CRAC
The Career Development Organisation

Inclusive selection and support for the Future Leaders Fellowship scheme

—

Investigation of current practice and identification of good practice examples

vitae
realising
the potential
of researchers

December 2023

Inclusive selection and support for the Future Leaders Fellowship scheme. An Investigation of current practice and identification of good practice examples by the Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC).

Written by Dr Katja Jonsas & Dr Robin Mellors-Bourne

Contents

1. Executive summary

The Future Leaders Fellowship (FLF), launched in 2018 by UK Research & Innovation (UKRI), is a flagship early-career researcher programme that aims to attract and develop the next generation of research and innovation leaders in the UK. It is unusual being open both to researchers across all disciplines and also to those in different working environments, including outside higher education/academia. The scheme overtly welcomes applications from individuals from diverse career backgrounds including those returning to research after a career break or time working in another employment setting. By the end of 2022, seven application rounds for funding have taken place, comprising nearly 3500 applications in total, of which 3020 were 'academic' in terms of setting (i.e. applications to an academic host organisation, which is the scope of this report).

Following significant increase in the number applications submitted in Rounds 5 and 6, UKRI introduced 'demand management' in Round 7 (launched in June 2022), through which academic host institutions are restricted in the number of applications they can put forward. The rationale for these allocations is to ensure that funding decisions can be delivered in a reasonable timescale and avoid overloading the community with peer review of the applications. In parallel, academic hosts were asked to submit a statement describing their 'inclusive selection process', which was intended to record how the host identified, supported and selected its FLF applicants.

CRAC was commissioned by UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) to undertake an investigation of the selection and support processes in academic host organisations, in which the key aims were:

- To understand how inclusive their processes are when selecting between applicants;
- To identify and understand the preparation and support provided to potential and final applicants, how this varies and whether it is inclusive;
- To identify, record and disseminate examples of good practice in this context; and
- To recommend any potential adjustments to FLF processes that could enhance inclusivity during selection, and any further data or investigations that would enhance/sustain this.

The scope of this study was academic host organisations (universities and research institutes). A mixed-method approach was implemented, drawing on the applicant and award data available, the 99 inclusive selection statements submitted by the academic host organisations, and primary research in the form of a total of 24 interviews with staff in a purposive sample of 12 academic host organisations, and a survey of FLF applicants in Rounds 6 and 7 which drew 438 responses. This report presents results and findings from the research, mini-case studies of good and novel practice that we identified, areas for improvement and a range of recommendations.

Overall findings

Analysis of applications submitted to Rounds 1-7 and of awards in Rounds 1-6 suggest no quantitative evidence for a pressing 'diversity problem' to be fixed. The profile of applicants in Round 7 is broadly reflective of the population from which it is drawn in terms of key protected characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and disability. However, there is some evidence that applications – and subsequent awarding – are less balanced in relation to broad disciplinary groupings and also institutional provenance.

The introduction of demand management in Round 7 limited the number of applications that host organisations could put forward, resulting in a higher level of competition within some. The resulting more strenuous internal selection required by those hosts heightens potential concerns about maintaining inclusivity. However, the evidence available suggests that most host organisations' processes to identify, attract, select and support FLF applicants in Round 7 did not differ hugely from those used in previous rounds. While there is no data yet about any effect of this demand management on awarding, it was resulted in a shift in balance of the provenance of applications, reducing the proportion from large research-intensive institutions.

However, there is evidence that in Round 7 more host institutions were concerned about diversity and inclusion in their FLF application operations and many introduced enhancements to their activities that aimed either to make them more inclusive or to result in greater participation by researchers in under-represented groups. The requirement to provide an inclusive selection statement has prompted hosts to assess their attraction, selection and support processes, and/or encouraged them to introduce enhancements. That said, our overall judgement – as some elements of these operations fall short of what would be regarded as best practice in inclusive recruitment and selection in some private sector organisations – is that there is scope to do more.

Attraction

When promoting the FLF opportunity, most hosts used a variety of channels to advertise the opportunity, both openly and through networks. Promoting opportunities openly is regarded as the starting point for fair and merit-based recruitment, as reliance solely on academics' networks for FLF promotion will favour those who have had more opportunities to join those networks and become more 'visible' than others.

A few hosts tasked senior researchers with approaching potential applicants known to be from under-represented groups, while others used institutional staff networks (such as of disabled staff, LGBQT+ or ethnic minority staff) to help to diversify the applicant pool. These networks seem to offer the chance practically to reach more deeply into certain under-represented groups to try to attract researchers who could be potential applicants.

A small number of hosts have conducted diversity reviews of the language used to describe the FLF opportunity, to avoid stereotyping and putting off some potential FLF applicants, but any rewriting of guidance and information about the scheme needs to be carefully conducted so as not to mis-portray key issues or requirements.

Selection

Several hosts have tried to lower the barrier for prospective applicants by a 'light touch' approach, encouraging submission of an outline or expression of interest, which takes less effort than a full draft application. This should help to attract applicants with less confidence that they will be successful but could result in larger numbers of such applications which will need to be triaged.

Selection of FLF applicants that wholly or heavily relies on written submission documents can disadvantage non-native English speakers or those with certain learning conditions. Many hosts are shifting the balance between written application documents and other selection activities, introducing activities such as interviews at various stages and in a few cases a pitch process, presentation or groupwork. It is widely understood that interviews or other interactive options can

enable applicants to share ideas and career aspirations in the context of their personal experiences better than through a standardised written application form. However, such activities need to be carefully designed and implemented to remain inclusive and fair. Interviews during the institutional selection stage will also be potentially valuable practice for the interview stage in UKRI's final selection process.

Two areas highlighted in guidance from UKRI for hosts writing their inclusive selection statements were the composition of panels used to assess applications and EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) training of those individuals. Many hosts reported they had proactively tried to make panels diverse in terms of discipline and gender, with far fewer seeking other dimensions of diversity such as ethnic background or different career stages. Specialist EDI or Research Office staff could play a role in oversight but were rarely fully embedded in panels. While many hosts mentioned that panel members were required to have had EDI and/or unconscious bias training, this was almost always generic in nature (and not necessarily recent), with a rarity of requirement for more specific training in inclusive recruitment or selection techniques.

An approach becoming more widely used in recruitment in the private and public sectors, to address unconscious or other bias amongst those undertaking selection, is anonymisation. A handful of hosts have experimented with this but report practical challenges with it in the academic setting. Nonetheless, such experiments are welcome and valuable as we believe there is scope to introduce anonymisation within certain specific elements of the selection process.

As the FLF scheme welcomes applications from researchers with different prior career trajectories, including those returning to research after career breaks, a widely reported challenge in FLF selection is how to take account of differing contexts consistently and fairly. A few hosts have introduced the 'narrative CV' within internal selection as a mechanism to capture wider expertise and experiences, although there remains uncertainty over how well this has worked so far in practice, for applicants and reviewers alike.

A key issue arising from this investigation of internal selection processes is their structure. Selection can be run as a single unified strategy (i.e. purely a central university-level selection process) or by devolving certain stages to units of the institution. A centralised approach is easier to manage to ensure consistency and tends to be adopted by smaller institutions. Devolving initial stages of selection to college, school or faculty level has advantages in terms of providing disciplinary expertise and the resource required to cope with the larger number of applications in a big institution, prior to central selection to develop a final short-list. However, ensuring consistency and inclusivity across a devolved approach is challenging. In general, more scrutiny and documentation appears to be needed from those adopting a devolved process than currently undertaken, to provide evidence of consistent fairness and inclusion.

Another key issue on which we saw relatively little focus in hosts' selection statements was diversity data. Our evidence-gathering suggests that while some hosts did systematically collect, analyse and report personal data about applicants, the majority did not to the extent necessary to determine whether processes are inclusive in practice. Without systematic data, it will not be known robustly whether a change introduced within the selection process helps or hinders inclusion or diversity.

Support

From the selection statements and our interviews we know that hosts are taking an individualised approach to FLF applicant support, based on applicants' needs, which in principle should be highly inclusive. That said, they tend to provide a combination of general information and advice, through workshops and group events, and a range of individualised support which ramps up as an applicant progresses towards a final application to UKRI. This can include mock interviews, mentoring and coaching. However, there is a lack of data about what support is offered to and accessed by whom, which hinders investigation of how tailored or inclusive it is in practice. Some hosts explicitly reported that they offered additional support for applicants in some disciplines, where they felt it would help them compete with applicants in disciplinary areas that have historically had high award rates, results from our FLF applicant survey suggest that this is not sufficiently widespread or effective in practice to meet their needs.

Examples of good practice

We selected and present 18 short examples of what we believe to be good and/or novel practice, that should enhance inclusion and/or lead to greater diversity in participation. There is no substantive evidence yet that these have improved outcomes, but we have identified them based on our knowledge of practice in other employment sectors. They are presented to share emerging enhancements to internal selection practice and to inspire similar innovations in future and stimulate wider discussion.

Areas for improvement

During attraction and information provision, two areas for further improvement, to diversify the range of researchers who apply, are greater use of staff diversity networks and, where external applicants are sought, more open promotions in addition to use of existing networks. In addition, establishing the diversity profile of a host's pool of eligible researchers to benchmark the profiles of those who do apply, would be valuable to review inclusiveness of current attraction activities. It would be good practice for hosts to take a more proactive approach to disseminating information about its selection process, including selection criteria and the potential reasonable adjustments that could be available in the process, as we found some evidence that not all applicants understand the selection criteria or process, either internally within the host and/or at UKRI, or the adjustments to processes that could be available.

During internal selection, most hosts continue to rely heavily on written application documents. We suggest that interviews are much more widely used to reduce that reliance on written material, but designed and managed carefully to ensure they remain inclusive.

There is also scope for the diversity of review panels to be enhanced further. Appointing individuals who represent every possible diversity characteristic to every panel is clearly impractical, but hosts could consider increasing the number of dimensions of diversity they are considering. Another strategy is to include EDI specialists or independent observers on panels or in a 'wash up' session where outcomes and processes are reviewed after a selection panel.

4

While hosts widely reported that panel members and others involved in selection had engaged in unconscious bias and/or other EDI training, we encourage much greater utilisation of training specifically designed to address EDI during recruitment and/or on inclusive selection techniques. All such training undertaken by panel members should be recorded, and there should be periodic 'refresh' of such training.

The inclusive selection statements provided by hosts suggest that some are not systematically recording what takes place within in different units operating in a devolved approach to selection. There is scope to improve the evidence about such operations to increase assurance that there is consistency and fairness across different units within a devolved structure.

A big area for improvement concerns 'EDI data', i.e. personal data about applicants. Very few hosts reported gathering data to an extent that allows them to demonstrate that selection is inclusive and equitable, or to prove the impact of process enhancements. In principle, data on as many protected characteristics as possible need to be accessed or gathered for/from every applicant, so the profile of those at each successive stage of the selection process can be analysed and reported. Working out how to achieve this effectively is a crucial step in progress towards more inclusive internal processes for the FLF scheme or other selection.

Evidence about the provision of support to applicants, and whether it is inclusive for all types of prospective applicant and discipline, is somewhat equivocal. There was some evidence from applicants suggesting that some groups felt less supported than others. The same applied to the provision of feedback. Understanding what needs to be improved will require more consistent gathering of documentation of the support that is provided, and to whom, and collection and review of feedback from applicants at different stages.

Recommendations

For host organisations

- We recommend all hosts adopt a culture of review and enhancement in relation to their FLF processes, underpinned by recording data about the profile of applicants at different stages of the selection process;

- There needs to be much more thorough and systematic gathering (in collaboration with and taking expert guidance from human resources colleagues) or collection and recording of data about applicants, including personal and protected characteristics, to enable analysis of applicant profiles at each stage of the selection process so that the inclusiveness of each stage or activity can be assessed;

- We recommend incremental improvements to attraction strategies, based on open promotion of the opportunity but also more use of diversity networks to increase levels of interest among researchers in those groups;

- There is scope for clearer provision of information about hosts' internal selection processes, including the criteria used and more overt promotion of opportunities to seek reasonable adjustments, so that the full range of potential applicants all have sufficient insight to make informed decisions and develop well-founded applications;

- Particularly for those using devolved elements of their selection process, we strongly recommend more systematic documentation about processes and criteria to be used, and better monitoring of devolved processes and participation, to ensure consistency and fairness across different disciplinary areas;

- We recommend that hosts undertake a diversity review of their selection processes, paying particular attention to the composition of panels and their expertise in relation to the scheme and diversity considerations, that panel members have recent and appropriate training in inclusive selection techniques, and that related selection activities themselves are inclusive;

- We recommend that hosts, individually and/or together, consider how to evaluate contextual issues during selection and develop guidelines so this can be approached and implemented consistently across selection processes;

- Finally, we recommend that host organisations take the opportunity to reflect on their learning in relation to developing more inclusive selection for the FLF scheme and translate this learning so that other selection processes can also be enhanced.

For UKRI

- The recent introduction of demand management should be retained as data so far suggest it has made the scheme more inclusive by broadening the footprint of hosts with applicants and awards, including more smaller and specialised institutions;

- To increase transparency and accelerate the progress of hosts in collecting and analysing applicant profile data, UKRI should continue to publish EDI data about FLF applications and awards and consider requiring academic hosts to provide recent profile data to accompany their inclusive selection statement. If so, UKRI should also partner with other funders and schemes to reduce fragmented data gathering and potential tensions with requests from others;

- The requirement for academic host organisations to provide an inclusive selection statement for each application round (or updates to the previous one) should continue, although the guidance/prompts given to hosts should be reviewed in the context of findings of this report;

- To encourage a culture of review and improvement, UKRI should conduct a diversity review of its own process for selection of FLF final applications and publish the results;

- It would be valuable for all parties for UKRI to lead an investigation into methods for fair and consistent assessment of contextual issues in selection for FLF or related funding applications, and share any good practice identified.

2. Introduction, context and aims

2.1 Introduction

UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) has since 2018 been the UK's national funding agency for science and research. It aims to strengthen and promote world-leading research and to translate excellent research into positive outcomes for the economy and society, fostering innovation across and between all disciplines. Since foundation, one of its strategic priorities has been to nurture the pipeline of talent in order to sustain continued excellence in research and innovation in the UK.

The Future Leaders Fellowship (FLF) scheme was launched in 2018 by UKRI as its flagship early-career researcher programme aiming to attract and develop the next generation of research and innovation leaders in the UK. It is targeted at researchers who are either at the stage of establishing independence or developing their own ambitious research plans within a commercial setting. While it is located alongside schemes from other funders which also aim to develop world-class research and innovation leaders, it is unusual in the UK in being open both to researchers across all disciplines and also to those in different working environments, including outside higher education/academia.

When taken up on a full-time basis, the FLF follows a '4+3' model in which a fellowship is funded for four years but with the option to apply subsequently to renew for up to three additional years, thereby offering a long period of support so that difficult challenges can be tackled and novel or adventurous approaches deployed. The scheme overtly welcomes applications from individuals from diverse career backgrounds including those returning to research after a career break or time working in another role. This is reflected in its relatively wide eligibility criteria; applicants are not required to have a doctorate (or a specific period of postdoctoral experience) and can have either an open-ended or fixed-term employment position. Applicants can come from inside or outside the UK but the fellowship has to be hosted at a UK institution. In these respects the scheme seeks to attract and retain research and innovation talent in the UK and to facilitate career paths that span the academic and business sectors.

At the time of this research, seven application rounds for funding had taken place, comprising nearly 3500 applications in total, of which 3020 were 'academic' in terms of their host's setting. Selection within Round 7 was still underway, but a total of around 500 awards were made in Rounds 1 to 6 (of which c.460 were in academic settings). The FLF scheme has funded projects ranging in value from £300,000 to over £2m.

2.2 Context

The UK Government has been increasing its investment in research and development (R&D) and trying to improve the UK's R&D strength, in line with priorities set out in the Government's 2020 'Research and Development Roadmap' which plotted potential progress towards a target for total UK investment in R&D (public and private) to reach 2.4% of GDP by 2027.[1] To maximise the potential of the UK's research and innovation capabilities the Government has recognised that the UK needs to continue to be regarded as an attractive place to undertake research and

---

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-research-and-development-roadmap

innovation activity. A strong R&D system needs to be able to attract and retain the widest possible range of talented researchers (and innovators) with the right sorts of skills to pursue and build upon research. Thus, the 'R&D People and Culture Strategy' in 2021 set out a wide-ranging vision for development of the UK's R&D talent base and to ensure it is an inclusive, dynamic, productive and sustainable ecosystem.[2] It is widely acknowledged that it is important to ensure that careers in research and innovation are open and attractive to the widest possible range of people.

One response has been UKRI's 'Equality, diversity and inclusion strategy' in 2023[3] in which two of its four objectives are:

- '*Foster a world-class research and innovation system, 'by everyone, for everyone''*; and
- '*Include and support a diversity of people and ideas through our funding and partnerships'.*

In turn, in order to secure the second of these high-level objectives, UKRI commits to undertake the following activities:

- '*Innovating, piloting, and investing in interventions to support a diverse portfolio of ideas and people';*
- '*Developing and investing in initiatives to increase the diversity of people able to apply for, participate in and benefit from our investments in research and innovation.'*

With this strategic underpinning at UKRI, and the wider context of increased concerns for equity, diversity and inclusion within the UK's research and innovation ecosystem, it is timely for UKRI to examine whether the FLF scheme is as inclusive as it could be in its operations and is effective in supporting the diversity of research and innovation talent that it has sought since inception.

2.3 FLF selection processes

Although much more detail is given later in this report about processes undertaken by academic host organisations to select and support applicants, it may be useful as context to summarise the trajectory of an FLF application, which is multi-stage. The first stage in any application is for a prospective FLF applicant to submit an outline proposal to their proposed host institution. Where a host uses a devolved selection process, initial selection is undertaken within a department or school/college prior to a subsequent institution-level selection stage. Many institutions, especially smaller ones, operate a single institution-wide process. The outcome of these internal selection processes is a short-list of applicants who are selected by the institution and whose applications are enhanced with the support of the host and submitted by it to UKRI for final selection. Although some support for all applicants is provided at various stages of the process, institutions are likely to provide significantly more support to those they select as short-listed applicants to improve their chances of selection by UKRI.

In practice, for final selection by UKRI, the institution first provides outline applications for its short-listed candidates, which are used by UKRI to gauge resourcing of peer review and are not assessed, although by this stage FLF applicants must have ensured support from their

---

[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-and-development-rd-people-and-culture-strategy

[3] https://www.ukri.org/publications/ukris-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy/

prospective host institution.[4] The final applications that the host forwards are peer reviewed for UKRI by three independent experts, and applicants invited to respond to those reviewers' comments. The applications (with comments) are further assessed by FLF 'sift panels' from which selected applicants are then invited to interview with a panel.[5] A final decision is made after that interview. Although not the subject of this research, UKRI's own selection process is well-documented. It also records key diversity characteristics on the applicants put forward by host organisations and awardees, publishes these data regularly and has benchmarked these profiles against eligible UK academic staff.

In Rounds 6 and 7, the entire process has been taking around 12 months to complete, from initial expression of interest to the host to announcement of award by UKRI. For Round 7, the earliest date for outline applications to UKRI was 6 September 2022, while full applications opened on 13 September and closed on 6 December, with final results communicated in autumn 2023.

Due to progressive increase in the number of applications to the scheme, UKRI introduced 'demand management' in Round 7 (which was launched in June 2022)[6] through which academic host institutions are restricted in the number of applications they can put forward. UKRI stated that this was to ensure that funding decisions could be delivered in a reasonable timescale and to avoid overloading the community with peer review of the applications. An application cap was calculated for each academic institution based on the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff it submitted to the 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF). Thus, for Round 7, academic hosts were divided into six bands. The five 'largest' hosts were allowed to submit up to 10 applications each, with progressively smaller caps applied to institutions in bands based on their FTE staff submitted to REF 2021, with the majority (95 institutions) allowed to submit up to two applications. Academic organisations which did not submit staff to REF 2021 could also submit a maximum of two applications, while research institutes were not subject to this cap.

The introduction of demand management will have had implications for some host institutions in their selection and support of applicants, with some larger institutions having to select much more strenuously, reducing a large number of initial applications down to the number of final applications allowed under their allocation. More detail about trends in applications and awards is provided in the next chapter.

In parallel, in Round 7, academic hosts were asked to submit a statement describing their 'inclusive selection process', which was intended to record how the host identified, supported and selected their FLF applicants. The introduction of demand management and provision of inclusive selection statements make this study very timely.

