How do we know that our research is 'inclusive'?

*COVID-19 has led to new ways of working which have transformed research practices. This has created opportunities for research cultures to be more inclusive and accessible- especially to those for whom the university is a barrier. However, post-pandemic, research cultures also need to change. In this post, **Stuart Read, Anne Parfitt** and **Tanvir Bush** outline three provocations that researchers can ask as part of an inclusive research practice.*

The Coronavirus pandemic has forced researchers to fundamentally rethink our research practice in ways that require and value different forms of working. These shifts, for example around our accommodation of technology, have the potential to make research cultures more open to individuals who experience barriers within traditional academic systems, such as disabled people and individuals with long-term health conditions. As a result, to return to 'business as usual' following the pandemic will be an injustice to all. How then, can we ensure that research practices post-pandemic, remain accessible and inclusive?

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To engage in inclusive research, we briefly want to explore three provocation questions that we can all begin to focus on as researchers. These questions are intersectional and apply variously to researchers regardless of whether the university has been a space that has historically served them well or not.

1. Who is meaningfully included in the research culture?

To develop inclusive research, we need to understand how to create a research culture that includes, rather than excludes, unrepresented groups. There are no definitive rules on what inclusive research is, nor how it is done. However, the focus is on working with underrepresented groups, such as disabled people, to shift the balance of power away from the researcher so that those with lived experience can have an authentic voice in shaping the research process. For example, principles of inclusive research within Disability Studies include disabled people having collaborative ownership of the research process and a guarantee that they are able to participate in ways that are accessible to their needs, and that the content of the research is focused on furthering disability equality.

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This means we have to be willing to hear the voices of those who have been excluded, in order to understand which research processes work, and which do not. We need to be open to trying new things and be aware that we will likely get things wrong – but getting things wrong is important in allowing us to learn and improve. By sticking to what we already know, rather than committing to making our research more inclusive, we are continuing and endorsing existing exclusionary practices.

2. Who and/or what is shaping the research process?

With this provocation, we need to think about the potentially competing research requirements that are at play, and which of these are guiding decisions about individual projects. Examples might include ensuring that the needs of participants are met, while also navigating academic protocols, handling the finite resources allocated for the research, and any requirements from funders. This can lead to difficult trade-offs between these potentially competing research requirements. In some cases, researchers may be reluctant to work with underrepresented groups due to perceived concerns about possible challenges and barriers that may be encountered. But, for research to be inclusive, we need to rethink these perceived challenges and see them as an opportunity to learn and change the status quo. In other words, changing narratives to ensure that research is guided by the needs and lived experience of the unrepresented people involved, rather than traditional academic cultures and expertise. For instance, researchers need to be aware that inclusive research may be resource intensive, but this work should be judged positively on its commitment to accessibility, rather than devalued because of concerns that this research will be 'more financially costly', or because it will 'take more time to complete'.

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3. How are contributions in the research process being evidenced?

For this final provocation, it is important to think about the role that underrepresented groups play in the research process. We need to consider both the previous provocations in tandem: people who experience barriers to participating in academia cannot experience inclusive research if projects are being driven by a conventional academic agenda. For example, a successful project may be judged according to the quality and/or quantity of journal articles and book chapters it generates. Underrepresented individuals may have been essential to the successful completion of a project, in terms of sharing their lived experiences as data, but may never be able to demonstrate their involvement. Therefore, we need to think about what outputs can be created which value rather than exclude such contributions.

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In addition, involvement in research is a finite process, so how can we ensure that underrepresented groups who have participated in the research are not viewed as a redundant commodity once a project has ended? This is particularly important if researchers receive a salary and have another project to progress to, which may not be the case for other people involved.

Closing remarks

In times of considerable turmoil and change for academia, researchers are presented with an important opportunity to challenge traditional research cultures to make a lasting commitment to engage in accessible and inclusive research practices. Doing so will benefit [all minority groups and the wider research community](#). However, inclusive research does not stop at the three provocations described above, which are only brief outlines, and could be expanded upon, and/or other provocations added. It is important for researchers to think critically about provocations which are tailored to their work, so that their commitment to inclusive research is promoted from the outset of any project they are, or become, involved in.

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