

Advanced Strategic Platform for Inclusive Research Environments (ASPIRE): A Tool for Change

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Abstract: In recent years, organisations have been striving to adopt a proactive approach towards reducing discrimination and enhancing inclusion. Research performing organisations, in particular, have made substantial investments and adopted a number of policies, programmes and interventions to combat gender inequality. Despite the progress achieved, gender equality in research and higher education institutions deems to be particularly difficult to attain, with the same challenges remaining prevalent for decades. Among the contributors to the perpetuation of gender inequality in academia, is the inability of gender equality initiatives to challenge gendered norms. Partly because the focus of such initiatives remains on normative constructions of gender, and their implementation is based on the assumption of culture change through instrumental drivers. Consequently, as long as success and impact of equality initiatives remains solely associated with the introduction of new policies, rather than the transformation of entrenched behavioural and culturally-prescribed norms, significant, continuous and integrated change is unlikely to occur. To address these issues, the Advanced Strategic Platform for Inclusive Research Environments (ASPIRE) offers an innovative and evidence-based framework aimed at accelerating meaningful change in attitude and behaviour towards diversity and facilitating inclusive research environments. ASPIRE encourages the focus of enquiry to expand from the (re)production of inequalities and adoption of solutions that centre on improving staff statistics and performance metrics, to long-term interactive processes of change that can generate structural and embedded impact on organisational culture. ASPIRE provides a dynamic web-based platform for implementation, adoption and sustained Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) practice. It goes beyond the current EDI approaches by taking a holistic and intersectional perspective, that does not only address issues of gender, but accounts for other personal characteristics that contribute to unique experiences of discrimination. It appropriately guides and measures the implementation of EDI initiatives across institutions, linking such measurement with indicators of change in attitudes and culture, and providing recommendations for future and further action.

Keywords: equality, diversity, inclusion, web-based platform, culture change

1. Introduction/background

In recent years, organisations have been striving to adopt a proactive approach towards reducing discrimination and enhancing inclusion. Research Performing Organisations (RPO), in particular, have made substantial investments and adopted a number of policies, programmes and interventions to combat gender inequality. Despite the progress made, however, gender equality in research and higher education institutions remains particularly difficult to attain (Powell, Ah-King and Hussénus, 2018). Structural challenges, such as vertical and horizontal segregation, gender pay gap, disproportionate barriers to recruitment and career progression also remain prevalent (European Commission, 2019). Organisations are transmitters of conventional ideologies, importing behavioural norms entrenched in culturally prescribed forms (Mihăilă, 2018). Their policies, procedures and informal work practices reproduce existing normative constructions of gender (Connell, 1989; Ely and Meyerson, 2010; van den Brink, 2015). Among the contributors to the perpetuation of gender inequality in academia, is the inability of gender equality initiatives to challenge gendered norms and have impact that creates structural and embedded change (Mergaert and Lombardo, 2014; Powell, Ah-King and Hussénus, 2018).

Gender inequalities in academia are often explained as the result of sex-role socialisation that produces differences in attitudes and behaviours between men and women. Due to these socialised differences, it is argued that women have not developed the appropriate skills and traits, and such differences further impact ambition, motivation and perceptions of merit. Interventions designed under this perspective (e.g. training, mentoring, networking), aim to develop women's skills that are considered essential for success, thus enabling them to perform as well as, and compete with, men. Despite being quite popular and widely implemented, interventions within this perspective, frame gender inequality as a 'women's issue', viewing women as the

source of the problem, while leaving the system and 'male' standards intact (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Subašić et al., 2018).

