

The four overarching recommendations suggested were:

1. Defining EDI and building relevant considerations at the outset of a project, whether this is a prerequisite for funding or not.

2. Diversifying project staff members across all levels, roles and contract types.

3. Co-creating strategic policies and actions, including all voices of internal staff members as well as external experts.

4. Raising awareness of EDI as an important characteristic for a successful working culture and engaging all team members in relevant action planning.

The report and subsequent recommendations were presented in the projects' senior leadership teams as part of their evaluation. Moreover, the recommendations have generated some external impact, as the project leads have used them to create online policy briefings on how EDI could be more successfully embedded in research projects, in an attempt to share 'lessons learned' with the wider sector.

Dr Anna Einarsdóttir, Reader in Critical Diversity Management and EDI Lead for SIGN, Prof Jude Brereton, Professor in Audio and Music Technologies and Skills and Training Lead for SIGN, and Dr Jon Swords, Senior Lecturer in Creative Industries and Research lead for SIGN and XR Stories, said:

"SIGN and XR Stories were large and complex projects where we tried to embed EDI at the heart of our activities. Advance HE's evaluation was independent, rigorous and helped us get another perspective on what we did well and where we faced challenges. Their work is being used to improve our future work and inform research-led evaluation of the projects.

"Working with the Advance HE team was a pleasure. We were kept updated with progress, they worked flexibly and we'd highly recommend them to anyone wanting an unbiased perspective on their work."