We emphasise that this research looks exclusively at the internal processes within academic host organisations (such as a university or research institute), i.e. prior to submission of the application to UKRI. We have not considered processes undertaken in other types of host organisation, nor the final selection process by UKRI.

---

[4] Round 8 Guidance for Academic-hosted Applicants

[5] Website https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/future-leaders-fellowships-round-7/

[6] https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/UKRI-251122-Funding-Opp-FutureLeadersFellowshisRound7-GuidanceAcademicHostedApplicants.pdf

2.4 Project aims and scope

We interpreted the high-level aims of UKRI in commissioning this new project as follows:

- To understand how inclusive the processes of academic host organisations are when selecting between applicants to put forward;

- To identify and understand the preparation and support provided to potential and final applicants, how this varies between types of host organisations and whether it is inclusive;

- To identify, record and disseminate examples of good practice in this context; and

- To recommend any potential adjustments to FLF processes that could enhance inclusivity during selection, and any further data or investigations that would enhance/sustain this.

The scope of this research was agreed to be academic host organisations only, comprising universities or other higher education (HE) providers and research institutes. The aim was to investigate practice to date but focus particularly on recent rounds and Round 7 in particular (for which demand management was implemented). We proposed and designed a mixed-methods approach, including secondary and primary research:

- Analysis of existing scheme data across all rounds, to investigate trends in relation to applications and awards;

- Analysis of all the inclusive selection statements provided by academic host institutions submitting applications in Round 7, from which to identify potentially interesting practice and develop a purposive sample of institutions for deeper investigation;

- Primary research through interviews with staff involved in FLF support and selection within that sample of institutions, to understand policies, processes and any impacts, and potentially develop short case studies to illustrate good practice identified;

- Primary research through a survey of applicants to recent rounds, to obtain the experiences and perspectives of applicants, including some whose applications were not selected by their host organisation for submission to UKRI.

Research questions and themes

We sought to investigate the following research topics and specific questions within the project, to the varying depths that could be feasible (again noting that in all cases here, 'host organisation' is restricted to academic host organisations):

- How did host organisations promote the FLF opportunity, including externally beyond their institution where they did that?

- To what extent did host organisations ensure that promotion to and identification of potential applicants was inclusive and did not disadvantage any groups of prospective applicants?

- What processes were used to identify and select potential and final candidates?

- Given the pan-UKRI nature of the FLF programme, to what extent was selection undertaken within specific disciplinary locations as opposed to centrally in a host?

- How were applicants supported through any internal selection processes, and was that support inclusive?

- In response to both demand management and the requirement to provide an inclusive selection statement, how did the selection process used in Round 7 differ from those in previous FLF rounds (or used for other purposes in the host institution)?

- Were additional and/or specific actions/practices introduced in Round 7 to promote uptake by applicants from diverse backgrounds or non-traditional career trajectories?

- To what extent were the processes and support evaluated to demonstrate whether they were inclusive and/or enabled a greater diversity of potential and final candidates?

- Were particular barriers found to implementing more inclusive selection processes?

- Did the implementation of demand management in Round 7 have effects on selection processes, and/or on the inclusiveness of those processes?

- To what extent is the diversity (profile) of applicants monitored at different stages, and are there barriers to collecting and/or reporting diversity data relating to the scheme?

3. Project approach and methodologies

3.1 Broad approach

As indicated in chapter 2, our project design could broadly be described as a mixed-methods approach, combining secondary and primary research, the latter both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Figure 3.1 illustrates the key strands of activity and methodologies and how they related to each other during implementation of the project.

Figure 3.1 Diagram of the project activities
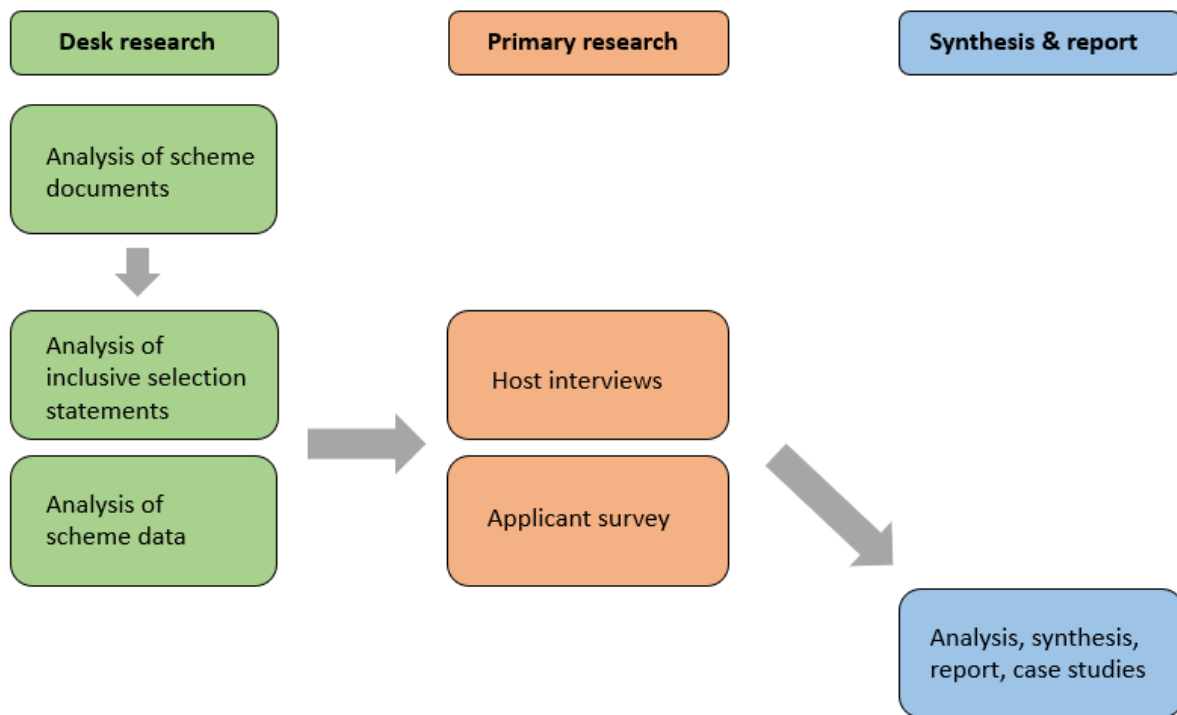
3.2 Research strands and samples achieved

Desk research

There were two broad aspects to our desk research, following review of FLF scheme documents to understand fully the intended operations of the scheme and guidance issued to host institutions and applicants. The first was **analysis of the inclusive selection statements** provided to UKRI by academic host organisations submitting applications to Round 7. All 112 statements (of which 99 were from HE providers) provided to us by UKRI were reviewed, analyses and coded using a framework based on our potential research questions and existing knowledge of inclusive selection practice. This enabled us to isolate examples of distinctive or interesting practice with a likelihood of being inclusive (and the reverse). It also enabled us to ascertain different broad approaches to selection or support, and collate certain high-level data about applications. From

this analysis, we selected a short-list of potential host institutions within which we felt it would be valuable to undertake more detailed investigation (primary research).

The second phase of desk research was **analysis of existing scheme data**, by which we refer to a selection of information held by UKRI about every FLF application received by it and about awardees throughout the lifetime of the scheme, provided to us by UKRI following extraction from its grant information systems. This provided us with some systematic data about applications and awards in all rounds. We analysed this quantitatively in excel, to derive statistics about the profile of applicants and awardees and how these have changed by Round. They are the source of much of the data in the next chapter.

Primary research

Within the desk research phase we had selected a purposive sample of 14 academic host organisations (and three reserves) within which we wanted to conduct **detailed investigations through interviews**. The institutions were deliberately selected to reveal more detail about interesting practice they had reported in their inclusive selection statements and to provide insights from a range of approaches taken in different institutional settings. Invitations to participate in interviews were sent to the current registered FLF contact at each of these institutions. Three of the 14 institutions invited were not able to take part, so two on the reserve list were engaged. In terms of the 'shape' of the achieved sample, five were Russell Group members, three were Post-92 institutions, four were research-active institutions in neither of those groups and one a specialist. They included institutions in England, Scotland and Wales. Most importantly, they reflected a wide range of approaches to aspects of FLF selection and support.

We undertook semi-structured online interviews with representatives of these host organisations, specifically targeting interviews both with a relevant staff member in their Research Office or similar unit known to coordinate their FLF applications, and with an appropriate member of senior academic staff who oversaw the scheme. In practice, due to preference of the interviewees, around half the organisations engaged in a single interview with both types of staff together, while the other half were conducted as originally intended (i.e. parallel interviews). Altogether, 24 interviews were undertaken across the 13 organisations, in March and April 2023.

We emphasise that the size of the sample was very modest and it was highly purposive, with the specific intention to focus on distinctive and/or good practice (rather than being designed with any intention of being representative of all institutions submitting Round 7 applications).

The remaining major strand of activity was to design and implement an **online survey of applicants** to recent FLF rounds. We felt that this would offer the opportunity to obtain 'on the ground' experiences and perspectives from applicants themselves, to complement the information from inclusive selection statements and interviews (and, perhaps, to some extent, enabling some validation of whether institutionally reported processes were experienced in practice as reported). The survey could also engage some applicants whose applications were not selected by their host organisations during internal selection, that might also reveal local variations in implementation of practice and/or differences for certain groups, depending on the level of engagement. The online survey instrument contained a combination of closed questions to provide quantitative results about certain issues, and open-ended questions which could draw

deeper information and potentially richer insights into individual experiences. Invitations to the survey were issued on our behalf by UKRI to final applicants to Rounds 6 and 7 and we also requested host organisations to circulate them to applicants at all stages of application including some not selected by their institution. The survey was open for responses between late March and late May 2023. Details of the response sample achieved are given in Appendix 1; in total we obtained 438 useable responses, including 31 awardees, 350 others those whose application had been selected by their host and submitted to UKRI (including some pending in Round 7) and 55 who had not been selected by their host organisation (with a very few apparently still pending within their institution). It is not possible to calculate an overall response rate, as we do not know how many invitations were issued by host institutions. However, a response rate of 36% was achieved amongst the applicants and awardees to whom UKRI sent invitations. It is not feasible to calculate how representative the overall response sample was of the entire target population, but we can state with confidence that the achieved sample reflected the range of potential respondents targeted.

3.3 About this report

Following implementation of the research activities above, analysis of data from each strand was analysed and results developed, which were then drawn together to synthesise overall findings and highlight issues of interest. This report contains those results and findings. Following presentation of analysis of scheme data to identify trends in the profile of applications and awards in chapter 4, we have attempted to collect research results and findings thematically in chapter 5, under the key themes of attraction, selection and support, whilst also trying to highlight key issues that emerge. These are pulled together in chapter 6, which offers overall findings and short case study descriptions of what we judged as good, novel or interesting practice or approaches, along with identification of areas for concern and potential improvement, as well as making some recommendations for institutions and UKRI.

Our approach has been to name institutions only where we directly exemplify good or novel practice (including the short case studies), but otherwise to maintain anonymity. This reflects the approach taken in our primary research, where we invited interviewees and survey respondents to speak about their experiences and perceptions on the basis that their anonymity would be maintained unless we sought their permission to describe and attribute their practice.

4. Trends and profile of FLF participants

As context for this research, this chapter presents analysis of the applications to the scheme since 2018 and awards made to date, in terms of the numbers of applications (and awards) and the profiles of applicants of those two types. Given the project focus, this analysis considers only applications to 'academic' host organisations, not those submitted to hosts in business or other employment settings.

4.1 Numbers of applications

As the scheme became more established, the number of academic applications rose significantly in Round 5 and especially Round 6 (Figure 4.1). Following 300-400 applications in each of broadly biannual Rounds 1 to 4, over 500 applications were received in Round 5 (June 2020) and almost 700 in Round 6 in February 2021. At the same time, the number of awards in each round has remained broadly consistent since Round 2. An effect of these changes is that the rate of success of final applications to UKRI fell from around one in four or five in early rounds to around one in ten in Round 6.

Figure 4.1 FLF academic applications and awards by Round
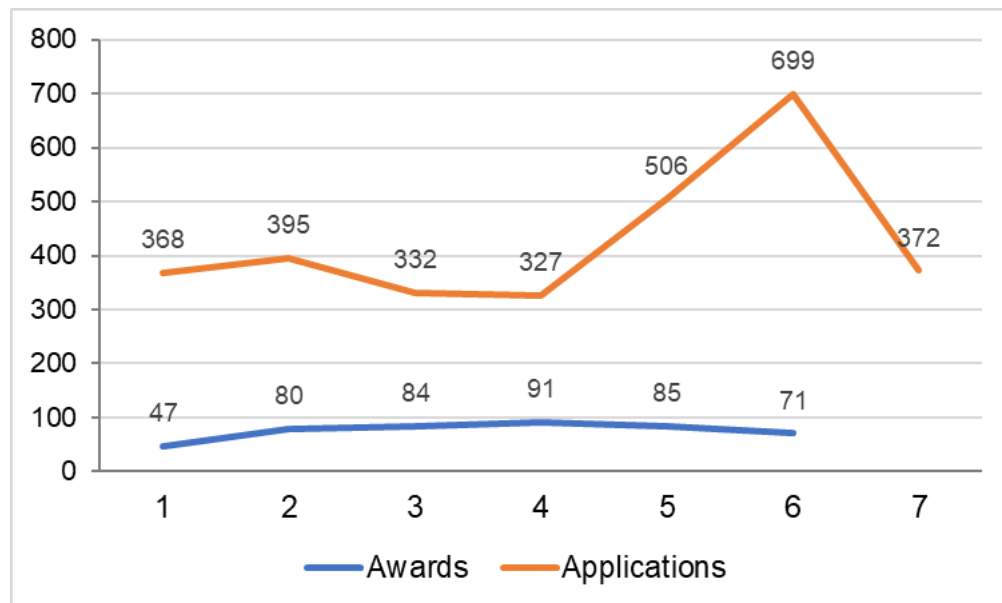
The increase in number of applications per round could relate to changes in call frequency, as after the first four biannual rounds the scheme shifted to a broadly annual call. In addition, there may have been some uncertainty about whether the FLF scheme would continue beyond its initial funding period of six rounds, which could have increased interest in Round 6.

As noted in the previous chapter, the increase in applications led to the introduction of demand management by UKRI in Round 7 through which academic host institutions have an allocation of how many applications they can put forward. Interestingly, application data from Round 7 indicate

that the introduction of institutional allocations through demand management did not influence the number of academic hosts that submitted applications. 101 universities/HE providers and 16 research institutes submitted applications in Round 7, whereas in Round 6 there were 99 universities/HE providers and 23 research institutes. However, between Round 6 and Round 7, the cap helped to reduce the total number of applications from academic hosts from 699 to 344, i.e. by over half. This is important context as we examine the extent to which internal selection by academic hosts is inclusive, as some universities will have had to undertake much more active selection between their candidates.

In practice, the brunt of this reduction between Rounds 6 and 7 was felt by the largest institutions (Figure 4.2). The proportion of applications provided by the 'Top 6' institutions (i.e. those which made the largest numbers of applications in Round 6) fell from 26% in Round 6 to 14% in Round 7. Numerically, there were some big 'losers' (in terms of numbers of applications made to UKRI) due to demand management, including University College London and the Universities of Oxford and Warwick, all of which made at least 20 fewer applications in Round 7 than in Round 6. Some other universities had proportionally similar reductions. Viewed another way, the percentage of applications submitted by Russell Group member universities decreased from 56% in Round 6 to 46% in Round 7, while the number of applications submitted by other mission group institutions rose (including Post-92 institutions, most strongly). That said, only 36 institutions submitted fewer applications than their allotted cap, so active demand management was not necessarily undertaken by all institutions.

Figure 4.2 Proportion of applications in key institutional groupings, for Rounds 6 and 7
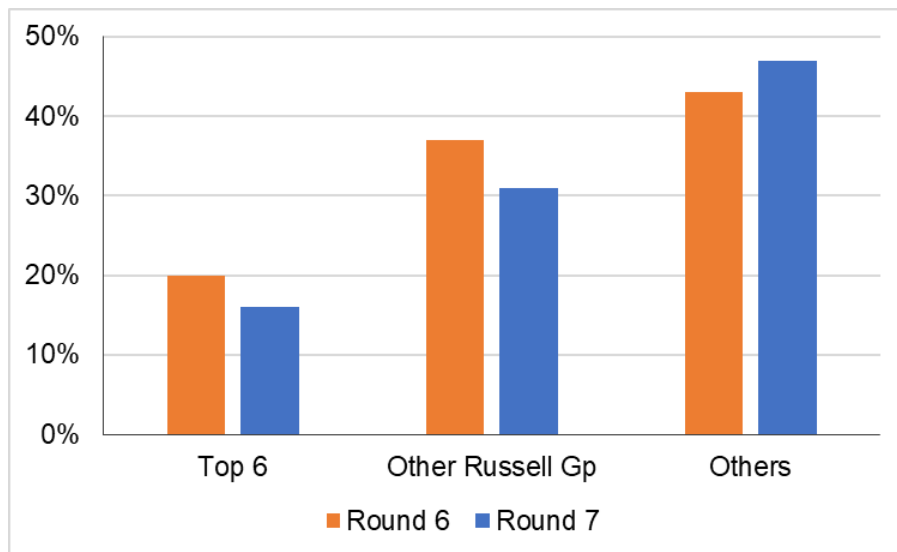
4.2 Profile of applicants and awardees

Personal characteristics

Some analysis of the profile of applicants in Rounds 1 to 4 was reported by the Institute of Employment Studies (IES) in its FLF evaluation scoping study[7] although we believe this was amongst all applications rather than purely those to academic hosts. Analysis was of the final applications to UKRI, after any internal selection by hosts and the profiles published may not reflect the profiles of those who made initial applications to their chosen host. The IES summary indicated an imbalance by gender in applications (with 38% of applicants being female), but related this to the high proportion of applications at that time in engineering and physical sciences (fields where men are the strong majority). Despite that imbalance in applications, 46% of awards were to female applicants (i.e. higher than for male applicants, with the award rate to females rising across the four rounds.

Around two thirds of applicants were reported to be aged 31-40 years (and 46% aged 31-35). In terms of nationality, IES reported that half of all applicants by that time were from UK nationals and half non-UK nationals. The award rate to UK applicants was higher than for others, overall, although that difference appeared to have reduced with time.

Only 3% of applicants to Rounds 1 to 4 had declared a disability, which was reported to be lower than in the typical UK early-career research population. As only 13 awards had been made to disabled applicants, statistics on award rates and declared disability were not considered reliable.

Across all nationalities, roughly one in five of all applicants were reported to be from minority ethnic groups, although these applicants only won 14% of the awards. Amongst those of UK nationality, around 12% of applicants were of ethnic minority background and (other than in Round 6) they were also under-represented in awards made. IES noted with concern that in Round 3, those with a white background were three times more likely to gain an award than those from an ethnic minority background, and in Round 4 nearly double. Across Rounds 1 to 4, there was an eight-percentage-point difference in the awarding rate between white and ethnic minority applicants overall.[8] The presence of such a potential 'awarding gap' reinforces the need to consider inclusiveness of the scheme and its selection processes, hence this new project.

In our new study, we had certain data for applications up to Round 7 and full data about applications and awards for Rounds 1 to 6, so could extend the IES analysis. Results for applicants to academic hosts are presented in summary form in Table 4.1, where we highlight overall statistics for Rounds 1 to 6 inclusive, and for Rounds 6 and 7 separately, conscious that Round 7 included demand management. Comparable results for awardees are shown in Table 4.2 (data on awards were not available for Round 7 as selection was still in progress).