Taking the opposite approach to solve this problem are interventions based on the idea that socialised differences should not be eliminated but valued and celebrated instead. Gender inequality in organisations is conceived as a consequence of behaviours, styles and forms of work traditionally perceived as 'masculine' being valued, and those traditionally classified as 'feminine' being devalued or suppressed. Interventions developed within this frame (e.g. awareness-raising activities, training, rewards) attempt to give voice to a woman's perspective and celebrate gender differences. Many organisations take this approach, attempting to make staff aware of 'gender differences' in styles, skills and perspectives, and their value. Critics have argued that this approach can legitimised perceived gender differences and reinforce gender stereotypes (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Ridgeway, 1997). Furthermore, the structural sources of inequalities and processes remain in place.

Organisations have adopted increasingly transparent recruitment and promotion processes and policies that support work-life balance, aiming to eliminate or compensate for structural barriers to women's recruitment and advancement. Policies implemented under this framework explain gender inequalities as a result of differential structures of opportunity and power that impede women's progress, give them less access and fewer resources. Such policies have been widely criticised for having little impact on organisational culture and systemic change (e.g. Ely and Meyerson, 2000; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012).

Interventions under these 'traditional gender perspectives' can be helpful and have the potential for transformational change (De Vries and van den Brink, 2016; Leenders, Bleijenbergh and van den Brink, 2019; O'Connor, 2014). Their impact, however, is usually associated with the introduction of new policies and practices rather than the evolution of organisational culture. Consequently, there is little evidence of impact on the quality of the experience that staff are exposed to within these organisations, highlighting their failure to change gendered norms and work practices (Benschop et al., 2015; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2008).

To address these limitations, the Advanced Strategic Platform for Inclusive Research Environments (ASPIRE) encourages the focus of enquiry to expand from the (re)production of inequalities and adoption of solutions that centre on improving staff statistics and performance metrics, to long-term interactive processes of change. ASPIRE offers an innovative and evidence-based framework aimed at accelerating meaningful change in attitude and behaviour towards diversity and facilitating inclusive research environments by generating structural and embedded impact on organisational culture. The ASPIRE framework does not only address issues of gender but takes an intersectional approach, accounting for other personal characteristics (e.g. race and ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and class) that contribute to unique experiences of discrimination.

2. ASPIRE model development

The ASPIRE project, funded through the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council's (EPSRC) Inclusion Matters Programme, started in January 2019. The methodology adopted a mixed methods consultation approach and was divided into three stages.

Stage 1: Initial evidence gathering and stakeholder engagement

During the first stage of the data collection, desk-based research was conducted to review, synthesise and evaluate empirical evidence on EDI related challenges and key barriers, interventive practices, impact monitoring processes and unmet needs. Publicly available data (e.g. organisations' websites, EDI strategy documents and action plans) and existing literature on EDI were analysed and reviewed.

Documents allow for inferences about institutions to be made as they represent situational embedded conceptions of their creators (Wolff, 2004). Thematic analysis of EDI strategies and action plans allow for an exploration of implicit cultural messages regarding inequality in academia and the framework in which policies and interventions are designed. A total of 135 EDI strategies and action plans from European organisations (mainly located in the UK) were subjected to a thematic analysis. The final themes emerged from the data, following multiple rounds of coding and analysis resulting from full engagement with the text. The initial data analysis focused on inclusion and diversity related challenges that RPOs are currently attempting to address in

their strategies and action plans. Once all challenges were coded and organised, the relevant coded data extracts were sorted into themes. Subsequently, themes were refined and discussed among the research team to form a coherent pattern and resulted in the final eight categories used to analyse the data: policy and practice; leadership; teams; behaviours; social inclusion; spatial inclusion; research performance and outputs, and student experience. Challenges were grouped accordingly under each theme.

Alongside this analysis, all identified initiatives and interventions being implemented to address the challenges, along with their effectiveness, were collated. Evidence from relevant literature was gathered and used to evaluate the impact of the interventions. The range of challenges and interventions cited in the strategies and action plans reflected a complex process that despite its uniqueness shared some similarities across institutions.

