Diversity in Science Grant

Grant Report

Project Overview:

Taking the form of a series of structured but open-ended interviews with volunteer staff members recruited from within the School of Bioscience, this project looked to:

- provide students with relatable insights into the experiences of staff as they've moved through their academic careers, bolstering a feeling of representation and inclusion
- provide staff members a forum to highlight specific challenges; put forward approaches that have (and haven't helped) them in the past; and to shed light on aspects of their conditions that they feel are poorly understood and are therefore not well addressed by the more common interventions.

Aims:

The aims of this project centred around two key areas:

- providing students struggling with mental health, neurodivergence, and/or disability, a point of relatability and insight into the experiences of staff; increasing visibility of these conditions within the academic environment and, by extension, building a more inclusive and welcoming environment.
- providing staff with an opportunity to voice and share their experiences, both during their studies/training and throughout their careers, in living with their conditions; drawing attention to the more nuanced aspects of the day-to-day struggles they encounter, the effectiveness and availability of current interventions, and express areas they feel could be better understood or addressed to further acceptance and inclusivity within their field, and the academic environment as a whole.

These aims were achieved primarily through semi-structured interviews, and the production of digital resources for dissemination. While interviews were initially due to be conducted by a (reimbursed) student so as to create a more informal interview environment; due to unforeseeable time constraints, interviews were instead conducted by the project lead.

In the long term, depending on successful evaluations, this project will be expanded to provide the same speaking opportunities to students (particularly those having just completed their study), and organise networking, mentorship, and support opportunities throughout the School.

Outcomes and Evaluation:

Evaluation of the project was initially designated to take the form of four parallel criteria, namely:

- has the opportunity provided to staff resulted in their feeling heard, or that they've been able to draw attention to areas that have otherwise went unsaid?
    - Of the interviews conducted to date, each member of staff expressed not only a feeling of being heard, and an excitement to seeing their conversation be disseminated, but also that the chance to reflect and speak candidly about their experiences was both enjoyable and a relief.
- for staff interacting with the resources produced by the end of the project; have they gained a better understanding of the experiences of both their colleagues and the students they teach?

- o Staff interacting with the project so far attested to gaining a better understanding of the experiences of both colleagues and students, including those with a similar condition to themselves.
- for students interacting with the resources; has being given insight into the experience of staff reduced the feeling of separation/distance between students and staff? Or increased the feeling of belonging, both in their course and in their field?
  - o Direct interaction by students was deemed worth delaying until the bank of resources, and their optimisation could be extended and refined, respectively.
- through the interviews and resulting discussions, have any general adjustments (applicable to the entire student population) or support resources been identified that can then pursued/developed within the School to further/continue to increase inclusivity going forward?
  - o Both interviews and the resulting discussions drew attention to key areas within the current framework of general adjustments that have both been highly successful, such as mandatory pre-upload of slides to allow for familiarisation and preparation, and that could be better addressed going forward. An example that has the potential to be a further project is to address the experience of both staff (in meetings) and students (in class) with ADHD who have been "called out" for fidgeting or giving the impression of not paying attention. These, and similar experiences could be initially addressed by incorporating education around such behaviours into staff training, and the development of "setting-specific" guidance resources for students to draw attention to options that may be more, or less, appropriate when in, for example, small group or lab based teaching environments.

Future Plans and Directions:

Given the success of the pilot interviews, future plans for the project incorporate the following:

1) Conducting additional interviews, a selection of which have been put in motion already, to facilitate the launch of a monthly podcast that can be directed towards both staff and students across institutions
2) Planning is in place to enable expansion of the interview format to enable more than one interviewee, to facilitate more nuanced conversations around the experiences of those involved, including direct conversation between staff and students
3) Expansion of the conversations facilitated to address experiences across:
   a. Race and ethnicity
   b. Gender
   c. Religion
   d. Sexuality
4) Continued consultation and discussion on how to facilitate discussions involving those whose experiences centre around non-protected diversity characteristics in an open, and safe, way that enables those involved to share their experience freely without risk to themselves or their careers.