---

[7] *UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships: Evaluation Scoping & Feasibility Study*, Institute of Employment Studies, 2021

[8] We infer that these statistics were for all nationalities, not for UK only

Table 4.1 Characteristics of applicants to academic host organisations (from scheme data)

	Rounds 1-6		Round 6 only		Round 7	
Population	**2630**		**700**		**370**	
Gender						
Female	1055	40.1%	310	44.6%	175	47.3%
Male	1510	57.4%	370	53.2%	185	50.0%
Not disclosed/unknown	65	2.5%	15	2.2%	10	2.7%
Nationality						
UK	1260	47.9%	345	49.3%	195	52.7%
Other	1300	49.4%	345	49.3%	170	45.9%
Unknown	70	2.7%	10	1.4%	5	1.4%
Ethnicity (UK nationals only)						
Ethnic minority	150	11.9%	35	10.1%	25	12.8%
White	1045	82.9%	295	85.5%	165	84.6%
Not disclosed/unknown	65	5.2%	15	4.3%	5	2.6%
Ethnicity (all nationalities)						
Ethnic minority	500	19.0%	145	20.7%	80	21.6%
White	1970	75.0%	520	74.3%	280	75.7%
Not disclosed/unknown	155	5.9%	35	5.0%	10	2.7%
Age						
< 30	135	5.1%	35	5.0%	15	4.1%
30-39	1930	73.5%	510	72.9%	270	73.0%
40-49	475	18.1%	130	18.6%	80	21.6%
Other/unknown	85	3.2%	25	3.6%	5	1.4%
Disability						
Known disability	90	3.4%	30	4.3%	15	4.1%
No known disability	2325	88.4%	615	87.9%	330	89.2%
Not disclosed/unknown	215	7.8%	55	7.6%	25	6.6%
Location when applied						
UK	2420	92.2%	645	92.1%		*na*
Other	195	7.4%	55	7.9%		*na*
Unknown	10	4.7%	0	0.0%		*na*
Host institution's Mission Group						
Russell Group	1575	60.7%	390	56.9%	170	47.2%
Post 92	265	10.2%	85	12.4%	65	18.1%
Other	545	21.0%	150	21.9%	85	23.6%
Specialist	85	3.3%	25	3.6%	15	4.2%
Research institute	125	4.8%	35	5.1%	25	6.9%

	Rounds 1-6		Round 6 only		Round 7	
Location of host institution						
England	2145	82.7%	560	81.2%	295	79.7%
Scotland	295	11.4%	80	11.6%	45	12.2%
Wales	100	3.9%	40	5.8%	20	5.4%
Northern Ireland	55	2.1%	10	1.4%	10	2.7%
Golden triangle	*535*	*20.6%*	*135*	*19.6%*	*55*	*14.9%*
Broad disciplinary group						
REF Panel A	785	29.8%	215	30.9%		*na*
REF Panel B	1155	43.9%	265	38.1%		*na*
REF Panel C	405	15.4%	110	15.8%		*na*
REF Panel D	285	10.8%	105	15.1%		*na*

Table 4.2 Characteristics of awardees (from scheme data)

	Rounds 1-6		Round 6 only	
Population	**460**		**70**	
Gender				
Female	205	44.6%	35	50.0%
Male	245	53.3%	35	50.0%
Not disclosed/unknown	10	2.2%	0	0.0%
Nationality				
UK	240	66.7%	40	57.1%
Other	100	27.8%	25	35.7%
Unknown	20	5.6%	5	7.1%
Ethnicity (UK nationals only)				
Ethnic minority	20	8.3%	5	12.5%
White	210	87.5%	35	87.5%
Not disclosed/unknown	10	4.2%	0	0.0%
Ethnicity (all nationalities)				
Ethnic minority	70	15.2%	15	21.4%
White	365	79.3%	50	71.4%
Not disclosed/unknown	25	5.4%	5	7.1%
Age				
< 30	30	6.5%	5	7.1%
30-39	355	77.2%	55	78.6%
40-49	70	15.2%	10	14.3%
Other/unknown	5	1.1%	0	0.0%
Disability				
Known disability	20	4.3%	5	7.1%
No known disability	395	85.9%	55	78.6%
Not disclosed/unknown	45	9.3%	10	13.3%

	Rounds 1-6		Round 6 only	
Location when applied				
UK	420	91.3%	55	78.6%
Other	40	8.7%	15	21.4%
Unknown	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Host institution's Mission Group				
Russell Group	340	74.7%	50	76.9%
Post 92	20	4.4%	0	0.0%
Other	75	16.5%	15	23.1%
Specialist	10	2.2%	0	0.0%
Research institute	10	2.2%	0	0.0%
Location of host institution				
England	375	82.4%	55	78.6%
Scotland	60	13.2%	10	14.3%
Wales	15	3.3%	5	7.1%
Northern Ireland	5	1.1%	0	0.0%
Golden triangle	*125*	*27.5%*	*20*	*28.6%*
Broad disciplinary group				
REF Panel A	150	32.6%	25	35.7%
REF Panel B	210	45.7%	30	42.9%
REF Panel C	60	13.0%	5	7.1%
REF Panel D	40	8.7%	10	14.3%

This analysis suggests the proportion of female applicants has continued to increase, being 45% in Round 6 and 47% in Round 7. The latest data on awards – from Round 6 – show gender parity in the <u>number</u> of awards made, so female applicants continue to have a slightly higher award rate. Further analysis reveals that the increase in proportion of female applicants results from a combination of a somewhat rising proportion of applications in social sciences, arts and the humanities (in which females are the majority of applicants) and also a rising proportion of female applicants in both physical sciences and biosciences.

The age profile has remained broadly consistent, as has the rough balance between UK and other nationals in terms of applications (although UK national applications outstripped non-UK in Round 7). However, the proportion of awards going to UK nationals remains higher, at 57% in Round 6 (and 66% for Rounds 1 to 6 combined), reflecting a higher awarding rate to UK nationals. The proportion of applicants declaring a disability rose slightly to 4% in Rounds 6 and 7, although this was the case for 7% of awardees in Round 6 suggesting a higher award rate that year.

When all nationalities are considered together, 19% of applicants in Rounds 1 to 6 identified a minority ethnic background (and 22% in Round 7). This group comprised 15% of all awards in Rounds 1 to 6, suggesting the awarding gap observed by IES has continued, but in Round 6 itself 21% of awardees had a minority ethnic background which was comparable to the 22% of applicants (so the awarding gap was not apparent in Round 6). Analysis for only UK nationals revealed a similar pattern, with rising proportions of applicants and awardees of minority ethnic background over time (and no awarding rate gap apparent in Round 6).

Analysis of disciplines and hosts

Some trends in terms of the research disciplines and also host institutions are also evident from this analysis (also summarised in Tables 4.1 and 4.2). Analysis reported by IES in its 2021 report is not comparable as it used different groupings and focused largely on awards not applications. Our analysis (for Rounds 1 to 6, as data on field of research was not yet available for Round 7 applications) suggests the proportions of applications when grouped within different REF panels[9] (A to D) have not changed markedly across this period, with the exception of some growth in Panel D subjects (the arts and humanities, broadly), as shown in Figure 4.3. When it comes to awards, much the same pattern is seen (albeit with more variations per round, due to the relatively smaller number of total awards per round), as shown in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.3 Broad disciplinary group of applications, using REF Panels A-D, by FLF round
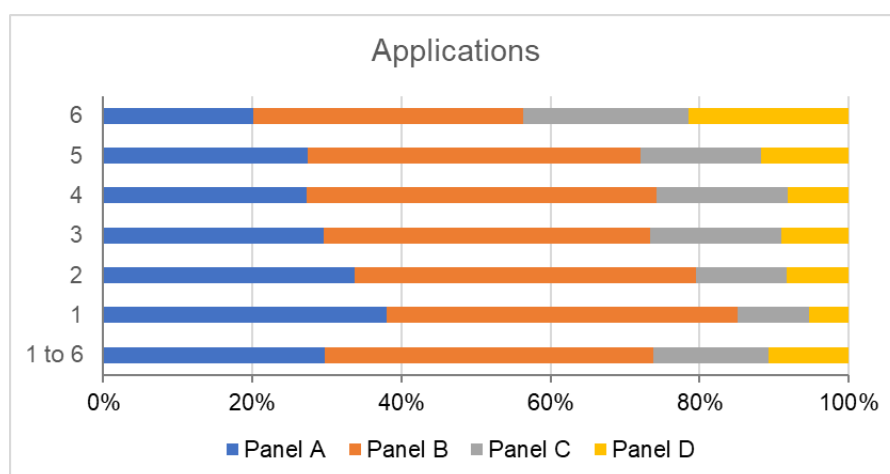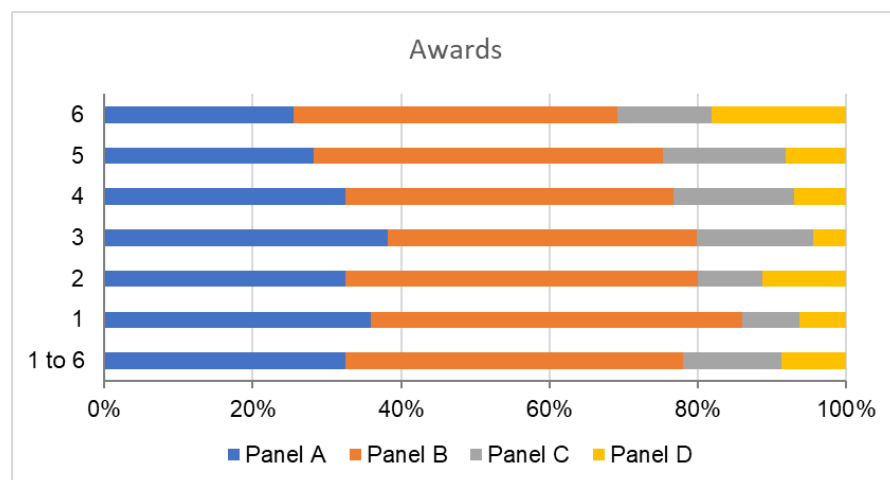

Figure 4.4 Broad disciplinary group of awards, by FLF round

---

[9] A: Biological and biomedical sciences; B: Engineering and physical sciences; C: Social sciences; D: Arts and humanities subjects

When award rates are considered (Figure 4.5), overall the highest rate has been in Panel A subjects (19%), closely followed by Panel B (18%), with Panel C and D somewhat lower at 15% and 14% respectively. However, it is worth noting that there is considerable variation by Round, and the particularly low rates of award in Round 6 are very noticeable, when there were twice as many applications as in some previous years but a broadly similar number of awards.

Figure 4.5 FLF award rates by round, for broad disciplinary groupings
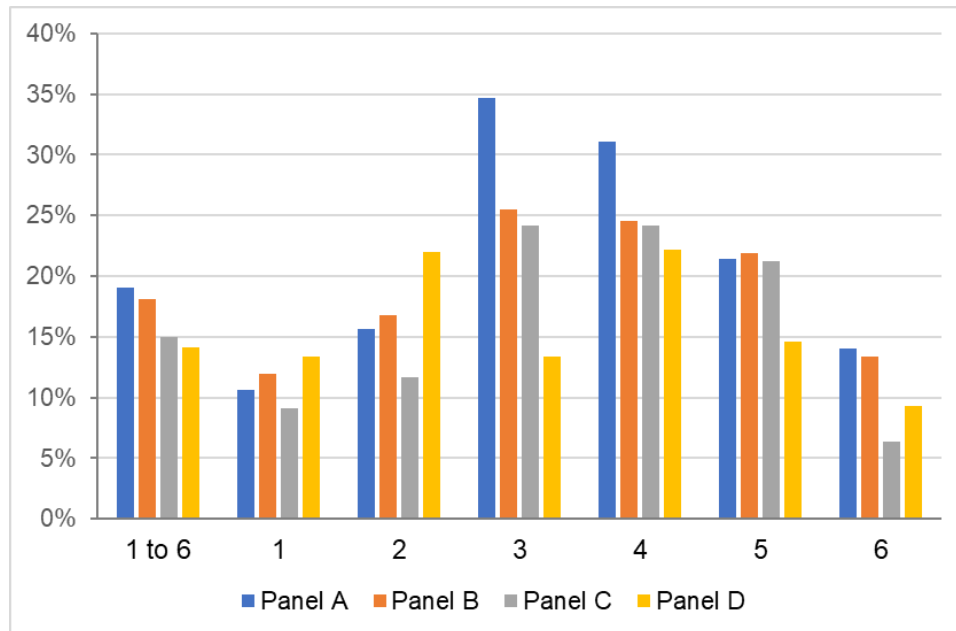
Analysis of the host institutions from which applications were submitted is also of interest, including any effects of introducing demand management. This is shown by broad mission group near the foot of Tables 4.1 and 4.2. The trend is for some decrease with time in the concentration of applications in Russell Group institutions (which comprised 61% of applications in Rounds 1 to 6 but 47% in Round 7) and a marked reduction in Round 7. A similar shift is seen in a reduction in the extent of concentration of applications within 'Golden Triangle' institutions.[10]

When awards are considered, across Rounds 1 to 6 combined, the proportion of awards to Russell Group institutions was 61% but slightly lower in Round 6 itself at 57%. The award rate for applications from Russell Group institutions was higher (22% for Rounds 1 to 6 combined) than for any other type of institution, and lowest for Post-92 institutions and research institutes (8%). Although the award rate for Russell Group institutions was lower in Round 6 at 13%, there was of a much lower rate overall in that Round (and with no awards being made to Post-92 or specialist institutions that year, or research institutes that year).

---

[10] We considered these to comprise the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford together with Imperial College, University College and King's College London

Comparison against benchmarks

The foregoing results for recent rounds do not seem to provide a statistically-driven requirement for concerns about more inclusive selection and/or support during FLF scheme applications, other than to try to counter the lower award rates for those in Panel C and D subjects and/or from institutions outside the Russell Group. What is potentially more important, however, is to compare the profiles of applicants and awardees with the profile of the academics who are eligible to apply for these awards. This could identify groups from which there are disproportionately few applicants or awards. CRAC has previously undertaken such analysis for the Royal Society's early-career fellowships, from which the Society noted that it was attracting a somewhat 'narrower' range of applicants than those who potentially could apply, with minority ethnic groups particularly under-represented.[11]

However, the wide eligibility criteria for FLF applications makes identification of a suitable comparator population challenging. Table 4.3 provides a comparison of the profile of applicants to Rounds 1-6 combined and to Round 7 with a profile based on HESA staff data for 2018/19. That year was selected given the 2018 launch of the FLF scheme and convenience in terms of ready access to data. Benchmark 1 was constructed across all disciplines to include academic staff on any type of contract, from research staff or junior lecturer level (broadly) upwards but below Professor level, irrespective of whether a doctorate was held. We excluded those aged over 50 years, given that very few FLF applicants are older than this. One caveat to note is that the profile of FLF applicants includes some located outside the UK prior to application, whereas the potential comparator group are located entirely in the UK.

We include an alternative, narrower potential comparator group ('Benchmark 2'), based on filters used in the Royal Society early-career fellowship study but broadened out to all disciplines, also shown in Table 4.3.

Comparison of the profile of applicants in Rounds 1 to 6 and in Round 7 with these two profiles suggests that in most areas the profile of FLF applicants is quite similar, given the caveats above. The biggest differences appear to lie in institutional type and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in disciplinary balance. However, these are also the variables where there is most difference between the two comparator groups, with Benchmark 2 unsurprisingly much more focused on Russell Group institutions as this is where most postdoctoral researchers are found. The fall in concentration of FLF applications from Russell Group institutions in Round 7 results in a proportion closer to that of Benchmark 1, whereas in earlier rounds it was much closer to Benchmark 2. There is some confirmation from this analysis of stakeholders' perceptions that applications from Panel B subjects were over-represented in early FLF rounds, and Panel D especially under-represented, but that this imbalance has receded, notably in Round 7.

---

[11] https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/Publications/2021/trends-ethnic-minorities-stem/Profile-of-postdoctoral-researchers-in-UK-eligible-for-RS-early-career-fellowship-programmes.pdf

Table 4.3 Key characteristics of FLF applicants and potential benchmark populations

	Rounds 1-6		Round 6 only		Round 7		HESA benchmark 1	HESA benchmark 2
Population	**2630**		**700**		**370**		109070	27850
Gender								
Female	1055	40.1%	310	44.6%	175	47.3%	49%	47%
Male	1510	57.4%	370	53.2%	185	50.0%	51%	53%
Not disclosed/unknown	65	2.5%	15	2.2%	10	2.7%	0%	0%
Nationality								
UK	1260	47.9%	345	49.3%	195	52.7%	60%	50%
Other	1300	49.4%	345	49.3%	170	45.9%	39%	49%
Unknown	70	2.7%	10	1.4%	5	1.4%	1%	1%
Ethnicity (UK nationals only)								
Ethnic minority	150	11.9%	35	10.1%	25	12.8%	11%	12%
White	1045	82.9%	295	85.5%	165	84.6%	82%	80%
Not disclosed/unknown	65	5.2%	15	4.3%	5	2.6%	7%	8%
Ethnicity (all nationalities)								
Ethnic minority	500	19.0%	145	20.7%	80	21.6%	18%	23%
White	1970	75.0%	520	74.3%	280	75.7%	74%	68%
Not disclosed/unknown	155	5.9%	35	5.0%	10	2.7%	8%	9%
Disability								
Known disability	90	3.4%	30	4.3%	15	4.1%	4%	4%
No known disability	2325	88.4%	615	87.9%	330	89.2%	96%	96%
Not disclosed/unknown	215	7.8%	55	7.6%	25	6.6%	0%	0%
Host institution's Mission Group								
Russell Group	1575	60.7%	390	56.9%	170	47.2%	46%	66%
Post 92	265	10.2%	85	12.4%	65	18.1%	25%	11%
Other	545	21.0%	150	21.9%	85	23.6%	(	(
Specialist	85	3.3%	25	3.6%	15	4.2%	29% (	23% (
Research institute	125	4.8%	35	5.1%	25	6.9%	(	(

	Rounds 1-6		Round 6 only		Round 7		HESA benchmark 1	HESA benchmark 2
Location of host organisation								
England	2145	82.7%	560	81.2%	295	79.7%	84%	84%
Scotland	295	11.4%	80	11.6%	45	12.2%	10%	10%
Wales	100	3.9%	40	5.8%	20	5.4%	4%	4%
Northern Ireland	55	2.1%	10	1.4%	10	2.7%	2%	2%
Golden triangle	535	20.6%	135	19.6%	55	14.9%	16%	22%
Disciplinary group								
REF Panel A	785	29.8%	215	30.9%	*tbc*		32%	34%
REF Panel B	1155	43.9%	265	38.1%	*tbc*		35%	35%
REF Panel C	405	15.4%	110	15.8%	*tbc*		20%	15%
REF Panel D	285	10.8%	105	15.1%	*tbc*		13%	16%

The apparent resemblance of the FLF applicant profile to Benchmark 2 probably reflects, in practice, that the majority of FLF applicants come from the same pool as those applying for other early-career fellowships which have more restrictive eligibility criteria (despite the wider FLF eligibility criteria in terms of career stage or trajectory).

In summary, from these profiles, our conclusion is that for Round 7 in particular, there is little to indicate strong under-representation of any specific groups within FLF applicants, at least on the basis of personal characteristics. Where we can see evidence for certain under-representation in previous rounds, these appear largely to have declined in Round 7. It is possible that demand management may have assisted in developing this relatively balanced situation or, certainly, has not made it worse.

However, as mentioned before, all this analysis relates only to applicants that universities put forward to UKRI, so could mask any imbalances that exist within the universities' internal selection stages, prior to them putting final applications forward to UKRI. In that respect, understanding whether those internal processes are inclusive remains important and the introduction of demand management – which has introduced stronger selection in certain institutions – could exacerbate the effect of any practice that is not inclusive.

5. FLF applicant selection and support in host organisations

5.1 Attraction

One of the aims of this project was to understand how host organisations promote the FLF opportunity and to what extent they ensure that promotion to and identification of potential applicants is inclusive and does not disadvantage any groups of prospective applicants. We start by summarising the strategies host organisations used to inform potential FLF applicants about Round 7 (based on their inclusive selection statements and our sample through interviews), and draw on FLF applicant survey data to consider applicant experiences and perspectives.

Promoting the FLF opportunity

In broad terms, we have considered two types of FLF applicant, based on their location when they prepared and/or submitted their application. 'Internal candidate' refers to an applicant who was employed or affiliated with the host organisation when they applied (for example, a post-doctoral staff member in the institution). In contrast, 'external candidate' refers to those who were based or employed somewhere else at the time of the application but sought to move to the host organisation if they were awarded a FLF fellowship.

Around half the host organisations (50 of 99) mentioned in their selection statement that they had reached out to external candidates in Round 7 to some extent, as well as to prospective internal candidates. Some hosts decided to focus solely on internal recruitment, given the timing of call (summer 2022) in relation to what they perceived as the necessary timescale for applications. One interviewee noted that as close collaboration between an applicant and potential host supervisor was necessary for a strong application, the summer timing of the Round 7 call meant it could be difficult to develop such relationships within the required timescale.