The subsequent data analysis involved a validation workshop with relevant stakeholders to gather their perspectives and feedback. The stakeholder group included EDI experts and practitioners, RPOs, researchers (with intersecting identities and across a range of career stages), publishers and Research Funding Organisations (RFOs). The consultation workshop led to the finalisation of the challenges and assessment of the interventions.

Stage 2: Stakeholder interviews to assess organisational culture

To extend the themes identified and conduct a more rigorous evaluation of best practice with respect to EDI, 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with different types of stakeholders, lasting on average 43 minutes (see Table 1). Interview data were analysed inductively using thematic analysis. After familiarising ourselves with the dataset through reading and re-reading transcripts, data were coded based on themes previously identified during the first stage of data collection. The data were also subjected to intersectional analysis. Emergent new themes were developed where appropriate. This resulted in further refinements to the proposed content which represented the core components of the ASPIRE framework.

Table 1: Summary of interviews conducted

Stakeholder type	Number of interviews
Research Performing Organisations	3
Researchers	15
EDI experts	4
Centres for Doctoral Training	2
Trade unions	2
Publishers	1
Research Funding Organisations	3

To develop the impact indicator framework, and thus provide the means to measure progress towards embedded impact and EDI related culture change, a cross-sectional design was adopted and supported by quantitative statistical analysis. Data were generated by means of a questionnaire and collected in seven RPOs. Participants were recruited through advertisements on organisations' websites and emails shared by organisations to their staff. Participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire on their experiences and perceptions of their working environment. The completion of the questionnaire took 15 minutes on average. Participants were then thanked and debriefed. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

The questionnaire allowed for a comprehensive evaluation and the establishment of an institutional baseline for organisational culture. It included measures related to:

- **Diversity readiness:** attitudes towards disability (adaptation of Loo, 2002); attitudes towards LGBT (authors' own, 2019); organisational racial and ethnical discrimination (James, Lovato and Cropanzano, 1994); organisational sexism (adaptation of Rubin et al., 2019); perception of organisational diversity (authors' own, 2019) and diversity by career stage (authors' own, 2019);

- **Work environment:** Diversity climate (Mor Barak et al., 1998); psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999); work-life balance support (Hammer et al., 2009).
- **Organisational commitment** (Meyer, Allen and Smith, 1993);
- **Sociodemographic characteristics** (gender identity, age, ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation, disability status, caring responsibilities, role (senior leadership; academic, professional staff, research student)).

Data were collected from 634 (274 female, 124 male and 236 not disclosed) members of staff and postgraduate research students. The results of the questionnaire were integrated into the ASPIRE framework and used to establish rigorous, multi-level, sequenced and meaningful indicators of embedded impact. Impact indicators (i.e. directional change goals) were identified through reviewing and coding the collected data and by consulting key sector representatives (strategic leads, institutional EDI staff and those representing key demographics).

Stage 3: Developing the ASPIRE 8-Pillar Model

The ASPIRE model, currently comprising eight pillars that define an inclusive research environment (Figure 1), was developed through a theory of change (Weiss, 1995). It provides a whole institution, integrated and holistic approach to building EDI strategies and the mechanism to evaluate change. Each pillar is 'achieved' by overcoming a series of challenges through completing intervention activities. Based on the data collected, two levels of challenges were generated. The first is the high-level challenge – the fundamental barriers to change – and the second is the contributory challenge – a series of stepwise challenges that together define the high-level challenge. In this way, incremental progress can be monitored, measured and evaluated against defined impact indicators.

