

Embedding Diversity in Research Design

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1. Policy Statement

UKRI's vision is to support an outstanding research and innovation system that gives everyone the opportunity to contribute and benefit and enriches everyone's lives. MRC is committed to this vision and to accelerating improvements in human health and prosperity by supporting world class health and biomedical research and innovation.^{1,2} MRC promotes health equity through supporting research that enables everyone to achieve their full potential for health and well-being. Central to this commitment, is promoting an inclusive approach to research design so that the benefits from research extend across all communities and population groups.

This policy underlines the importance of inclusive research across the broad spectrum of the MRC remit and sets out clear requirements and expectations for embedding diversity and inclusion in the design and conduct of all MRC-funded research.

Version Number	Status	Revision Date	Summary of Changes
Version 1.0	Published	28 June 2023	New policy.
Version 2.0	Published	12 March 2025	The term 'both sexes' has been removed. A new reference is made to health equity.

¹ UKRI strategy 2022 to 2027: transforming tomorrow together. www.ukri.org/about-us/strategy-plans-and-data/our-strategy-2022-to-2027/

² MRC strategic delivery plan 2022 to 2025. www.ukri.org/publications/mrc-strategic-delivery-plan/

2. Purpose

- 2.1 The purpose of this policy is to embed consideration of relevant diversity characteristics into the design and conduct of all MRC-funded research and innovation, and to ensure that the benefits and impact of these activities extend across all communities and populations.
- 2.2 The policy defines requirements and expectations of researchers receiving MRC funding.
- 2.3 The scope of this policy covers consideration of diversity in research and innovation involving human participants, including, but not limited to, clinical studies, public health and population-based research, observational studies; and studies involving data from people and/or the use of human biological material (e.g. cells and tissues).
- 2.4 The scope of this policy also extends to animal research and the MRC requirement to consider sex in the experimental design of animal research and in studies that use animal tissues and cells.³

3. Definitions

Key diversity characteristics relevant to this policy are defined below⁴:

- 3.1 **Sex** refers to the biological attributes of humans and animals that differentiate male, female and intersex (also referred to as Differences in Sex Development), including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels and function, and reproductive organs. The main categories of sex are female and male but there is variation in the presentation of different biological components of sex. Sex is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.⁵
- 3.2 **Gender** is distinct from sex, and refers to the attribution of behaviours, expectations and roles to different sexes in humans, therefore varies over time and by social and cultural context. Gender is often regarded as binary (e.g. man/woman), however there is diversity in how individuals and groups experience and express gender (e.g. gender fluid, non-binary). Gender reassignment is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.
- 3.3 **Race and ethnicity** are often used interchangeably and in the Equality Act 2010, the protected characteristic of 'race' is defined as including colour, ethnic or national origin, or nationality. Both terms are social constructs used to categorise and characterise seemingly distinct populations. 'Race' is usually associated with biology and linked with physical attributes such as skin colour. However, 'races' are not clearly distinct at a genetic level and the genetic differences within a racial group are often greater than the differences between them. 'Ethnicity' is broader and refers to socio-cultural attributes, and ethnic groups are often defined by a common language, identity, culture, beliefs and customs, and migration histories. Distinct ethnic groups that do not represent the majority in a population may be referred to as minority ethnic groups.
- 3.4 **Underserved** is a term increasingly used to describe under-represented groups in clinical and health research. The INCLUDE guidance⁶ describes this group as individuals who have lower inclusion in health research than would be expected, a high healthcare burden that is not matched by the volume of research designed for them, and who have important differences in how they respond to or engage with interventions.
- 3.5 **Intersectionality** describes how overlapping forms of categorisation, which may be related to

³ MRC guidance on Sex in the Experimental Design of Animal Research (2022) www.ukri.org/councils/mrc/guidance-for-applicants/policies-and-guidance-for-researchers/sex-in-experimental-design/

⁴ These definitions have drawn on Gendered Innovations <https://genderedinnovations.stanford.edu/> and the NIHR-INCLUDE Guidance <https://sites.google.com/nihr.ac.uk/include/home/guidance>

⁵ Equality Act 2010 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

⁶ NIHR-INCLUDE Guidance <https://sites.google.com/nihr.ac.uk/include/home/guidance>



gender, sex, ethnicity, age, religion, socioeconomic status, sexuality, geographic location, migration history or other characteristics, can affect an individual or group.

- 3.6 Other dimensions of diversity that might be considered include age, religion, sexual orientation, disability, health status, language, and socioeconomic dimensions such as geography (place of residence), educational level, occupation, and many others.

4. Responsibilities

- 4.1 MRC requires diversity and inclusion to be considered:
- 4.1.1 by researchers when designing their research proposals, recruiting participants, and/or conducting research involving human participants, animals, data or samples
 - 4.1.2 when developing public involvement and engagement (PIE) activities to support research design and conduct, where the research is funded by the MRC or the PIE/research activities are being undertaken by MRC staff
 - 4.1.3 by peer reviewers, and MRC committee members when reviewing research proposals.
- 4.2 As part of their research proposal, applicants for MRC funding who are proposing to conduct research involving animals and their derived tissues and cells, or human tissues and cells, are required to:
- 4.2.1 describe the sex of the animals, tissue and cells to be used;
 - 4.2.2 use male and female animals, tissues or cells, unless a strong justification not to do so is given; and
 - 4.2.3 if conducting a single sex experiment, explain the appropriateness of this choice and any limitations of the study as a result.
- Items 4.3 to 4.5 apply to research involving human participants only:*
- 4.3 When considering how to make their research design more inclusive, researchers should take a broad view of diversity, not limiting it to specific protected characteristics, but also include concepts such as 'underserved' groups or those defined by culture or behavioural characteristics.
- 4.4 As part of their research proposal, applicants for MRC funding are required to describe
- 4.4.1 the characteristics of the population groups or subpopulations who could benefit from the research being proposed, including how this might contribute to health equity
 - 4.4.2 the approach that they have taken to addressing diversity and promoting inclusion of these groups throughout their research, and
 - 4.4.3 explain/justify why this approach has been taken.
- 4.5 Researchers are expected to record and report relevant information⁷ about the diversity characteristics of research participants so this is available even if these characteristics are not used in the analyses.
- 4.6 MRC will provide clear guidance for applicants and peer reviewers, and establish a cycle of continuous improvement through monitoring and evaluation.
- 4.7 Development of cross-UKRI expectations for inclusive research design are anticipated.
- 4.8 Researchers, peer reviewers and Board and Panel members are expected to take

⁷ Standardised reporting guidelines for describing data are recommended where applicable, e.g. the [Sager Guidelines](#), [STANDING Together](#)



advantage of available [training resources](#) where these will support best practice in inclusive research.

4.9 Researchers applying for MRC funding are expected to follow the [guidance for applicants](#)

4.10 Peer reviewers are expected to follow the [guidance for peer reviewers](#)

5. Monitoring and Evaluation

5.1 MRC will develop relevant metrics to monitor and evaluate compliance with this policy including:

5.1.1 Review of data from annual Researchfish® reporting by grant holders

5.1.2 Review of MRC Centres and Institutes

5.1.3 Undertaking one-off evaluation and audits, such as review of grant proposals, as appropriate.

6. Approval and Review

6.1 This policy will be reviewed and updated by MRC staff.

6.2 This review will take account of relevant new policies developed by UKRI or its constituent Councils.

7. Associated MRC guidance

7.1 Guidance relevant to this policy includes:

7.1.1 [MRC guidance on Sex in Experimental Design of Research](#)

7.1.2 [MRC applicant guidance](#)

7.1.3 [MRC peer reviewer guidance](#)