When promoting the opportunity to internal candidates, hosts cited using:

- Communication channels such as their staff intranet, news bulletins, staff networks, their website or other forms of email (85 examples);

- Established academic staff (including Deans, Heads of Research and research leaders) to cascade information about the call and/or personal approach prospective applicants (50 examples).

Some also used social media to broaden their efforts, as well as providing FLF information sessions to promote the FLF opportunity.

When promoting the opportunity to or targeting external candidates, host organisations used the following two main routes:

- Website/s (the university's website and/or via an external job or funding board, 18 examples);

- Networks (chiefly academic networks, 33 examples).

Within the latter, research leaders and other academics were commonly asked by the Research Office[12] to disseminate the FLF call to prospective external applicants through their own academic networks, as well as to identify and approach some potential applicants directly.

The FLF applicant survey confirmed these differences between internal and external applicant promotion strategies (with the caveat that these results were only from those who had responded positively to some kind of attraction activity, as people who did not express interest or apply were not captured in the survey). Around two thirds (67%) of respondents who were internal applicants said they learned about the FLF through an institutional email, newsletter or bulletin, while 21% indicated social media. One in four had been approached personally and one in five had been recommended by a peer or mentor. These results also showed that many had been reached through more than one channel.

Figure 5.1 How applicants heard about the FLF scheme, for internal and external applicants (multiple options allowed; Internal candidates: N=368; *External candidates* N=51)
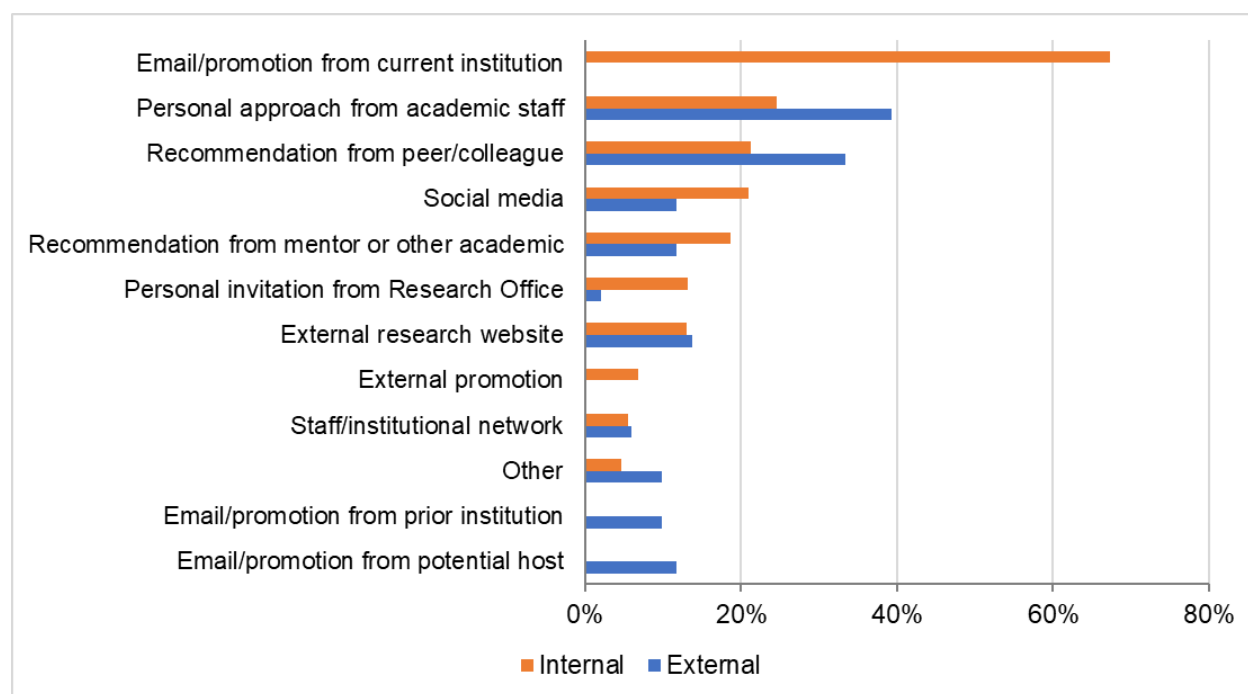
By contrast, amongst external candidates responding to the survey, 39% reported they had been personally invited or approached by a research leader from their prospective academic host and 33% said a peer or colleague researcher had recommended the scheme to them. Thus, the majority of external candidates were alerted through a personalised approach, unlike the position for internal candidates where most responded to a more open and general promotion. In principle, 'open' recruitment (i.e. through an open advertisement or mechanism) is regarded as a fairer and more inclusive approach to promotion than through a network of established researchers.

---

[12] In this report we use the term 'research office' as shorthand to denote an institution's team or entity that coordinated and supported applications to the FLF scheme

Promoting the opportunity to under-represented groups

Analysis of the inclusive selection statements suggested most host organisations preferred to use open communication channels to reach out to prospective internal applicants rather than targeted emails or via personal contacts. Two thirds of the hosts indicated that they sent information (via email or other means) to <u>all</u> academic staff, regardless of their employment status, contract type or career stage (68 examples of an 'all staff' approach).

Relatively few hosts (compared with those using open channels) reported that they specifically tried to target potential applicants in under-represented groups, but those that did indicated:

- Use of institutional 'diversity networks' supporting groups such as LGBTQ+, women, disability or ethnic minorities, to disseminate the opportunity (4 examples);

- Tasking academic leads (or professional staff) to identify and approach applicants from under-represented groups and/or from diverse career trajectories (11 examples).

When we probed in interviews whether the host organisation had done anything specific to promote the opportunity to potential applicants from under-represented backgrounds, some did refer to dissemination through institutional staff diversity networks. However, others had decided not to use them because they did not want to exclude anybody – they worried that such targeted staff networks might not be up to date and so preferred to use general research/staff mailing lists instead which they felt would have more thorough coverage and be up to date. One participant felt that they had a very diverse staff body to start with, so did not need a more targeted approach.

Was the information provided inclusive?

In their statements and interviews with us, a number of hosts reported attempts to attract a wider range of potential applicants by using different information provision strategies. One such strategy was to provide information in a range of accessible formats, including providing recorded (i.e. asynchronous) online information sessions to increase accessibility for those who worked part-time or had commitments such as caring responsibilities, in addition to their standard face-to-face and/or 'live' online sessions.

To ensure inclusive language within information about the scheme, a handful of hosts reported that they had asked an EDI specialist to undertake a 'diversity review' of materials and language used. Three institutions referred to use of a 'gender decoder' tool to ensure the language used to describe the FLF scheme was inclusive in relation to gender. As a result one of these then referred to the FLF process as "a selection and support process" rather than as a competition, because they believed the term 'competition' could put some less confident applicants off applying.

Another strategy cited was in relation to the handling of enquiries, where a host worried that there could be some 'gatekeeping' by academics at school or department level, who might inadvertently discourage certain applicants from progressing. While these hosts did task academic leaders and others with approaching potential applicants, they encouraged interested applicants to contact staff in the Research Office first for an initial discussion about the FLF scheme, rather than immediately to discuss it with the academic. It was felt this provided prospective applicants with an opportunity to discuss the FLF scheme confidentially before deciding whether to apply, without

prejudicing any discussion with an academic who might subsequently be involved in the application. In this way they felt the applicant could confidentially either gain the confidence to submit an application or seek an alternative scheme to fund their research ideas or project.

Applicant perceptions of information about the FLF scheme

Figure 5.2 illustrates that most applicant survey respondents were positive when asked whether the information provided about the FLF scheme was accessible, gave them a clear understanding of the application process and was adequate. That said, while the majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed they had a clear understanding of FLF selection criteria (76%) and the information provided about the FLF scheme met their needs (78%), around one in five respondents disagreed. More detailed analysis suggested that slightly higher proportions of female applicants felt they did not have a clear understanding of FLF selection criteria before they started their application (26%) or a clear understanding of the application process (21%) than amongst male applicants (18% and 14%, respectively).

*Figure 5.2 Applicant perceptions about hosts' information provision about the FLF scheme (*N=436)
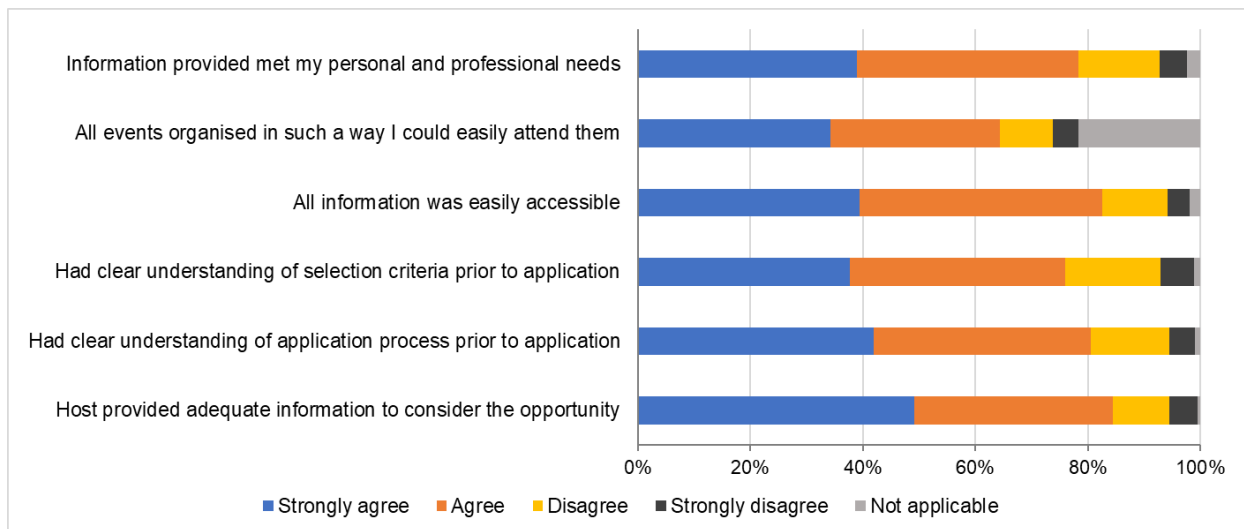
Differences of a similar magnitude were seen between 'international' respondents and UK nationals, with the former slightly less confident about these issues. While these differences could be partly explained by non-UK nationals being less familiar with UK funding and university selection processes in general, detailed analysis revealed that most of these 'international' FLF applicants had been in the UK at the time of application, so that difference may not have applied. It could be that the differences relate to perceptions about the information provided, due to its language and/or content. Another modest difference we noted was that a higher proportion of male applicant respondents (over 60%) referred to using online resources about the FLF scheme when they applied, whereas this was reported by fewer females (52%).

Summary

The evidence we have suggests that while some host organisations did use specific strategies to reach out to potential applicants from under-represented groups, to try to diversify the range of researchers who applied, the strategy most host organisations took was to disseminate the call openly to all academic staff through a variety of channels. On the other hand, appeal to external candidates depended more on specific approaches by academics and research leaders to known individuals. While an 'open' approach of promoting the opportunity to everybody is in principle the more inclusive, it seems likely that targeted activities may assist in obtaining a wider diversity of internal applicants, such as through staff diversity networks, and be the more practical approach for the external market.

Our evidence on the experiences and perceptions of applicants is restricted to survey respondents who did actually apply to a host, and does not include insights from those who did not know about the opportunity or chose not to pursue it. With that caveat, although the majority of FLF applicants felt the information provided about the FLF met their needs and was easily accessible, there were substantial minorities who retained some confusion about the selection criteria and process and/or did not feel the information provided met their needs. This suggests there is room for improvement in attraction activities by academic host organisations and, especially, how they inform potential applicants about their selection processes.

5.2 Selection

Given that the FLF scheme welcomes applications from the full range of disciplines, selection of FLF applicants requires disciplinary expertise across that range – and consistency in how this is done – in addition to understanding what the scheme requires of any applicant and their potential leadership qualities. This is a potential challenge both in the internal selection processes we investigate here as well as during final selection by UKRI.

Another point emerging from our interviews was the distinctiveness of the FLF scheme in terms of what it requires at application stage, including evidence of leadership and other potential. Interviewees and other stakeholders noted that final-stage proposals are often all of very high quality, which reflects the attractiveness and competitiveness of the scheme but also means that selection between such applications is challenging. This section sheds light on how FLF applicants are assessed and selected within academic host organisations, prior to the host submitting its chosen short-list of applicants to UKRI for final selection. It attempts to focus on the extent to which these processes are inclusive and what hosts are doing to ensure that they are inclusive (including perceptions from applicants) as well as on efforts being made to increase the participation of a diverse range of candidates.

Selection strategies

All the evidence we obtained suggests that hosts are broadly using the criteria for assessment published by UKRI (for its own final selection process) during their internal selection activities. Analysis of interview data and selection statements suggests that in the initial stage/s of selection, hosts' focus was on confirming applicants' potential eligibility and/or their project being suitable

for the FLF scheme. In the vast majority of cases, applicants were asked to provide a written expression of interest or complete an internal application form, usually supported by their CV.

The applicant survey data suggested that in Round 7 around one third were asked also to provide separate diversity (personal characteristics) data, which was a higher proportion than in previous rounds (23%). Given the current attention to inclusivity this seems a surprisingly low proportion, and we note a wide range in hosts' comments about collection and use of personal data as part of their process, in their selection statements (this is a focus for discussion later in this report).

As noted in section 2.3, the trajectory of applications through a host's selection processes could vary in several ways. One key difference was that 40 of the 99 hosts analysed, which were mostly smaller institutions, ran a single unified process in which a central panel assessed submissions and selected from those applicants. A few others had so few applicants that no formal process was yet required. The remainder, including most of the larger hosts, on the other hand, ran a 'devolved' process whereby there was a preliminary stage of selection at school/college/faculty level prior to a subsequent, final, central institution-level stage. A few institutions used three stages, with a departmental stage before the school/college/faculty stage. In cases of a devolved structure, within each stage, application materials were reviewed by a panel, resulting in a short-list of candidates who would proceed to the next stage, with the final centralised selection process involving an institutional assessment panel (and/or its Research Office) and generally some sort of ultimate sign-off by very senior staff.

Hosts who implemented a devolved process argued that this was necessary for there to be sufficient disciplinary expertise to judge applications and ensure fairness to all disciplines, hence utilising discipline-related units such as a college or school (or department). We also heard that large institutions feared the large numbers of applications could overwhelm a single, institution-wide assessment panel. On the other hand, a devolved process by definition runs the risk of inconsistency between the different devolved units, and we noted that a few larger institution stated that they deliberately maintained a wholly centralised process as they believed this was necessary for consistency and inclusion. We will return to this strategic choice in a later section.

Applicant survey data suggested that the majority (64%) of all applicants were assessed solely on the basis of written materials (i.e. an expression of interest, internal application form and/or draft proposal, and their CV), while around 21% were also interviewed (and the remaining 11% instead provided a presentation or took part in group activity, in addition to their written submission materials). These proportions were similar from Round 7 and previous round applicants. This pattern was broadly reinforced by analysis of the hosts' selection statements, which suggested only a minority of hosts conducted interviews as part of their process. Many of those argued that an interview was valuable as preparation for final selection by UKRI, as that process does include an interview. Only one interviewee in our sample thought the interview had been introduced for potential enhancement of inclusivity, although some hosts reported in their selection statement such a rationale for having interviews in their process.

The final stage of the trajectory of an application, once selected by the host, was development of an outline and then final application by the applicant for UKRI, with the support of the Research Office and/or others in the host institution.

Inclusivity of application materials

A number of approaches were described in hosts' statements and interviews which had been introduced in order to enhance inclusion and fairness in the internal selection process. One was the use by a few hosts of a first 'light touch' stage, whereby a prospective applicant did not have to develop a full draft application but was considered – either by the Research Office and/or their department – on the basis only of their eligibility and broad research idea. It was thought this could be advantageous in enabling less confident candidates to consider applying, as the initial 'barrier to entry' was lower. If they gained the confidence that their application could be successful, they could then be encouraged to apply formally and potentially obtain support in doing so. We acknowledge that for large institutions with many applicants, in particular, this could add even more burden to their selection effort, while being potentially valuable to aid inclusivity.

Partly provide evidence from prior career activities of an applicant's potential for leadership, several hosts had introduced the requirement to submit a 'narrative CV' as they believed this could capture experiences and expertise that is not typically evidenced in a traditional 'academic CV'. It was also thought to be valuable in allowing more contextual experiences to be described, helping applicants with diverse and non-traditional academic backgrounds to articulate the value of their personal experiences and skills. This idea has some potential to counter the fact that candidates with more advantageous backgrounds are likely to be able to describe a wider range of research experiences that could enhance their application, as they have had more research-focused opportunities. One interviewee noted that those who come into research with a practitioner background typically do not have the traditional trajectory of a PhD qualification and/or experience of a junior academic position, and hence will have a different range of experiences from which to evidence their potential. The narrative CV approach more readily allows that context to be made clear, assuming, of course, that those assessing it are able to place appropriate value on different experiences and contexts.

However, the interviews suggested that implementation of the narrative CV within FLF selection was not straightforward. One host reported that its introduction for Round 7 actually caused additional stress for some applicants because they were not familiar with the format, while many academics were not familiar with how to assess it. It had dropped the narrative CV for Round 8, to allow time for it to provide training to academic staff in how to assess it. Another interviewee noted that there needs to be training for panel members more generally about how information in a CV that is not directly related to the application should be assessed during evaluation of a candidate, i.e. how contextual factors should be taken into account. Moreover, as UKRI does not currently require a narrative CV as part of the final application, asking prospective applicants to submit a narrative CV during internal selection but an academic CV later creates additional work for the candidate.

In their statements, some hosts stated they had deliberately introduced one or more interviews within their internal process, to reduce reliance on assessment of the written application form. It was believed this could be valuable as some applicants are less fluent in their writing, including those without English as a native language and some groups with less advantaged backgrounds. Having an interview during internal selection was also considered good preparation for potential subsequent assessment of a final application by UKRI, which also uses an interview process. However, in the same way that a written application can be more problematic for those who are not native English speakers, the same can apply to interviews. While some hosts we interviewed

noted how some of their non-native English-speaking applicants could describe their projects fluently, the way they articulated notions such as leadership could be more difficult, especially for those less familiar with the UK research eco-system and language used within it. One host we interviewed had analysed their applicant data to find that non-native English-speaking applicants were slightly less successful when their process had solely been based on written documents. To address this, they introduced an internal interview (and interview training) as part of their internal selection process.

A minority of hosts mentioned that they asked applicants to make a presentation or 'pitch' during the selection process. While this can, to some extent, benefit candidates whose writing capability may be more limited, it is known from private and public sector recruitment that a presentation exercise can favour candidates from particular backgrounds and/or with high levels of confidence in their ability to 'perform'. Best inclusive selection practice in those other sectors deliberately focuses on assessment of the content of the presentation rather than its style, to counter the advantage that some may have, including native English speakers. Equally, a group exercise, mentioned by some, can favour those with the highest confidence and communication skills, and needs to be used with caution if assessment is to remain inclusive (and such exercises are not part of the UKRI final selection process).

Inclusivity of different selection trajectories

Although demand management was formally implemented by UKRI for Round 7, many hosts had been undertaking internal selection previously in order only to put forward strong applications to UKRI. Other rationales for selection amongst FLF applications in previous rounds were to ensure that applicants and their projects met the FLF eligibility criteria, and/or fitted with the host's own research strategy. One large institution reported that it had received nearly 100 expressions of interest or prospective applications in a previous round, which it had to reduce to a few tens of final applications that it had supported. It is believed that similar ratios occurred in several of the larger institutions. Introduction of demand management by UKRI tended to require internal selection by larger institutions to be even more rigorous. Several interviewees noted that an outcome of this change could be that a choice might have to be made between applications that scored equally in the internal process, whereas before demand management all of the equal-scoring applications could be submitted (if the host deemed that quality high enough).

As noted above, analysis of the hosts' statements highlighted two broad strategic approaches: devolved selection in which applicants go through one or more selection stages in disciplinary-based units of the institution, prior to a final round at institution level, or a unified, central selection process in which all are assessed at the institutional level. As noted, the benefits of a centralised approach are consistency in applicant selection and the ability to address any potential school and department level 'politics' that could occur during candidate selection.

During devolved selection, the number of rounds reflected a university's structure and size. Some hosts (15) used as many as three rounds of selection, starting at departmental level. Other host institutions (38) drew on two such rounds, i.e. at school/college/faculty level and then centrally.