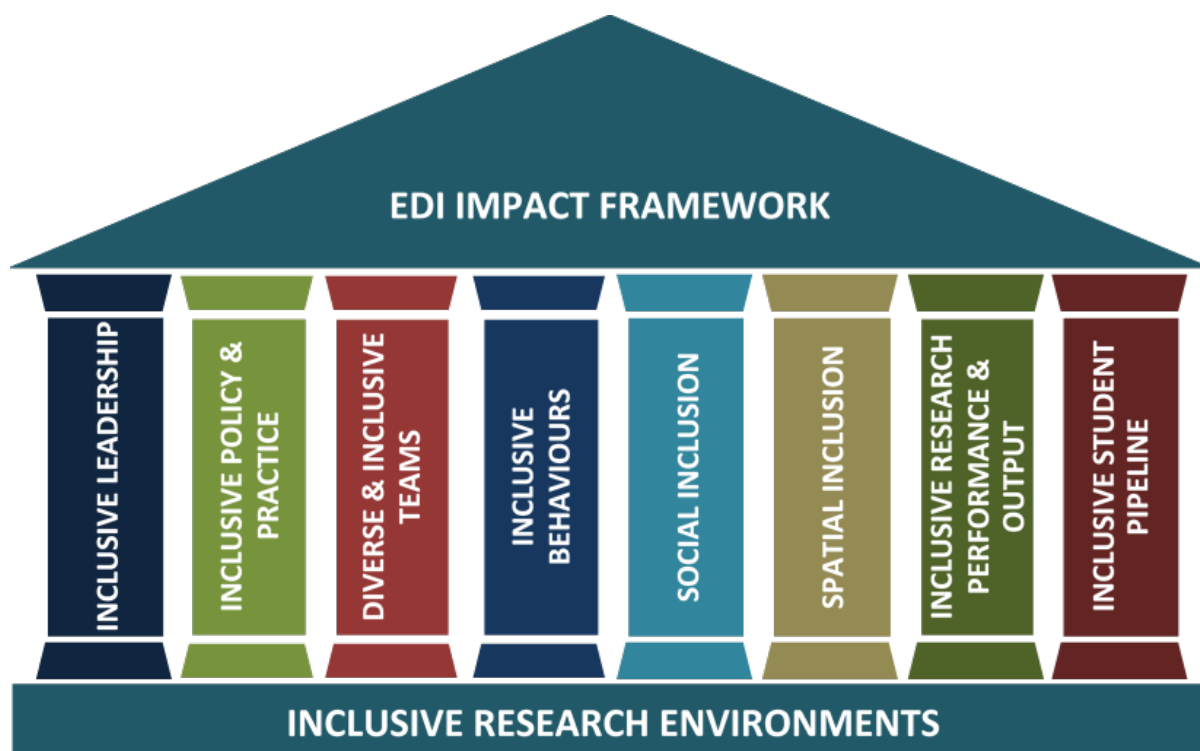


Figure 1: The ASPIRE 8-pillar model

3. The ASPIRE user tool – the user's perspective

ASPIRE is a web-based platform that is underpinned by research and designed to grow and adapt to new knowledge and evidence. It allows the user to define its organisational / departmental / research group challenges or goals from an EDI perspective, and measures progress in terms of increasing EDI literacy and changes in attitude and culture. The starting point is to establish the user benchmark – how far along the EDI journey are you? This benchmark is used to monitor progress. Once you have defined your goals, the platform will lead you through the recommended interventions – these will complement the interventions you have

already established. You can either reject or accept the intervention, based on an informed choice, and your bespoke strategy will begin to build. Each intervention comes with its own change/impact indicators and advice on how to implement the indicators within a monitoring strategy. The platform is designed for the user to self-audit progress against defined goals (Figure 2).