As introduced earlier, our interviews suggested the rationale for devolved selection was to ensure sufficient disciplinary expertise and involve the schools (or other units) and departments in the applicant selection process (i.e. expanded resourcing), although there is clearly a need for consistency in the way those different units operate their processes. One participant noted that

as it is the schools and departments that provide much of the support for potential FLF applicants (in addition to what is done for all of them by the Research Office), then it is only fair that they should be involved in the selection process as well.

Where there is devolved selection, a key issue is to ensure a coherent approach across schools or other units (and departments if they are a stage too). The most common strategy for coherence and to maintain transparency was to require devolved units all to use the same selection criteria and scoring schemes, while a few institutions included observers in devolved selection meetings. While these efforts should help consistency, several hosts admitted that it is difficult to ensure that all devolved units use the criteria similarly. We noted from their statements that some hosts were much more active than others in monitoring the processes that took place in devolved units.

We noted with interest that some of those with a devolved strategy imposed a cap on the number of applicants that each school or unit (or department) could put forward, i.e. each had to select their 'best' 1 or 2 applicants who would progress to the next stage of the internal selection process. This is potentially problematic where a particular unit has several very high-scoring applicants, some of whom may be screened out due to the cap, whereas the best applicant in other units might not be so strong. In this way, the final short-list might not comprise all the best candidates.

Also, irrespective of whether a final institutional selection process is itself inclusive, such a strategy begs the question of whether the devolved prior rounds were all inclusive, and raises the question of to what extent the host can monitor activities in those units to be consistent and inclusive (to assure that the process is consistently fair overall). There is presumably a challenge here between potential fairness within a devolved unit, and between the applications that are short-listed by different units. In principle, it would presumably be fairer not to impose a numerical cap on a specific unit, but rather to allow the strongest applications to emerge from all units, between which the final process would then select. Although many hosts did try to pursue this latter strategy, several were working on the simpler basis of an allocation for each school or devolved unit.

This was an area where the use of observers in selection panels became important, as this could provide such monitoring for consistency. However, it was reported that the nature and role of such observers varied, from having staff from the Research Office present in all committees/panels to ensure they followed the same procedure across the organisation, to such staff joining a selection committee to ensure there was fairness and transparency in its work and/or challenge potential biases they perceived or observed. Resourcing such observation work across a large institution with devolved processes could be very challenging.

It should also be noted that a centralised approach did not necessarily mean the process had only a single phase. Our interviews revealed some cases where a single institution-level panel did both the initial selection of candidates to identify those who should develop a draft application, and then also either reconvened or there was a separate panel or group who did final selection and approved final applications before they were submitted to UKRI.

Who engages in the applicant selection process

A central tenet of inclusive selection theories is that the diversity of applicants should be matched, where possible, by the diversity of those making the selection. As the FLF welcomes applications across the full range of disciplines and from applicants with different career and personal backgrounds, there is a challenge during FLF selection processes to ensure that those assessing

applications have the right expertise to evaluate this diversity of applicants and their projects, fairly. Most hosts, in their selection statements, mentioned discipline and gender as key dimensions of panel diversity, while a smaller number tried also to include additional panel members to introduce some diversity in terms of ethnicity, disability and/or career stage. In addition, some hosts deliberately included an EDI specialist or Research Office staff on selection panels, to bolster expertise about diversity and inclusion and/or enhance oversight of the working of these committees or panels.

Levels of panel diversity were reported to vary between hosts. Analysis of selection statements revealed that a minority (10) only considered disciplinary diversity in their panels, while far more (46) specifically referred also to gender, while far smaller numbers also targeted disability and/or ethnic minority representation. Around 20 hosts reported that their panel/s included early-career researchers specifically and/or academics from diverse career stages, while a small number included current FLF awardees too.

In order to raise awareness of potential diversity issues or counter bias, around half of the hosts mentioned in their statement that that they provided committee/panel members with EDI-related training, and/or briefed them or provided guidance on EDI. The most common approach reported was unconscious bias training (23 examples), while some (17) required panel members to have undertaken both unconscious bias training and workplace EDI training. There was a marked rarity of reference to diversity training which explicitly focused on recruitment or inclusive selection techniques (whereas this is relatively common in larger public and private sector employers).

One host stated that it required panel members to have done their training in the past six months, and another that it had to be refreshed every second year. However, most did not specify how recently EDI training needed to have been undertaken. We infer that in many cases the training being referred to was somewhat generic EDI training, including about unconscious bias, and could have taken place as part of induction to their job, i.e. not be recent. There was also very little mention of whether panel members' training was recorded, and/or how often it was refreshed.

Rather than training, some hosts noted that panel members were given guidance or notes about inclusive selection. One relatively common approach, also confirmed in the interviews, was to remind selection panels about EDI considerations at the beginning of the meeting. Our observation from other sectors is that closer involvement of a diversity specialist in selection panels, or in 'wash-up' meetings that follow interview panels to consolidate their decisions, is likely to be more beneficial than a briefing in advance, as it allows for challenge of decisions. However, this could be hard to resource consistently in large institutions with devolved panels. In isolated examples, a very senior member of staff who was highly committed to diversity undertook a final review of short-listed applicants and made the final decision on which should be put forward, which could have a significant impact on the diversity profile of their final applicants.

The interviews suggested that panel diversity could be difficult to achieve for smaller institutions and/or for those whose departments or faculties varied in research intensity. In addition, the tight selection deadlines could mean that academics or professionals who could enhance panel diversity or bring in an EDI perspective might not be able to join panels due to other commitments. While there were many aspirations to enhance panel diversity and bring in such EDI perspectives, practically implementing diverse panels was reported not to be easy in practice.

Other strategies to address inclusion

Regardless of whether the host followed a devolved or centralised selection process, the interviews reminded us that host organisations made considerable efforts to ensure impartiality, coherence and transparency in their decision-making. In addition, action was regularly taken to increase panel expertise in relation specifically to the FLF scheme and provide reminders about unconscious biases during selection. The following were isolated examples of practice (i.e. that were not common) that certain institutions had introduced to address the need for impartiality and potential inclusion:

- Inviting colleagues to panels whose school/department did not have a candidate or were not in any way connected to current applicants;

- Keeping selection of candidates and support/advocacy for candidates entirely separate.

If impartiality is not addressed, there were fears that committee members could focus on selecting applicants in their own discipline at the cost of overall fairness or alignment with the university's research strategy (the latter beneficial to ensure the university stood behind its selected candidates, although arguably that may not always be an inclusive aim). Thus, work had to done to iron out any 'politics' in selecting the final candidates. This was helped by having panel members from schools and departments that did not have candidates and were entirely independent of the applicants (whereas a head of department or similar might well know a candidate in their department). While these individuals might not have relevant disciplinary expertise, they could bring other knowledge and perspective to the selection process.

Coherence and transparency in selection processes were also addressed by other activities (again, in a minority of institutions, judging from analysis of all their statements):

- Documenting committee/panel membership and roles taken within those bodies (for example, the role of observers);

- Formalising and publishing the selection criteria beforehand;

- Creating clear criteria for any 'tie break' situations;

- Providing guidance on how to interpret the selection criteria and/or (in rare cases) how to assess issues of context for applicants from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, and/or with career breaks, fairly.

While some host institutions were essentially exercising demand management through a rigorous internal selection process prior to Round 7, due to the large number of applications they received, others noted in our interviews that they had created an additional final centralised selection panel and/or formalised an existing informal process specifically for Round 7, when they were required also to provide an inclusive selection statement. Documentation and formalisation of selection processes was recognised as valuable in enhancing transparency, but appeared to have become more common in practice with the requirement to produce the selection statement and provide it to UKRI. Equally, publishing selection criteria in advance, and recording and publishing panel compositions, aids transparency in the selection process. An aspect of standardised guidance across devolved processes was that there should be clear rules for all panels about whether applicants should be ranked or just scored, and if they did produce rankings how these should be

considered in subsequent selection rounds to ensure a coherent approach across different schools and departments.

The need for clear criteria for a 'tie break' situation was also seen to have increased with the demand management cap introduced in Round 7, as these situations became more common. One participant noted that they did have situations in which applicants had been equally ranked by the selection panel/s, and that these were difficult to resolve. Previously, the host organisation could simply submit all the applications that met a certain threshold, but this was no longer an option in Round 7 if that number exceeded the host's allocation. Pragmatically, one emerging solution was to also to consider any EDI data that were available and use this as a tie-break criterion to prioritise applicants from under-represented groups.

More broadly, some hosts described the guidance they gave to support decision-making. As a scheme, FLF emphasises (1) research and innovation excellence, (2) research impact and strategic relevance, and (3) the applicant and their development and potential. To provide support in assessing all these aspects, one participant noted that they had provided their own guidelines on how to assess applications in all three of these areas. Others highlighted guidelines they provided about the risk of potential disciplinary bias, particularly important in the centralised selection processes and/or in smaller institutions which do not have all disciplines equally represented or have particular historic strengths in certain disciplines. We note in cases where institutions do produce their own guidelines that there is some risk that this could introduce differences from the content of the guidelines supplied by UKRI, which in turn could lead to inconsistencies between different institutions, so such deviations needs to be avoided.

Notably, some interviewees referred to guidance they had seen in other selection processes (not FLF) about how to assess the influence of career breaks on progression and research outputs. This was one specific example of wider concerns about how to take into account issues of context, acknowledging that inclusive selection needs context to be considered more integrally but that there is not yet clear guidance about how to do this practically and fairly. This is an area where we recommend further thought and development of guidance.

Increasing expertise about the FLF scheme specifically was achieved by some involving previous awardees with experience of an FLF application to panel/s. While having an FLF awardee in a panel might not necessarily enhance inclusivity in selection, some hosts noted that FLF awardees did make valuable contributions, reminding the panel about the scheme's priorities and aspirations and what UKRI seeks in FLF applicants and their projects, as well as challenging any misunderstandings in these areas.

While many hosts tried to counter unconscious bias by ensuring that those involved in selection had engaged in awareness or training about it, a small number of hosts approached this a different way by trying to introduce anonymisation in some or all selection stages, i.e. anonymising the application materials. In principle, this supports the aim of assessing applicants solely on their achievements and potential, irrespective of their background. While some hosts felt anonymisation was impossible practically, due to the small size of their academic community (i.e. academics were familiar with each other's work), a small number of hosts had trialled anonymisation within certain stages of their process. After its initial school-based selection stage, one institution's Research Office had anonymised the short-listed applications from the schools

prior to its central selection panel which assessed the applications based on research excellence and the research proposal. This required that panel members were not familiar with any of the applicants or their work, so care was needed in composing the panel, including use of external panel members.

An issue that emerges across this project, in the context of trying to address inclusivity, is the lack of 'EDI data'. While some hosts gathered data on the personal characteristics of applicants, and could monitor how the profile of applicants evolved as they progressed through the selection stages, most did not appear to collect or gather, nor monitor and publish, such data systematically. This lack of data is problematic in both devolved and unified selection approaches, as it is very difficult to assess how inclusive activities are without such evidence, and/or how this differs between different units within a devolved process. One participant in our interviews noted how useful the gathering of applicant personal data was to their departments/faculties, because it gave them insights into which applicants were being selected across the institution. However, very few hosts appeared to be collecting or accessing personal data sufficiently systematically to benchmark the applicant pool and/or test whether their selection process was inclusive overall, nor specific activities within it.

FLF applicants' perceptions about selection processes

Results from the FLF applicant survey suggested that the majority of respondents felt that their application had been treated fairly (85%) and that the selection process had given them a fair opportunity to present their research ideas and potential (81%, see Figure 5.3). 80% felt that the selection criteria had been applied fairly, although 35% said that beforehand they did not have a full understanding of the criteria that would be used and 25% of them about the selection process that would be used. Interestingly, one third of the 90 open-ended responses received about these perceptions were negative comments about the transparency of the selection process.

*Figure 5.3 Applicant survey respondents' perceptions about host selection processes (*N=435)
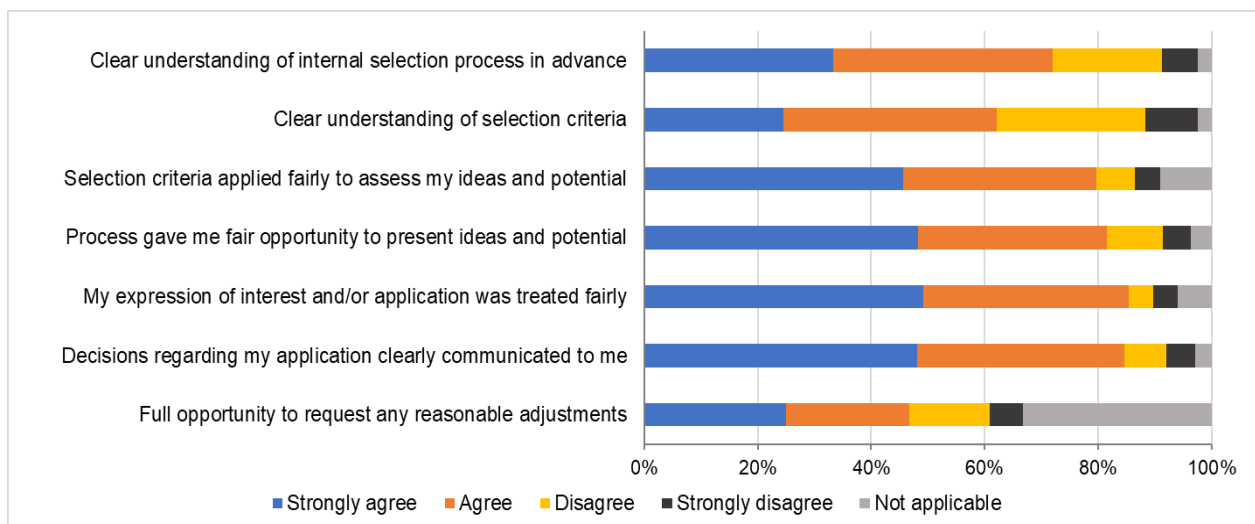
More detailed analysis of most of these results for different key sub-groups of respondents did not show consistent or robust differences. There was some evidence to suggest that some groups were slightly less aware of processes and criteria in advance (non-UK nationals and those at earlier career stages), but the differences were slight and their reflections on fairness did not differ significantly. We did not see any systematic differences between the perceptions of men and women, nor with ethnic background (although the sample of minority ethnic respondents was too small for a robust comparison). Nor were there systematic differences between those reporting on Round 7 experiences and other rounds.

However, these results need to be treated with caution, as the vast majority of the respondent sample – about 85% – had been successful in selection by their host institution (although relatively few of them had obtained an award, with many not yet at the point of final award), with few <u>not</u> selected by their host during its internal assessment process (15%). The perceptions of these two groups (essentially those who were successful in host selection and unsuccessful, respectively) were markedly different, based on the survey results. For example:

- The proportions of those who had been successful during internal selection who had not fully understood the selection process (24%) or the selection criteria (32%) were lower than amongst those who had not been successful in their application (41% and 61%, respectively);

- The proportions of successful applicants who thought the process was <u>not</u> fair to them (5%), had not given them a fair opportunity (9%) and that the criteria had not been fairly applied (7%) were all very low, reflecting high levels of satisfaction with the process. In contrast, the comparable proportions among unsuccessful applicants were all much higher, with 38% thinking it <u>not</u> fair, 52% that they had not had a full opportunity, and 47% that the criteria had not been fairly applied;

- When it came to reasonable adjustments, while 18% of successful applicants felt that these had not been offered sufficiently, the equivalent proportion amongst unsuccessful applicants was much higher at 38% who thought it insufficient.

It should be said that the number of 'unsuccessful' applicants in the sample was quite modest (*N*=51), which limits the robustness of these comparisons, but there is a clear trend. An implication of these differences is that host institutions reviewing their processes need to obtain feedback from applicants who have been unsuccessful at different stages during internal selection, as well as those who were successful, to obtain a full view (and this could also lessen the risk of disappointed candidates putting off future prospective applicants).

An area of specific interest to this study is perceptions about reasonable adjustments in the application process. One third of respondents felt that this was not relevant to them, while 47% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had had a full opportunity to request any reasonable adjustments to the process to accommodate their needs, and 20% did not. This means that 30% of those for whom this was relevant did <u>not</u> feel they had sufficient opportunity to seek adjustments.

This is one question where there appeared to be a difference for survey respondents who declared a disability (which was admittedly a small sub-sample) and those who did not. While around 18% of the latter disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were sufficiently able to request reasonable

adjustments, twice this proportion (37%) amongst disabled respondents disagreed that this was the case – and it is likely that disabled applicants are amongst the groups who will require adjustments most. In contrast, perceptions of disabled and other respondents did not differ significantly for the other issues questioned. This discrepancy suggests there is scope for improvement in the way in which hosts alert prospective applicants to potential flexibility and adjustments in the application and selection process.

As we have already pointed out, some host organisations were already implementing internal selection prior to Round 7 and may not have made wholesale changes to practice for Round 7. The FLF applicant survey data tend to back this up, as the perceptions of respondents about host selection processes were largely similar between those in Round 7 and previous rounds.

Summary

Evaluation of the extent to which internal FLF selection processes conducted by academic hosts are inclusive is complicated by some strategic differences in approach, most prominently that some organisations use a devolved approach prior to centralised final selection while others use an entirely centralised approach. Nonetheless, we have evidence that some hosts are making headway in developing and implementing approaches that aim to be fair and inclusive for the wide diversity of applicants encouraged. To date, their efforts to handle disciplinary and gender diversity have perhaps gone further than those to enhance diversity in other respects, such as disability or ethnicity, or to take into account different employment circumstances or career trajectories.

There is evidence that host institutions are trying to ensure impartiality, coherence and transparency in their decision-making, although specific actions to enhance inclusivity of selection between diverse groups of candidates are less advanced. There are many recorded attempts to increase the diversity of panels used in selection and to ensure that those who take part have at least basic training or awareness of EDI issues, such as unconscious bias training, but few appear to be training their panel members specifically in inclusive selection techniques, and strategies such as blind review (i.e. candidate anonymisation) are only in their infancy and tried by few hosts. There seems a need for guidance on how to take into account issues of context, given that the scheme particularly welcomes candidates with a variety of backgrounds.

Most applicants who succeeded in their hosts' selection processes reflect positively on them, believing the process to be reasonable and fair overall, although substantial minorities did not have a good understanding of the processes or criteria beforehand. Although we engaged far fewer unsuccessful applicants in this research, there is some evidence (unsurprisingly) that their perceptions are less positive.

Our knowledge of inclusive recruitment and selection in other settings helps us to identify that progress by hosts has been more limited in some important respects, not least the systematic collection of applicant profile data at different stages, which is vital to assess inclusion through the process. Further reflections on how processes could improve is given in the next chapter.

5.3 Support

The third main aspect of this review is the support given to applicants by host organisations and how systematic and inclusive it is. As discussed in more detail in this section, the most common approach to support reported is to try to tailor it to the applicant's needs, which would be an inclusive approach. We first try to shed some light on how hosts tried to support their applicants and what they did to ensure that the support was inclusive. Thereafter we use the FLF applicant survey responses to indicate how that support was experienced by applicants.

How hosts support their FLF applicants

Analysis of hosts' inclusive selection statements suggests that they used two broad approaches to support FLF applicants:

- A wholly individualised approach in which FLF applicants were invited to approach, or were assigned support by, their school and/or Research Office, which then provided a range of support ranging from online resources to personal advice and mentoring;

- A combination of generic information sessions and workshops offered to applicants as a group as well as some individualised support.

Around 30 host organisations reported that they used webinars, online sessions and workshops to inform potential FLF applicants about the scheme and provide them an opportunity to ask questions. These generic information sessions were followed by much more tailored support. Both the wholly individualised and the combined approaches involved staff in the Research Office and relevant academics (such as research leaders), so FLF applicants had both administrative and academic support in developing their application. A small number of hosts provided support through a fellowship college or development centre, rather than from the Research Office itself.

The FLF applicant survey responses broadly confirmed existence of a combination of strategies for support. While just under half of the survey respondents (48%) reported obtaining support in early stages of developing their ideas for an application, 13% said they received no support at that stage. Analysis of open-ended responses from the former group to questions about the range of early-stage support they had received suggested it could be categorised into four main types:

- Events (33 examples): webinars, workshops, online sessions and other specific training – these were mostly, but not exclusively, responses from applicants in the larger research-intensive institutions;

- Review and feedback (45): feedback from Research Office staff, line-managers etc.;

- Materials (44): emails, documents and guidance about eligibility and internal selection processes, and showcasing previous FLF applications;

- Meetings (31): one-to-one meetings with Research Office staff, line-managers, mentors or peer researchers.

Other types of support regularly mentioned (32 instances) included various activities ranging from support through an applicant network, allocating resources such as funding or time allocations, to appointment of a mentor or specific Research Office staff member to help them.

Within the selection statements, just over half the hosts (53) referred to the provision of feedback to applicants, and 28 mentioned providing mentors as a form of support. It is possible that these sorts of support were more widespread than reported in the statements, particularly where these support functions might have taken place at school or department level and/or involved multiple individuals in different roles and capacities, as the Research Office providing the statement might not have been aware of all that activity.

Where an application was selected by the host for further development towards a final application to be submitted to UKRI, the level of support for the applicant increased, in comparison with that provided prior to assessment within the host institution. Figure 5.4 shows higher proportions of applicants in that later stage were supported in all the different ways questioned, compared with those developing their application prior to internal selection.

Figure 5.4 Applicant survey respondents' experiences of support offered, with broad stage of application (expression of interest: N=426; *application shortlisted:* N=375)
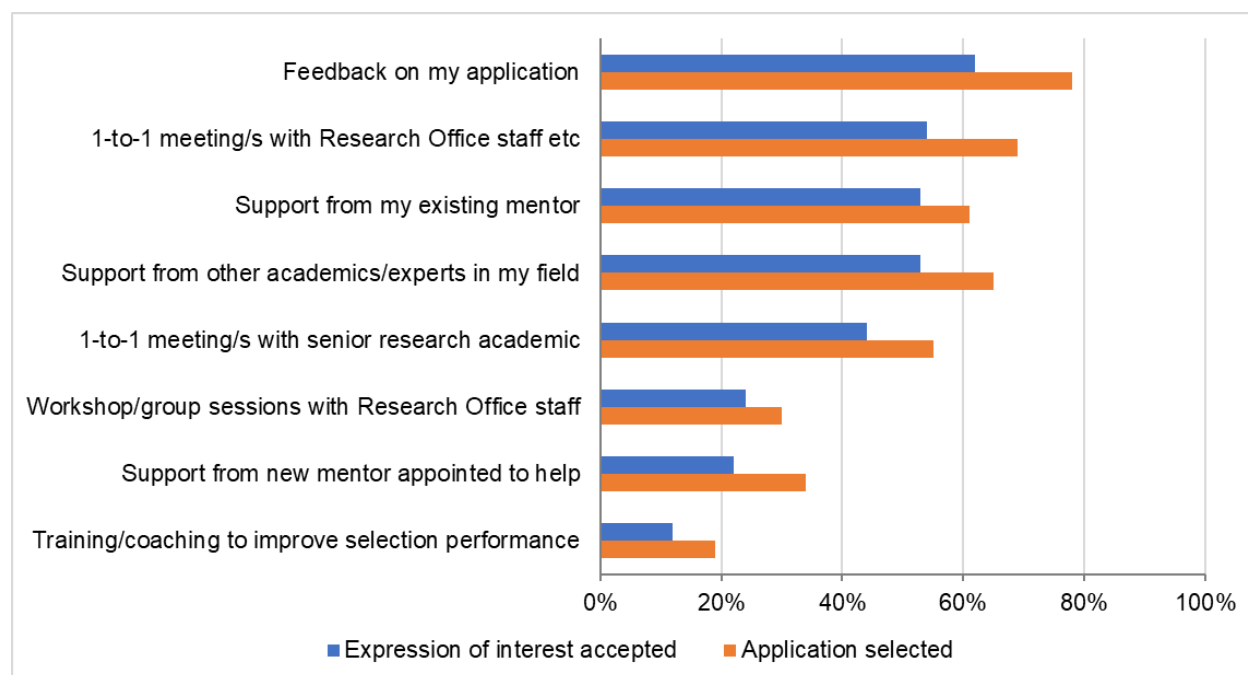
The FLF applicant survey responses suggest that the most common form of support was feedback on the application, at both the early and final application stages, with one-to-one meetings with staff in the Research Office (or others) the next most common, followed by support from academic experts and mentors. Training and coaching to improve performance during selection was offered to some but was less common during internal selection but more common once applicants had been shortlisted and entered the final application process with UKRI.

How systematic or inclusive is the support?

When asked in the interviews whether host institutions took any specific actions to provide additional support for applicants from under-represented groups or diverse career trajectories, one mentioned additional development support being offered to applicants of ethnic minority background (although this was described as being part of a wider EDI strategy and not specific to FLF support). Our evidence suggests that instead of targeting any specific additional support to those in under-represented groups, the intended approach was rather to tailor support to match each individual applicant's needs, so it was hoped that support was bespoke rather than based on expectations of need within any applicant groups. One participant reasoned that this was because some applicants are more adept at working things out for themselves, whereas others need more support, and this variation is very individual.

That said, some interviewees did cite certain practices that aimed to enhance inclusivity in FLF support:

- To ask applicants to identify their needs for support or particular circumstances when submitting their early expression of interest or similar;

- To offer internal and/or external interview and writing workshops;

- To translate the language used in FLF application guidance from UKRI so it could be understood in different disciplinary contexts and by all applicants;

- To assign applicants a buddy (someone who has gone through the selection process);

- To provide opportunities for networking and/or leadership development to applicants, so that they could cite experience of these in their application even where it had hitherto been slim;

- To have the Research Office staff and academic support units share knowledge about FLF scheme/support with each other to ensure that all applicants are equally supported.

While most applicants are assumed to get some support from their school or department, not all potential applicants have similar access to such support. One interviewee noted how research staff on fixed-term contracts, especially, might not have the same opportunity to develop skills or gain the same range of experience as other academics, that they could use to evidence the potential for progression and leadership that is sought in the FLF scheme. Thus, that host had organised additional mentoring and networking opportunities for fixed-term staff applicants. Asking applicants to report in advance the needs they might have for support, based on their circumstances, when they first submitted an expression of interest was thought to be helpful, so that support could be tailored to meet their needs.

Another specific issue brought up was support for non-native English speakers. As already noted in the context of selection, while such applicants might be able to write a research proposal, they might be less adept at communicating their wider achievements or goals. Applicants from some cultures who have learned to draw solely on metrics and list their research outputs could struggle to discuss impact or leadership in ways that would convey their potential and aspirations. Thus, non-native English speakers needed not only to write well in English but also to understand notions of leadership or impact in the UK and especially in the FLF scheme context given this is

a discrete aspect of the application. Some hosts therefore provided their FLF applicants with external training both in writing and for interview.

In a somewhat similar way, one of our interviewees was concerned that applicants from the arts and humanities might find it more difficult to describe and talk about research leadership, compared with those in lab-based sciences, or conceive it in a more limited way. To address this, the host asked applicants to talk to the Research Office staff about their career aspirations, which usually allowed them jointly to unpick what leadership means in the applicant's specific field and help them to articulate it in their application. Those that assigned a buddy to FLF applicants realised that a former FLF applicant (or current award holder) could provide valuable emotional support and practical advice, and potentially fill any gaps in the information that the host was providing to all applicants.

The sharing of knowledge between Research Office staff supporting applicants can be seen as 'behind the scenes' work which helps to ensure that all applicants are equally supported. While the FLF application and project that is proposed builds on disciplinary expertise, there are also other dimensions such as impact, industry engagement and leadership that might require additional support when FLF applicants prepare their proposal. Our interviews highlighted how some Research Office staff were coming together to share best practice, across this range of issues. Another interviewee noted how faculties had shared learning about how to succeed in FLF applicant selection and support. While sharing learning like this might not be directly linked with how any individual FLF applicant is supported, it is likely to ensure a more coherent and potentially inclusive approach across all the FLF applicants.

Perceptions of support

Overall, most respondents to the FLF applicant survey felt that their host's support was accessible and met their academic and research administration needs (Figure 5.5). That said, 21% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt fully supported by their host institution, and 29% disagreed that they had had a clear understanding of how their host institution would support them in advance as a potential FLF applicant. There was no evidence that these perceptions differed between key groups such as by gender or nationality. However, there were slight disciplinary differences, with 34% of respondents from REF panel C and D subjects not understanding how their host institution would support them compared with 27% in subject groups A or B. Somewhat more of the respondents from subject groups C and D did not feel the support offered met their disciplinary needs (23% did not, compared with 14% in A and 17% in B). While the number of specific comments about disciplinary tensions was small, these potentially shed some light on reasons that underpin these perceived differences in support. The respondents referred to issues such as a lack of senior academics in their field, not having sufficient discipline-specific research support, or the host prioritising support for only those whose project aligned with its wider research strategy. Interestingly, there was also a difference with institution type; 33% of respondents from Russell Group universities disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had a clear understanding of how their host institution would support them, higher than the comparable proportion from Post-92 and other Pre-92 institution respondents (24%).

45

Figure 5.5 Applicant survey respondents' perceptions about support from their host institution (N=432)
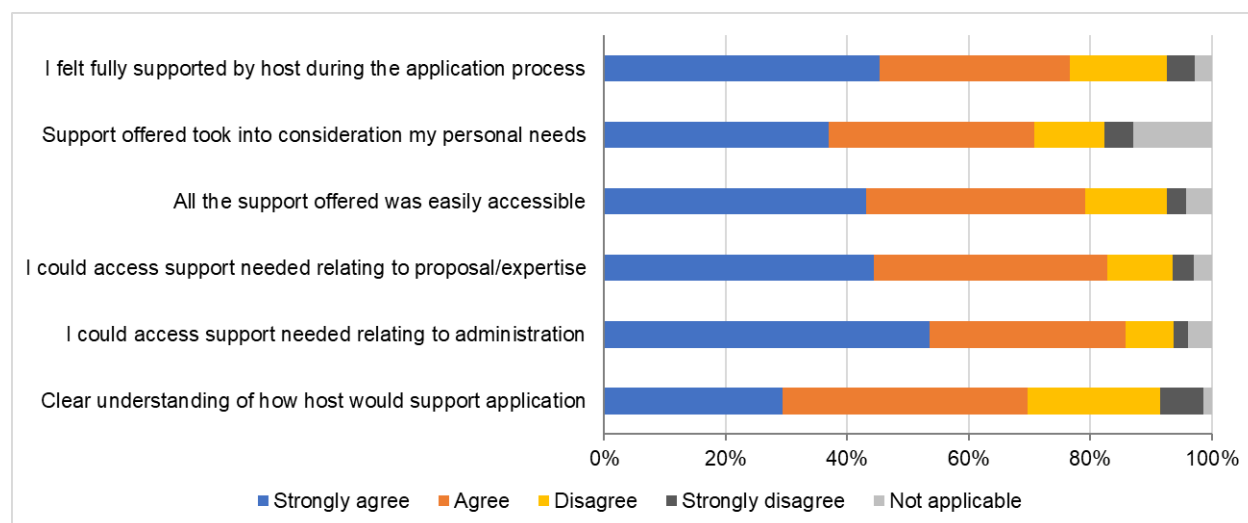
Another group whose results were different from overall were those whose application was not supported by their institution (i.e. those who were unsuccessful in selection by the host). Amongst these respondents, approaching half did not feel that the support met their needs, which was about twice the rate overall. However, this did include some respondents who were rejected at the first (e.g. departmental stage), who might not have had access to the same range of support as those whose applications were taken forward further. Another notable finding was the responses from those reporting a disability. 27% of these felt that the support offered was not accessible and 22% felt that the support did not meet their needs, which were again higher proportions than for all respondents. While the number of respondents who declared a disability was low, these findings suggest that further work is needed to ensure that support is inclusive and accessible for everyone.

When asked to consider what inclusive support might constitute, some of the responses to open-ended questions in the applicant survey were valuable, with many directing attention to what could be labelled as 'holistic support' (29 responses). This was summarised as being supported throughout the entire duration of the selection process and/or being offered support that covered all areas or specific training that met their needs. A modest but significant number of comments about support (11) referred to its inconsistency, acknowledging that while some aspects of support were in place, it was not consistent across the duration of the selection process and/or all areas of the FLF application. A handful of respondents noted differences between the support offered to external applicants and internal, or those on different types of employment contract, suggesting that existing permanent staff got the best support. A few respondents referred to a more general lack of organisational resources and/or institutional experience of the FLF scheme, which did not necessarily translate into a negative perception about the support, per se, as these respondents acknowledged that there were understandable gaps in resourcing of support and the materials offered (i.e. a high number of applicants to be supported by a small team; or no access to previous FLF applications).

Summary

When it comes to supporting FLF applicants, the main approach taken by hosts was stated as being tailored to meet the individual applicant's needs. In principle, that should be an inclusive approach. That said, there were some differences between the perceptions of different groups of applicants about their access to support and how well it met their needs, suggesting that it may not be meeting everyone's needs and/or could be inconsistent. The FLF applicant survey indicated some disciplinary differences in this respect, including in the extent to which prospective applicants were sure of the support they would get when they first applied.

5.4 Other issues

A further aim in this project was to identify any specific actions that could promote uptake of the FLF opportunity by applicants from diverse backgrounds or non-traditional career trajectories, and to identify further enhancements that could be made to processes to promote inclusivity.

Perhaps the most prominent issue we identified, and a clear barrier to sustaining improvements, was the pervading lack of 'EDI data'. For example, amongst the case studies (from 12 institutions, all of which were selected on the basis of having some interesting and potentially good practice), only three had a systematic approach to gathering and recording personal data and other aspects of the profile of applicants. Our analysis of the selection statements revealed that few hosts mentioned collection of data at all when describing their FLF scheme activities. Only one third of applicant survey respondents said that they provided personal/diversity information as part of their application (although in principle this could be drawn from existing data held by the institution, admittedly). It should be said that, from work on inclusive recruitment in other sectors, systematic recording and monitoring of diversity profiles at different stages of a selection process is considered critical to assess how inclusive different activities are and – in the context of desired improvement – how effective any enhancements to processes are that are being trialled.

A consequence of many hosts not having systematic EDI data was that they could not assess how effective their approach was, in terms of inclusion. For example, they could not assess whether applicants were representative of the profile of those eligible. Equally, when discussing support for FLF applicants, one interviewee noted there was no way to identify any patterns in that FLF support, such as whether there were any differences between females and males or other groups in terms of the support they sought or took up, or their perceptions of its value. Similarly, with this common lack of systematic data, it could not be clear if any particular selection practice particularly contributed to exclusion and/or if any of the practices that were introduced with the aim of enhancing inclusion were effective.

When questioned about the lack of personal data about applicants that they could access or gather, and/or report, interviewees in our sample most commonly cited data protection concerns. Some reported experiences of hesitation from human resources (HR) colleagues to share personal data that the host already held about applicants, for data protection reasons. In some cases, the Research Office was explicitly discouraged from gathering any new EDI data itself on scheme applicants because it was believed they would not have the resources or processes to handle personal data correctly, or that doing so would result in multiple copies of personal data

(that might not be consistent). Our interviews suggested three possible solutions were being used, to varying extents:

- For applicants to complete an anonymised form as part of the application process. This could give an overview of the diversity profile at application (and potentially who is selected as stages progress) but we believe this approach is unlikely to provide sufficient data unless the form is both wide-ranging in its coverage but also completed by all applicants. This raises questions about whether making completion such a form should be mandatory, although it should certainly be very strongly encouraged (and explained why it is important). This will, however, raise the issue of several different sets of personal data being held in different parts of an institution about individuals;

- To use the existing HR system and ask HR to provide aggregated data about the applicants, or about them individually. This has the inherent problem that it will not include any external applicants (because they are not included in the HR system). It could also be problematic if the staff had not been asked for sufficient consent when the data were first collected, and/or if an insufficient range of data was available. If aggregated data is sought, this will require multiple iterations of data provision as the cohort of applicants progresses through internal selection, in order to obtain the profile at each stage;

- To use a specific recruitment-based monitoring programme both for internal and external applicants, although this would require resources (time and money) to set up and administer, and was very rare amongst the institutions.

Irrespective of how such baseline data for applicants are obtained, the need for systematic recording of the profile of applicants at different stages of the selection process remains and there was little evidence that such analysis was taking place with the detail and consistency that would be required to identify exclusionary practices and/or assure the inclusivity of stages in the process.

Another specific issue about which we asked in our interviews was any effect of having to develop and submit the inclusive selection statement (a requirement introduced for Round 7). Some noted that this had had a positive effect on practice. The requirement for the statement gave momentum and impetus for promoting diversity and inclusion considerations to the staff involved, highlighting that UKRI is currently emphasising inclusion. It also prompted more hosts to document their processes and record activities (and who participated in them), which is a valuable activity. One interviewee noted that after having written their statement, they shared it with the EDI lead at their university and as a result were making some changes to how applicants would be selected in Round 8.

A third issue that emerged was what could be called 'aftercare'; i.e. the extent to which host organisations provided support for those who were not selected internally (or by UKRI). In the interviews, aftercare was described as the provision of extensive feedback on the application and helping candidates to identify alternative support schemes for their research project and/or progression. However, the FLF applicant survey responses suggested that helpful feedback, or guidance in identifying alternative schemes, might not be widely experienced. In Round 7, 50% of respondents who were not selected by their host said they were informed of the negative decision but without the full reasons behind it, and only 20% that they received a good explanation of the

reasons. Even fewer said they obtained detailed feedback and/or were helped to identify an alternative funding option. These results are not necessarily representative of the experiences of the whole FLF applicant body because of the low number of respondents in this position in the survey. However, we believe that aftercare is an area that deserves further attention. It will also be necessary to consider how best to improve this without placing yet more burden on the same academic and professional staff, and/or local FLF awardees.

The FLF applicant survey suggests some connection between the lack of feedback and unwillingness amongst unsuccessful applicants to resubmit an application (which would be understandable). While demand management aims to limit the number of applications per round for each academic host, we assume that hosts will not want disillusionment of prior applicants to be part of their strategy. The standard of applications in a particular year could be unusually high, so a good applicant who did not succeed that year could have a good chance another year, when there might be fewer (good) applicants. Losing their interest through a lack of aftercare and feedback would benefit neither the individual nor the institution. This is particularly relevant for the FLF scheme, taking into consideration the extent of resources and investment both applicants and host organisations put into the application and selection processes.

6. Overall findings and recommendations

6.1 Emerging themes and overall findings

This study specifically investigated the processes undertaken by academic host institutions during their internal selection of FLF applicants to develop a short-list of applications they will submit to UKRI for final assessment, as well as the support provided during those processes. However, we believe that many of the findings may have wider relevance for other internal demand management processes and other selection processes in HE institutions.

Based on our analysis of applications submitted to UKRI, after those processes, in Rounds 1-7 and of awards made in Rounds 1-6, there is no quantitative evidence for any pressing 'diversity problem' to be fixed. The profile of applicants to Round 7 in particular is broadly reflective of the population from which it is drawn in terms of key protected characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and disability. There are insufficient data to determine whether that profile is representative in relation to other diversity dimensions such as alternative career trajectories, those with caring responsibilities, or for other under-represented groups. However, there is some evidence that applications – and the subsequent awarding – are less balanced in relation to broad disciplinary groupings and also institutional provenance. In those respects, and wider concerns about equity in the research environment, this study is timely, not least because the scheme aims to support the widest possible range of researchers to become independent research leaders. Ensuring application and internal selection processes in host organisations are inclusive, as well as the final selection undertaken by UKRI itself, is key to that aim and for fairness.

Its timing is also interesting in the context of UKRI's introduction of demand management in Round 7, which caps the numbers of applications academic hosts can put forward. In some cases this has markedly reduced the number of applications a host organisation can put forward, compared with previous Rounds, resulting in higher competition within that host. The more strenuous resulting internal selection required by the host could heighten potential concerns about maintaining inclusivity. It could mean a host choosing between applicants they have scored equally, rather than being able to submit all applications above a certain threshold. In that situation, how they choose between them becomes important.

Round 7 also saw introduction of the requirement for academic hosts to provide a statement describing their selection process. This alerted some organisations to consider the inclusivity of their operations and applicant diversity, and prompted others to enhance their processes. This study presents something of a 'health check' in this respect across academic host institutions. There is also a long 'tail' of organisations which submit very few or single applications, who may hitherto not have undertaken any selection at all. The requirement to write the statement will have prompted them to think more about their processes and whether they are inclusive.