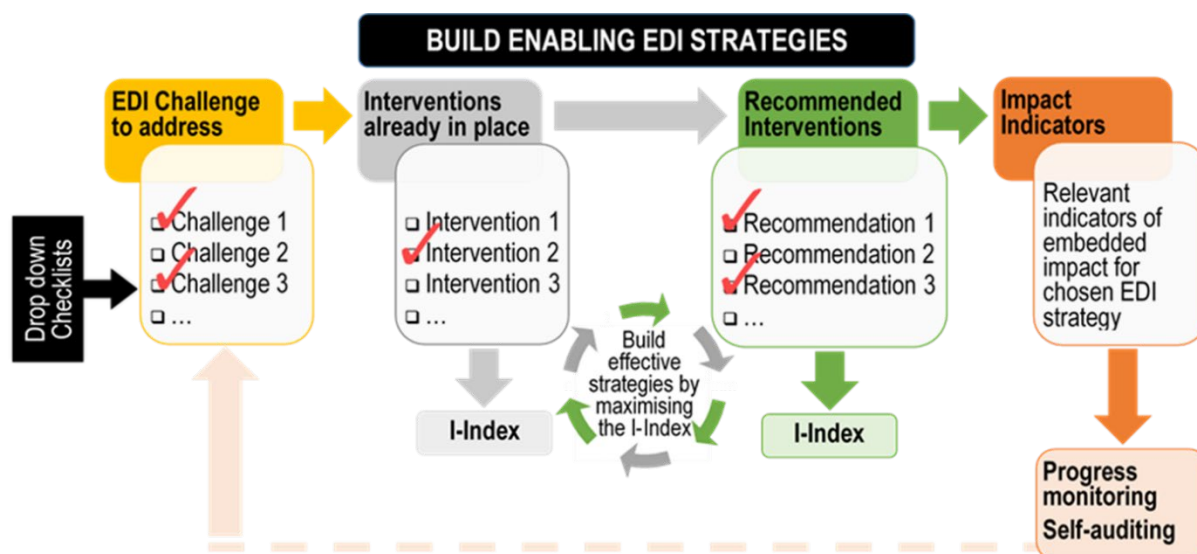


Figure 2: Schematic of the ASPIRE user tool, illustrating the iterative process for building enabling strategies

The ASPIRE Model introduces the concept of the ‘i-index’ (a purely internal index process). The i-index is used to establish the user benchmark at the outset, and as a means to monitor/measure user progress and EDI literacy growth (Figure 3). A key assumption of the model is that all interventions need to be completed and impact evidenced in order to fully ‘achieve’ the pillar. These are defined as the conditions for success. If all interventions are completed and all change/impact evidenced, then $I = 100\%$.