Overall, the range of evidence we obtained suggests Round 7 processes on the whole did not differ hugely from those used in previous rounds. However, there is evidence for incremental improvement overall, that more of these institutions are concerned about diversity and inclusion in their FLF application operations and, in some cases, that some have introduced enhancements to their activities that aim either to make them more inclusive or to result in greater participation by those in certain under-represented groups. That said, our judgement is that there is scope to

do more in these respects and that many of the elements of these operations fall some way short of what would be regarded as best practice in inclusive recruitment and selection (on the basis of comparison with leading employers in the private and public sectors). Later in this chapter we present an idealised depiction of inclusive recruitment and selection (i.e. that would maximise inclusion). With that framing, we then present examples of good practice by hosts we identified in this study, as well as key shortcomings or gaps in practice that should be rectified if there is a sustained will to improve inclusivity in selection and/or enhance diversity of participation. Our key overall findings follow here.

Attraction

Promotion of the FLF opportunity ('attraction') is currently mainly through open channels, especially to prospective internal candidates. Open promotion is regarded as the starting point for fair and merit-based recruitment, while reliance on academics' networks for FLF promotions will favour those who had more opportunities to join those networks and become more 'visible' than others. Most hosts used a variety of channels to advertise the opportunity, both openly and through networks. We note that promotion of the FLF scheme to prospective external candidates was mainly through the networks of established academic staff, rather than open advertising. While potentially a less inclusive approach, it is almost certainly pragmatic, as some targeting is needed otherwise the potential market would be huge (and the same for many hosts, which could lead to duplicated effort).

A few hosts reported made targeted approaches to potential applicants known to be in under-represented groups, while others used institutional staff diversity networks to try proactively to diversify the applicant pool. As these networks offer the chance to reach deeper into these specific groups, they seem a natural and low-cost mechanism to reach out to researchers in some of the under-represented groups, where the evolution of these communities has created links to researchers.

In other employment sectors, inclusive recruitment specialists recommend careful diversity reviews of the language used to describe opportunities and the information given to prospective applicants, to avoid stereotyping and putting off certain groups of applicant, typically those who have less access to opportunities due to their background or circumstances. A small number of hosts appear to be taking this approach, reviewing their materials and, in a few cases, introducing gender-neutral or other language believed to be more inclusive. While this is in principle a good idea, the extent to which it is relevant in this academic fellowship context may be limited, and use of gender-focused tools may not be the most effective as there is already broad gender parity. Care is also needed to avoid inadvertently adjusting fixed requirements stated by UKRI.

Selection

Based on our analysis of selection statements, a number of hosts have tried to lower the bar for prospective applicants by a 'light touch' approach encouraging submission of an outline or expression of interest rather than a formal application. This should help to attract applicants with less confidence in whether they will be successful, which typically could include those from under-represented and diverse backgrounds and/or trajectories.

More generally, much of the selection of FLF applicants has historically relied heavily on written application documents, which can disadvantage non-native English speakers and those who write less well. A potential response taken by some hosts is to shift the balance between written documents and other activities, so they have introduced interviews, a pitch process or groupwork in their internal process, rather than solely relying on written materials for assessment. In principle, interviews or other options can enable applicants to share their ideas and career aspirations in the context of their personal experiences better, which could allow qualities to emerge which are missed in a written application. This could advantage those with non-standard career trajectories. Arguably, an interview panel can also probe further to seek evidence about aspects of an application that might be lacking in the written materials, and is good practice for the interview within the final UKRI process. However, care is needed for these sorts of activities to be conducted in an inclusive and fair way and there are risks in each.

Two areas highlighted in guidance from UKRI to hosts about what to mention in their selection statements were the composition of panels used to assess applications and EDI training of those individuals. Many hosts did mention trying to use a diversity of staff in panels, most commonly in terms of gender and discipline, but in some cases including individuals at different career stages and/or EDI staff. Many indicated that panel members must have EDI and/or unconscious bias training, but they did not report on whether it had to be recent. There was almost no mention of more specific training on EDI in recruitment or inclusive selection techniques. Some hosts also reported that EDI staff played a role in oversight of assessment processes, and occasionally challenging the outcomes of panels, but this did not appear widely embedded.

An approach becoming more widely used in recruitment in other sectors to address unconscious or other bias is anonymisation (or blind review). A very few hosts were experimenting with whether this was possible in an academic selection setting. Our view is that there is definitely scope for it to be used in certain aspects of selection, such as when undertaking review of the research idea separately from assessment of personal research experiences and/or a CV.

As the FLF scheme welcomes applicants from different career trajectories and employment settings, including those returning to research after a break, a challenge in FLF selection is how to assess the extent to which differing contexts should be taken into account, consistently and fairly. A few hosts had introduced use of the 'narrative CV' in order to capture wider expertise and experiences, although there remained some uncertainty over how well this worked in practice, for applicants and reviewers alike.

A key issue that arises from this investigation of internal selection processes is their varied structure, as they can be run as a single university-level process (typically used by smaller institutions) or as a devolved strategy. The latter involves two or even three levels (stages) of selection; typically a first selection stage within school/college/faculty units, and a subsequent final university-level selection. Some of the largest institutions have a third, department-based phase at the beginning. While a devolved selection strategy arguably ensures that there is more specific disciplinary expertise available in the early selection stages, and provides greater resourcing to assess large numbers of applications in total, it beg questions of the inclusivity of the processes within each devolved unit and consistency between them. Some hosts have inadvertently introduced a risk by tasking devolved units each with selecting a single best applicant or two, between which the subsequent university-level process will choose. This could be unfair where

different units have differing numbers of strong candidates, and may result in the institution not putting forward all the best candidates. Although there was evidence of some hosts monitoring the activities within devolved units to assure consistency, we sensed a distinct lack of monitoring and documentation about those activities in many others.

A key issue on which we saw relatively little focus in selection statements was diversity data. While some host organisations did gather (or access) and record personal profile data about the cohort of applicants at one or more stages of FLF internal selection, we note that the majority did not systematically either access such data from existing HR records or collect anew such data for analysis and reporting. The majority of applicants in our survey had not been asked to provide these data, while difficulties were reported by hosts we interviewed in trying to access sufficient existing personal data held by HE, and this would cover external applicants. This is a major shortcoming as without systematic data we believe it very difficult to determine whether processes are inclusive in practice and there is little scope to understand whether a change in process helps or hinders inclusion or diversity. This issue seems wide-ranging consideration.

Support

By and large, from hosts' selection statements and interviews with them, we know that hosts claim to take an individualised approach to FLF applicant support, based on applicants' needs. This should be highly inclusive, in principle. Some hosts aim to customise support by asking applicants to identify their needs and circumstances at the initial stage, and may offer additional training on, for example, interview technique or proposal writing at later stages, as candidates progress. Although some explicitly talked about augmenting the support for candidates in certain disciplines, to help them compete with applicants in disciplinary areas that have historically had high award rates, the FLF applicant survey suggested some disciplinary differences remain in how well support was experienced and met needs. There was also a general lack of data about what support was offered to and accessed by whom, which hinders investigation of how inclusive it is in practice. This is an area where hosts could valuably undertake more research with their applicants, especially including those whom they did not select (and ideally those who could have applied but did not).

Review and enhancement

Finally, an observation that emerged is that the requirement to provide an inclusive selection statement has prompted host organisations to assess their attraction, selection and support processes, and/or encouraged them to introduce new enhancements which would promote inclusive selection (and which might also be implemented beyond FLF applications). As inclusive selection and support requires constant review and attention to effectiveness, the statement they provide to UKRI (or similar reporting activity) pushes them to record and reflect on their processes and activities, and therefore is in itself valuable.

6.2 An idealised view of inclusive selection practice

The two diagrams below present a simplified view of an idealised recruitment and selection process for FLF applications within a host organisation. The first shows the overall recruitment and selection process, while the second focuses in on the selection part within that.

Overall process

Attraction	Open advertising/promotion of opportunity to internal market; Additional promotion to under-represented groups including through diversity networks; Open promotions and targeted through networks to external market/s. Profile of target markets identified if possible.
Information and enquiry handling	All enquiries triaged and recorded by Research Office to avoid academic gatekeeping; information about process offered through multiple channels; options for reasonable adjustments overtly described; mentor/buddy options offered; informal guidance and feedback offered on personal basis
Selection process	*As shown in accompanying selection process flow chart*
Support	Feedback and aftercare for those not selected through process; Feedback and personalised support for those selected to develop final application to UKRI including practice and coaching/mentoring

Selection process

Initial sift	Undertaken by research office to check eligibility and completeness. Applications anonymised; EDI profile of all applicants, before and after sift, are recorded. Feedback to any ineligible applications. Need for any reasonable adjustments established.
First review	Eligible applications reviewed by panel/s with academic expertise; panellists all trained in unconscious bias and inclusive selection (latest training and its date recorded); diversity amongst panel members (panel compositions and membership are recorded); panels use standardised process including agreed contextual assessment of CV; research office reviews all outcomes; EDI profile of long-list recorded.
Feedback and support	Feedback to unsuccessful applicants and support offered, Feedback to long-listed applicants; explanation of next stage and support offered.
Interview panel	Short-listed applicants interviewed by panel/s with academic expertise, panellists all trained in inclusive selection techniques (training and date recorded); diversity amongst panellists (not the same people as earlier stage); panel composition/membership recorded; panels use standard process (without CV) with agreed contextual scoring; research office staff to observe and facilitate 'wash-up' sessions; EDI profile of second short-list recorded.
Feedback and support	Feedback to unsuccessful applicants and support offered, Feedback to short-listed applicants; explanation of next stage and support offered.
Final review	Final selection/refinement by a single panel to agree final short-list; panel membership is diverse and includes research office staff and EDI lead (not just as observers); panellists all trained in inclusive selection (training and date recorded); panel composition /membership recorded; panel uses pre-agreed process and contextual assessment; EDI profile of final short-list recorded.

The process starts with an initial sift of applications, although we elsewhere recognise that a prior stage of inviting a 'light touch' expression of interest from prospective applicants could be an additional element, before submission of application materials for the initial sift. This diagrammatic representation assumes a standardised set of application requirements within a host (but which could vary between different host organisations). It also assumes a centralised structure, within which there could be parallel initial and review panels, as needed. Where a devolved approach is chosen, the host will need to replicate most of these stages within each devolved unit, before undertaking a centralised final review. As throughout this report, for clarity, the term 'research office' is used as shorthand to denote the team coordinating the FLF application process, wherever it is located within the institution.

6.3 Examples of good practice

The following mini-case studies are of hosts' activities where we have identified good, interesting or novel practice which has been introduced with the aim of enhancing inclusion within FLF selection, and/or diversifying the range of people who put forward an application or succeed in it. We emphasise that in most cases the effectiveness of the activity or enhancement has not been proven through research evidence, so our selection of examples is based on those we believe have potential for success, partly based on our experience in other sectors. In each case we have included a short explanation or contextualisation statement. We must also stress that these examples are not necessarily unique, and we could potentially have selected a different host which is using that particular or a similar approach or activity, but we have chosen these specific examples as they were within our research sample.

Attraction

Using diversity networks to reach out to under-represented researchers

As part of a broad range of communication channels and activities to attract FLF applicants, the research office at the Newcastle University made use of a range of staff networks ('diversity networks'). These networks exist in many universities, supporting staff in particular groups. Newcastle promoted the FLF opportunity through its NU Women, Race Equality Network, Disability Interest Group, Rainbow Network, NU Carers and NU Parents networks.

Although fully open promotion or advertising is in principle inclusive, targeting promotions to staff in under-represented groups via relevant institutional networks could increase exposure of the scheme to, and interest in it from, relevant researchers in those groups, where the groups do include such researchers. This is a pragmatic means to encourage interest amongst traditionally under-represented researchers, with the aim of achieving a wider diversity of applicants.

Use of neutral language when informing potential applicants about the FLF opportunity

In an effort to ensure that communications, messaging and information provided about the FLF scheme was inclusive, the Newcastle University's research office used a 'gender decoder' tool to review the language used. One result of using the tool was to decrease the extent to which the FLF scheme is described as a competition, and to emphasise the support available to applicants.

In addition, all communication about the scheme was reviewed by an EDI lead within the research office in order to ensure that neutral and inclusive language was used, to avoid putting off any applicants.

We agree that attention should be placed on how the FLF scheme is described and the language used to do so, through some kind of diversity review. This has the potential to ensure that those who are perhaps less confident about applying and/or have less experience of application processes can fully engage with the FLF opportunity. However, it is obviously important that any guidance does not inadvertently diverge factually from that provided by UKRI.

Use of stage-related workshops to inform potential applicants

To support and inform potential FLF applicants about the opportunity, Cardiff University organised and offered a workshop specifically about developing an Expression of Interest for prospective candidates. This was separate from a workshop offered which focused on developing a full scheme application, which was targeted to help those who were selected to write a final submission. In the early-stage workshop, potential applicants were asked to reflect on whether the scheme 'is right for them' and 'is right for them right now'. To help the prospective applicants reflect on these questions, the workshop covered the aims of the scheme and the eligibility and assessment criteria, and shared and discussed the internal application form at Cardiff. Prospective applicants were informed about the range and depth of information they would need to provide for each section of the form. The workshop was organised online during core hours, and the slide deck and recordings were made available separately for those who could not attend.

The use of a workshop to inform potential FLF applicants about the opportunity provides an alternative means to enhance FLF applicants' understanding of what is required and the internal selection process, rather than relying on prospective applicants reading everything from a web page, and the chance for the research office to assess levels of understanding. Our FLF applicant survey highlighted that many respondents were not clear about the selection process being used or its criteria, so a workshop approach could be valuable to increase this. Good selection practice should present prospective applicants with an honest and clear view of the selection process that is front of them, so they are all as well-prepared as possible, irrespective of their prior experiences.

Understanding how FLF applicants learnt about the scheme

As part of its FLF application process, Cardiff University asks all applicants to fill in an anonymous applicant survey. This also provides personal data, which is covered in another example below. Applicants are asked how they first learnt about the FLF opportunity. These questions allow Cardiff to assess how its different promotional channels are working to attract applicants. While the number of applicants in any one round does not support a valid statistical analysis, the survey does provide the basis for some understanding of how applicants from different groups (including different disciplinary backgrounds) have learnt about the FLF opportunity and understand what is involved. This allows some insights into how messages about the FLF scheme are reaching diverse groups and/or across different departments and schools, or not.

This is an example of the sort of evidence-gathering and feedback collection that should be conducted at different stages of the application and selection process, to underpin review and improvement work.

Selection

Enhancing consistency and transparency in devolved selection

The University of Edinburgh uses a devolved selection approach which is organised in three layers. Initial review of applications is conducted at School level (of which there are 23), within which documentation submitted is reviewed against the FLF criteria, resulting in nomination of candidates to go forward to selection panels in Edinburgh's three Colleges. Following panel assessment at College-level, all candidates are given feedback to improve their application and a selection of up to 10 candidates is forwarded from each College to be reviewed by the University panel which provides the final selection of the applicants (and reserves) that will be submitted to UKRI. To ensure coherence across the different panels in different Schools and Colleges, all the panels use review and scoring based on the FLF scheme criteria and a pre-agreed scoresheet that is also made available to applicants in advance. There is also a requirement to publish panel composition in advance (as well as this being recorded). In addition, all panel meetings are attended by neutral observers (from the central and College research offices) whose role is to observe that the decision-making in different panels follows the same process.

Ensuring that there is consistency across a devolved process is important to provide overall fairness to all types of applicant, including those from different disciplines. Edinburgh's approach aims to broadly mirror the FLF selection process, balancing an (initial) more specialised College peer review stage with an interdisciplinary panel to make a final selection. Allowing each College panel to select up to 10 applicants means that there are strategic decisions to be made at the final panel stage, negating disciplinary bias.

A centralised approach to applicant selection in a larger host organisation

Despite its relatively large size, the Newcastle University has chosen to utilise a single, centralised approach to selection. All expressions of interest from prospective applicants are assessed by a central panel, with all panel members encouraged to read all of them in advance. Each is reviewed in more detail by allocating it to two selected panel members, who act as 'introducer 1' and 'introducer 2' at the panel meeting. Each expression of interest is discussed and ranked based on how well the project matches published UKRI assessment criteria. In order to assist with decisions between equally ranked applicants from different disciplines, further advice can be sought from the relevant Deans. The panel's composition is designed to ensure sufficient disciplinary expertise, with a representative from every faculty. In addition, the University's Head of Research and Funding Development attends to provide oversight and observe that processes and behaviours are inclusive.

The rationale for a centralised selection approach is that it supports coherence and consistency across the diverse disciplines from which applications come. This avoids the risk in a devolved process of inconsistency between processes in different devolved units. The challenge is to field sufficient disciplinary expertise and sufficient central panel resource to assess all applications.

Having an observer in the panel, who does not directly introduce or assess applications aids transparency and who offers oversight and potential challenge, supports inclusion in the panel's decision-making.

A light-touch approach to encourage applications

This example showcases Coventry University's choice of a 'light touch' approach to lower the bar to entry in terms of the effort required for an initial application. When promoting the FLF scheme to its researchers, Coventry aims to provide an approach that encourages a wider range of applicants to apply including those with less experience or confidence. It is designed to acknowledge their diverse experience and skills, but does not require a lengthy research proposal. Utilising the UKRI criteria within this short-form application document ensures that applicants are starting to align their preparatory work with what would be required for a final submission, should they be selected by the university.

The rationale for introducing the 'light touch' application method, rather than asking all applicants to develop a full draft application at this stage, was to offer a manageable and accessible option for potential applicants who might not have much previous experience in developing a grant or fellowship application or who are less familiar with the UK research grant system. In principle, this is sound logic, as it should encourage a greater diversity of applicants – i.e. ensuring that it is not only the most experienced or confident researchers (who would be prepared to invest the time for a full application) who come forward. However, equally important will be the nature of the selection that is conducted between these early applications, and also the feedback given afterwards. It is acknowledged that this approach might not be wise in a large institution as it could lead to very large numbers of early applications. Coventry also feels that this sort of approach is appropriate in terms of overall enhancement of its research culture more widely.

To acknowledge personal circumstances and challenges in selection and support

Aston University uses an initial application form that attempts to reduce the effort required for an applicant to express interest in the scheme, rather than a full draft application (similar to the Coventry University example above). At this stage they also include a specific section and opportunity on the form for applicants to disclose any personal circumstances and/or challenges they might face when they are developing their application. Declaring these sorts of personal circumstances will aid the university to consider and organise appropriate support and also contribute to implementation of effective selection activities, although appropriate constraints will be needed on how the data are stored and with whom they are shared. As the application process currently includes an online interview round, asking applicants about existing commitments is practically useful when planning panel schedules, which can allow for the possibility of arrangements outside core hours and/or reschedule interviews around, for example, interviewee's caring responsibilities.

A fundamental aspect of good inclusive selection is proactive information to prospective applicants about the reasonable adjustments to the process that they can request and how. Many organisations will offer adjustments on request, but good practice makes the possibilities more visible, placing less emphasis on the applicant to be confident enough to ask for an adjustment.

How to take into account contextual factors when assessing applications

Most host organisations base much of their selection on an expression of interest or application form together with a CV. The traditional academic CV, which emphasises research, teaching and administrative experiences in HE, does not necessarily do justice to those who have a different background, such as a career forged in industry, to whom the FLF scheme is explicitly targeted in addition to academic researchers. To provide an application format that can capture diverse experience and expertise, the University of Bradford developed an application form based on the 'narrative CV' concept. When developing this format, the research office engaged FLF panel members as well as reviewing UKRI FLF guidance and previous feedback from applications, to identify the themes pulled out by reviewers and panel members. In addition, the narrative CV demands the applicants describe their career plans and how their project links to Bradford's wider research strategy. Bradford is currently gathering data on their use of a narrative CV approach in this way and how it shapes their applicant selection and ultimately diversity of applicants.

Harnessing the concept of the narrative CV at Bradford potentially enhances inclusivity by offering applicants a way to showcase a wider range of expertise and skills than would a traditional academic CV. However, their introduction of this new format for an application also highlights that panel members and others reviewing applications need guidance on how to assess this wider range of information, and how to balance its value compared with, for example, an application from an academic who has deeper but narrower expertise and outputs. It should also be borne in mind that the final application to UKRI does not currently highlight a narrative CV approach.

To use a range of assessment methods when selecting final applicants

The University of Lincoln uses a centralised selection approach. After initial sift screening of expressions of interest, eligible applicants are asked to submit a draft case and to prepare for a 'pitch panel' exercise. Their 5-minute presentation ('pitch') is followed by a 30-minute question and answer session (i.e. essentially an interview). When selecting FLF applicants, the selection panel draws on the draft application, presentation, and the questions asked in interview to assess the value of research and how well the applicant meets the requirements. By including the presentation and interview as a part of selection process, the panel can access details that might have been missed in the draft application and assess the need for further support should the applicant go through to final UKRI FLF selection and interview.

Historically, selection of FLF applications has drawn heavily on assessment of written work, i.e. an application form and documents submitted by the applicant. Lincoln's use of the pitch panel, combined with interview questions, reduces reliance on written material. This may be more inclusive as written materials can be more challenging for non-native English speakers or those with learning conditions that disfavour writing. Thus, a pitch panel may provide an opportunity to assess how the candidate can communicate their research idea and career aspirations to a wider audience, and the interview questions can probe areas of interest that might be less well articulated in a wholly written application, as noted above.

We consider its use here as positive, being positioned as a supportive early element in a range of activities, but point out that some private sector recruiters feel over-reliance on a pitch or presentation during final selection can favour those who are confident speakers and can 'perform' well in terms of conveying their ideas. It can disadvantage those who are less confident and,

especially, those with certain learning conditions. In the academic setting, not all research ideas across different disciplines are as easily described in a short pitch, and it is not used in UKRI's final selection process.

Anonymisation during selection

While a number of hosts have contemplated use of an anonymised approach during selection of written applications, to counter any unconscious or other bias, most note that it is difficult to organise in practice. The University of Salford has introduced it at one stage of its devolved selection approach. In its approach, its schools conduct the initial selection after which applications and CVs are anonymised and sent to a 'pre-selection panel' at university level for evaluation. Moreover, panel planning ensures that none of the panel is familiar with any of the applicants or their work. The applicants selected by the pre-selection panel are then submitted to the University's Strategic Funding Committee for the final decision.

While anonymised recruitment attempts to mitigate unconscious or conscious bias in candidate selection, it is considered problematic in academic recruitment due to the emphasis on research outputs which are often personal. These are often difficult to anonymise in a smaller institution or specific research fields, because academics tend to be familiar with their colleagues' work. Thus, anonymised selection at school or department level might not be achievable unless an external panel is used or assessment is of a discrete element of an application such as the research idea. We believe in this case the institution is to be applauded for trialling anonymisation in the academic environment.

Having a range of career stages represented in panels

Given the stated aim of the FLF scheme to include researchers on different career paths, as well as across the full range of disciplines and with diversity in terms of personal characteristics, trying to obtain similar diversity in selection panels is very challenging, if not impossible. Attention was particularly given to panel diversity at Coventry University. Its review panel had equal representation of men and women and included members from under-represented groups in terms of a range of protected characteristics. In addition to ensuring representation across the UKRI remit in terms of disciplines, an existing FLF awardee was included as well as professional staff from Research Services to provide oversight and focus. To ensure there was fair attention to applications from researchers at different career stages, some early-career researchers were deliberately included in the panel.

Diversity in panels is often defined in the FLF context in terms of ensuring disciplinary expertise as well as gender balance. The most common approach is to rely on established academics because they bring in the disciplinary expertise needed and other experience of selection committees. However, involving additional expertise, such as staff from Research Services and those who have personal experience of the scheme, as well as some who are not senior academic researchers, enhances panel diversity and increases the chance of inclusive judgements.

Increasing expertise about diversity and inclusion

Aston University uses a university-wide selection process, in which initial screening of applications by funding managers is followed by assessment by an academic panel, followed by a short online interview with a panel. To mitigate unconscious bias in selection, there are briefings on bias and EDI throughout the selection process. In addition, everyone involved in selection is asked to complete the University's 'Recruitment in the Equalities Framework' training module which covers unconscious bias, its impact on the recruitment process and how those involved in recruitment can mitigate its potential impact on candidate selection.

This is an unusual example where specific EDI training relating to recruitment is used, whereas most hosts require panel members only to have more generic EDI or unconscious bias training, which is not applied to selection and may not be recent. To ensure that a selection process drawing on different assessment methods remains inclusive, it is a good idea to introduce expert EDI knowledge in other ways too, in addition to this training of assessors. This can be done by including EDI specialists within panels or in the 'wash up' sessions that follow panels, or as observers of key activities.

Support

To provide bespoke support at all stages of the FLF selection process

At the University of Salford, initial applicant support includes one-to-one discussions between prospective applicants and the research office, to clarify scheme requirements including expectations about research project ideas. Applicants are also given feedback on their CV, and how best to highlight relevant achievements and experience. These discussions can include an existing mentor or the research office will try to help the applicant identify one. Having the mentor in the same meeting helps to tailor the support appropriately.

Mock interviews are also held to prepare the applicants for the interview panel stage, and an external expert is available to provide additional coaching for those who are less confident in their presentation skills. This has been found to be beneficial for those who are not native English speakers and/or feel intimidated in front of an interview panel. At a later application stage, when applicants are asked to respond to peer review comments, the research office convenes help to support the applicant to develop and articulate their response.

While individualised support tends to be more inclusive because it acknowledges the diversity of applicants, this example shows there is scope to extend support well beyond information about the scheme/process and feedback on proposals/applications, including provision of mentoring and coaching in key activities.

Upskilling research office staff, research managers and researcher developers

To ensure that all applicants have access to equal support, Coventry University has created an informal support system in which more experienced research managers and other professional staff share knowledge about the FLF scheme with their colleagues. Everyone has access to the same information about the FLF scheme criteria and the internal selection process, but it was acknowledged that there could be varying levels of experience amongst those supporting FLF

applicants. Having a network in place means that all staff involved can discuss the FLF scheme with more experienced colleagues and, by doing so, the team aims to ensure that all applicants are supported with equal expertise.

Most of our consideration of inclusive support focuses on the opportunities available to and the experiences of the FLF applicants. However, to reinforce the provision of equitable support for all applicants, this example demonstrates the value of attention also to the professional staff and how they in turn are supported and upskilled in their work.

Review and improvement

Gathering EDI data and obtaining feedback

Cardiff University was keen to gather data about the profile of FLF applicants, so all prospective applicants were asked to register their interest through a short online survey. As discussed earlier, this included questions about how the candidates had learned about the FLF opportunity, together with optional questions about their backgrounds and identities. The data gathered allows the University to review and monitor the progress of applicants through the selection stages, which will help to isolate any processes that are not inclusive. Moreover, comparison of the profile of applicants with that of all university academic staff provides an insight into whether FLF applicants reflect the wider Cardiff academic population. The latter analysis also allows the team to identify departments with limited pools of potential applicants in key groups, such as those which are male-dominated, which could inform attraction efforts.

In principle, the aim to record the diversity profile of early-stage applicants and throughout stages of selection is admirable and should underpin efforts to make selection more inclusive, including comparison against key benchmarks. However, implementing that data collection through optional questions in a survey may only give a partial view of applicant diversity and a mechanism that gathers anonymised data from all applicants would in principle be stronger, although a mechanism that allows the option for applicants to opt out of providing certain elements of EDI data (e.g. including 'Prefer not to say' as a possible response) is better than opting in. To encourage applicants to submit data, applicants should be informed about why EDI data is being gathered and how it is being stored, in line with GDPR principles; it should be made explicit that the data are being used only to improve the selection process, in order not to deter applicants.

A culture of continuous review and improvement

At the University of Exeter, the starting point for reviewing their processes is gathering FLF applicant profile data, which the research office obtains from faculties and departments, including protected characteristics. While the numbers did not support a valid statistical analysis, the data team noted that non-native English speakers seemed to be slightly less likely than the native English speakers to get through the selection process. This prompted a change in how applicants were selected, by introducing an additional interview as part of the process, after scoring of applications by the faculty panels. In addition to their attempts to collect data and adjust their process in response, Exeter shared its Round 7 inclusive selection statement with the university's EDI team for review. The EDI team suggested the use of additional mechanisms (such as events or workshops) to inform potential FLF applicants about the scheme more thoroughly. It also

recommended that there should a minimum requirement for how many academics are involved in applicant selection at faculty level, leading to a change in the guidance it gave to faculties.

As noted previously, collection of profile data and feedback, and here the use of a review by experts in EDI, are helpful inputs to the culture of continual review and improvement that underpins enhancements to inclusion and research culture.

6.4 Areas for improvement

Attraction and information

The evidence collected in this study suggests that, by and large, the strategies used by many host organisations are effective in drawing in prospective applicants, so we do not see the need for major shifts in attraction practice. However, establishing the diversity profile of the pool of eligible researchers from whom applicants could emerge, to benchmark the profile of those who do apply, would be valuable to review the inclusiveness of current attraction activities. This is likely to require more attention to data collection and analysis, while including external applicants within any benchmark population may not be feasible. Obtaining feedback from those who are eligible but choose not to apply would be a powerful addition to evidence-gathering.

Two other areas in which there could be incremental improvement to diversify the range of researchers that apply are more extensive use of staff diversity networks and, where external applicants are sought, more open appeal to prospective external applicants rather than reliance on existing academic networks. We accept, however, that the latter may not be fully realisable in practice, because a host cannot practically target all researchers outside the institution (and if all hosts did, they would all be advertising to the same population). Nonetheless, some review and enhancement of the inclusivity of the academic networks used would be wise.

Finally on attraction and information-giving, more proactive provision of information about both the host's selection process and potential reasonable adjustments to it would be good practice. It should be made clearer to all that there is the possibility for adjustments (and what these could be). Of course, this does the beg the question of the adjustments that could be offered. We found some evidence from applicants that not all applicants understood the selection criteria or process from the outset, within the host and/or at UKRI, so there appears to be room to improve this aspect of information provision too.

Selection processes

Our understanding of the selection activities being undertaken across the hundred or so academic host organisations is that there is high reliance on written application documents and their assessment. While this is commonplace in the academic eco-system, this does contrast somewhat with other employment sectors where there is more balance between the use of written application materials and other forms of interaction with applicants. If it is not the case already, we think every applicant should engage individually with the Research Office to some extent and, ideally, all who pass the initial sift stage should be interviewed, as this may offer a greater chance for those who do not yet excel in writing applications to put their case across. It will also be good practice as the final selection by UKRI includes an interview. Where an application from an under-

represented group is regarded as a 'possible', that applicant should be included for interview together with other long-listed applicants. Our recommendation is not to rely wholly on review of written documents submitted, but that aspect should remain as the final selection process by UKRI is based on a written submission. However, we also liked the idea of offering a low barrier to entry for applicants by the invitation of an informal expression of interest prior to development of a written application.

Given the widespread use of devolved approaches to selection, there is considerable scope to improve the evidence about whether there is consistency and fairness across different units within a devolved structure. Selection statements suggest that some hosts are not systematically recording what takes place, which raises the risk of inconsistency (and of challenge). More systematic management and documentation are required, in addition to ensuring that EDI data-gathering processes are implemented in all the devolved units as well as during centralised processes. There is a need to improve reporting and documentation generally, not least to provide some evidence of fairness and equity.

In terms of who takes part in review or interview panels, there is further scope for the diversity of panel compositions to be enhanced, on the basis of what was reported in the statements. The ideal of a selection panel reflecting the diversity of those it is assessing presents a practical challenge for a scheme such as the FLF which aims for a wide diversity of applicants in several dimensions. Appointing individuals with that range of characteristics to every panel is clearly impossible, but hosts could consider increasing the number of dimensions of diversity they are considering, beyond disciplinary and gender diversity which are most common. Including EDI specialists or independent observers on panels that are not very diverse – potentially to remind them about inclusivity and challenge behaviours or decisions if necessary – may be a more practical strategy, and would be consistent with UKRI's final process. A 'wash up' session after each panel, that includes panellists, EDI specialists and Research Office staff to review what has taken place and ensure that the outcomes reflect an inclusive process would mimic what is regarded as good practice in the public and private sectors. Recording and reporting the compositions of those who take part as panel members should be routine practice.

While hosts widely reported that panel members and others involved in selection had engaged in unconscious bias and/or other EDI training, in many cases we suspect this was generic training which was not recent. We encourage much greater utilisation of training or CPD specifically designed to address EDI during recruitment and/or on inclusive selection techniques. The training that those involved have had, and its date, should be recorded and reviewed, and there should be periodic 'refresh' of such training.

During interviews, there is also potentially room for improved practice. In addition to using standard questions across the interviews, some have argued that in truly inclusive interview practice (by employers in competency-based interviews, at least) assessors should not see the applicant CV, as they may then selectively draw that information into their judgement, i.e. outside the standardised questions. However, in the academic setting, this may not be realistic and it is possible that use of a CV that provides some contextual evidence will actually favour candidates from certain under-represented groups. Anonymisation may be feasible in distinct elements of the selection process, however, which would be beneficial. We would encourage hosts to review the way they use both panels and interviews and consider this. Inviting applicants to present or pitch

to an audience, or engage in group exercises, needs very careful management and assessment, as these techniques run counter to inclusive practice as they favour individuals who are adept at 'performance' in such settings, and can disfavour others, and are not used in the final selection process by UKRI.

Our final point and largest area for improvement concerns 'EDI data', i.e. about applicants. Very few host organisations reported that they were gathering or accessing data in the way they need to if they want to improve practice and ensure it is inclusive and equitable. In principle, full data on as many protected characteristics as possible (plus other dimensions within the FLF context, such as prior career trajectory) need to be gathered for or from every applicant, starting with those who express interest in the scheme. Once this is gathered, potentially by the Research Office, the profile of the cohort progressing to each successive stage of the selection process needs to be analysed, reviewed and reported. Only with this level of granularity, in terms of data collection but also analysis, can evidence be robustly gathered about the inclusivity or risk within each activity or stage in the selection process. We consider that this is the area of practice that requires the most attention – and at almost every host institution – and possibly the resourcing and support from senior management, as well as consistency from funders. We recognise that such consideration will need to take account of the needs and resources of HE teams, as well as data protection concerns.

Support

Evidence in relation to provision of support, and whether it is inclusive for all types of prospective applicant, across all disciplines, is somewhat equivocal. Hosts suggest that they offer a range of information provision and advice openly to prospective applicants, some of which is in the form of events delivered to groups, and then take a highly individual and needs-based approach to support once applications are underway, presumably ramping up in potential intensity for those who are selected by the host to be put forward to UKRI. The evidence we obtained from applicants did not strongly reflect those strategies, but suggested that some types of applicant felt less supported than others, with somewhat more of those in the social sciences, arts and humanities subjects feeling that the support had not met their needs.

This seems to indicate there is scope improve support further. This is almost certainly an area where making support equitable is not the same as providing equal support to all, as applicants from certain backgrounds and disciplines are likely to need more support than others. As for selection processes, understanding what needs to be improved requires more documentation about the support that was provided to whom, and collection and review of feedback from applicants, at different stages. Perhaps unsurprisingly, our survey data suggested that those who were not selected by their host were less happy with the support they had received, than those were selected. That sort of feedback needs to be collected and reviewed locally, not through a study such as ours. One aspect should be obtaining feedback on provision of information about the selection process and criteria, which ought to be something about which sufficient information could be given to all but appears to remain sub-optimal according to our applicant survey response data. Another would be the views of those who choose not to apply, to see if this is partly due to them not considering that the potential support will be sufficient.

A related area for improvement is the provision of feedback, an important aspect of support. The FLF applicant survey suggests that further work is needed in this area. Again, there was some discrepancy between the strategies for giving feedback that we heard from the institutions, and the experiences related by applicants, some of whom said they had had almost no feedback at all. Thus, this is another area where more detailed recording of the feedback and 'aftercare' that is offered and provided would be valuable (not only to those who were selected by the host but who did not gain an FLF award, but also to those not selected by the host), although its resourcing should not be under-estimated. Taking into account the total amount of effort and resource that goes into the FLF application process, from both the applicant and staff in the host institution, some extent of aftercare for unsuccessful applicants (such as identification of alternative routes for progression or funding) would seem valuable so that as little as possible of that effort is lost.

6.5 Recommendations

It is hoped that the overall findings in this study, and especially the examples of good practice and the areas for improvement identified, will prove valuable to academic host organisations as they seek to improve their practice – which was the intention of this study and report. Nonetheless, we offer the following more specific recommendations.

For host organisations

- We recommend all hosts adopt a culture of review and enhancement in relation to their FLF processes, underpinned by recording data about the profile of applicants at different stages of the selection process;

- There needs to be much more thorough and systematic gathering (in collaboration with and taking expert guidance from human resources colleagues) or collection and recording of data about applicants, including personal and protected characteristics, to enable analysis of applicant profiles at each stage of the selection process so that the inclusiveness of each stage or activity can be assessed;

- We recommend incremental improvements to attraction strategies, based on open promotion of the opportunity but also more use of diversity networks to increase levels of interest among researchers in those groups;

- There is scope for clearer provision of information about hosts' internal selection processes, including the criteria used and more overt promotion of opportunities to seek reasonable adjustments, so that the full range of potential applicants all have sufficient insight to make informed decisions and develop well-founded applications;

- Particularly for those using devolved elements of their selection process, we strongly recommend more systematic documentation about processes and criteria to be used, and better monitoring of devolved processes and participation, to ensure consistency and fairness across different disciplinary areas;

- We recommend that hosts undertake a diversity review of their selection processes, paying particular attention to the composition of panels and their expertise in relation to the scheme

and diversity considerations, that panel members have recent and appropriate training in inclusive selection techniques, and that related selection activities themselves are inclusive;

- We recommend that hosts, individually and/or together, consider how to evaluate contextual issues during selection and develop guidelines so this can be approached and implemented consistently across selection processes;

- Finally, we recommend that host organisations take the opportunity to reflect on their learning in relation to developing more inclusive selection for the FLF scheme and translate this learning so that other selection processes can also be enhanced.

For UKRI

- The recent introduction of demand management should be retained as data so far suggest it has made the scheme more inclusive by broadening the footprint of hosts with applicants and awards, including more smaller and specialised institutions;

- To increase transparency and accelerate the progress of hosts in collecting and analysing applicant profile data, UKRI should continue to publish EDI data about FLF applications and awards and consider requiring academic hosts to provide recent profile data to accompany their inclusive selection statement. If so, UKRI should also partner with other funders and schemes to reduce fragmented data gathering and potential tensions with requests from others;

- The requirement for academic host organisations to provide an inclusive selection statement for each application round (or updates to the previous one) should continue, although the guidance/prompts given to hosts should be reviewed in the context of findings of this report;

- To encourage a culture of review and improvement, UKRI should conduct a diversity review of its own process for selection of FLF final applications and publish the results;

- It would be valuable for all parties for UKRI to lead an investigation into methods for fair and consistent assessment of contextual issues in selection for FLF or related funding applications, and share any good practice identified.

Appendix: Applicant survey response sample description

Table A1.1 Applicant survey respondents by FLF and institutional context

		N	%
FLF application round (latest)			
	Round 7	275	63%
	Round 6	150	34%
	Prior to Round 6	13	3%
FLF application trajectory			
	Awardee	31	7%
	Submitted, pending	212	48%
	Submitted, unsuccessful	132	30%
	Not selected by host	37	8%
	Not selected by school or department	14	3%
	Other	11	3%
Institution type			
	Russell Group	245	56%
	Post 92	57	13%
	Specialist/research inst	44	10%
Other pre 92		92	21%
Institution location			
	England	355	81%
	Scotland	54	12%
	Wales	22	5%
	N Ireland	7	2%
Broad discipline			
	REF A subjects	163	37%
	REF B subjects	177	40%
	REF C subjects	60	14%
	REF D subjects	38	9%
Total		*438*	

Table A1.2 Personal characteristics of FLF applicant survey respondents

		N	%
Sex			
	Female	212	49%
	Male	201	46%
	Other/prefer not to say	23	5%
Nationality			
	UK	203	48%
	Other	218	52%
Ethnicity (of UK nationality only)			
	Minority ethnic	28	14%
	White	169	84%
	Other/prefer not to say	5	2%
Disability or learning condition			
	Yes	38	9%
	No	354	83%
	Prefer not to say	35	8%
Age group			
	30-34	107	27%
	35-39	169	40%
	40-44	101	24%
	45 or over	29	7%
Circumstances			
	Full-time employment	407	93%
	Open-ended position	218	50%
	External candidate	51	12%
	Caring responsibilities	155	35%
Prior career			
	Career break/s	127	29%
	Wholly academic career	399	91%
	Mostly another sector	15	9%
Total		*438*	