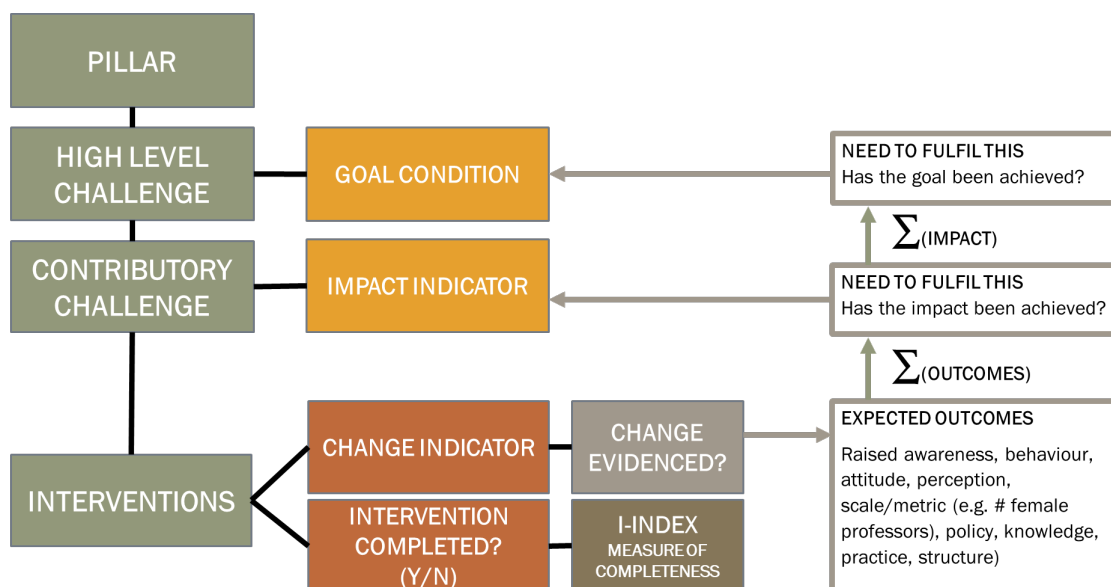


Figure 3: Measuring progress with the ASPIRE model

Since interventions may well impact more than one ‘challenge’, the model recognises interventions as having different ‘reach’ (Figure 4). Interventions with more ‘reach’ are likely to be more impactful within the EDI strategy, and hence a more efficient and cost-effective approach. The concept of ‘reach’, therefore, is used to prioritise interventions – and is used to inform user choice.

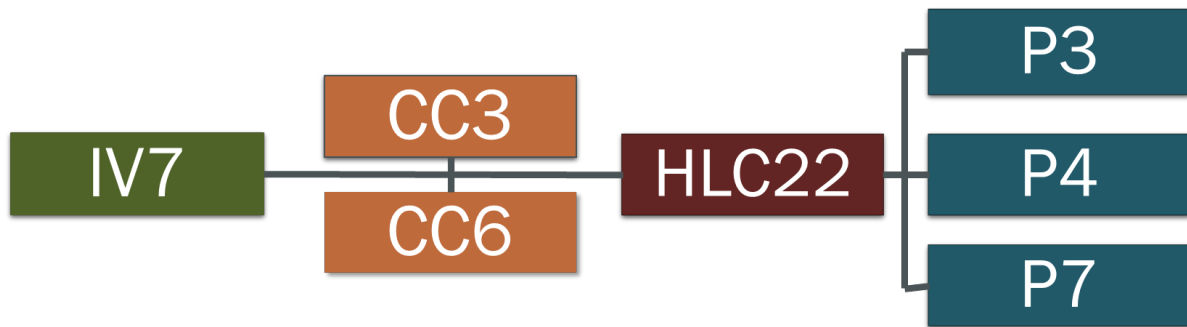


Figure 4: The concept of ‘reach’ is utilised in the model to prioritise interventions and to inform user choice. An intervention (IV) may address more than one contributory challenge (CC), high-level challenge (HLC) and/or pillar (P). The more challenges addressed, the impactful the intervention is likely to be

The ASPIRE platform is due to be available mid-2022.

4. Discussion and conclusion

One of the main contributors to the perpetuation of gender inequality in academia, is the inability of gender equality initiatives to challenge gendered norms and have impact that creates structural and embedded change. ASPIRE proposes a systemic approach that extends simple metrics-based evaluations and includes a comprehensive evaluation of attitudinal and behavioural change. It compels organisations to examine and reorganise their structures, processes and culture in order to achieve meaningful and equitable change.

ASPIRE offers an innovative framework that allows users to continuously identify and disrupt oppressively gendered (and other) practices and guides them on how to revise and appropriately measure their implementation, linking it with meaningful markers of culture change. As a consequence, ASPIRE will enhance our understanding of how organisations can move from reproducing ‘traditional’ gendered norms and change their practices and culture to address diversity and inclusion. ASPIRE acknowledges that social identities do not function independently of one another and takes an intersectional approach. By accounting for a range of personal characteristics that contribute to unique experiences of discrimination, ASPIRE attempts to provide a more accurate representation of lived experiences and to move away from unidimensional group comparisons.

The ASPIRE toolkit provides a new evidence-based resource synthesising EDI best practice, that will allow customisation of the EDI strategy the user wants to develop, constant monitoring of progress and enhancement for dynamic strategy development. Consequently, ASPIRE will improve the process of reviewing and modifying existing inclusion-related practices.

By reducing barriers to inclusion at individual, departmental, and institutional levels, ASPIRE will improve organisational capabilities in strategic decision-making (re. EDI), evaluation, tracking and review.

ASPIRE has the potential to have a long-lasting impact across the sector generating improved and sustainable inclusive research environments.

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