# External Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy

## 2023-2028

Science Foundation Ireland
For what's next

# Contents

# 1 Foreword

**People start from different places, so true inclusion and belonging require equitable actions, where equity means that everyone receives the 'supports' they need to achieve their goals and ambitions.[1]**

We aspire to support those with the greatest potential to become part of delivering on the ambitions of SFI's organisational Strategy[2], regardless of their backgrounds, identities, or social characteristics.

Achieving our ambition means challenging ourselves and taking action to become a more inclusive, equitable, and accessible organisation. We believe that this approach will help to embed equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) as part of a broader, more inclusive research culture, which delivers better, more relevant outcomes for science and society.

We have already demonstrated leadership in improving the representation of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) research and, more broadly, in the entire education talent pipeline. Whilst gender will remain a central tenet of the new EDI Strategy, we will now proactively consider other areas of inequality or disadvantage to support an intersectional approach, in keeping with our values and best practice.

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1    Adapted from, and used with kind permission of, the International Women's Day 2023 campaign.
2    Shaping Our Future

# 2 Introduction

**People are at the centre of a thriving research and innovation system. They are the source of ideas which can transform our world and the solutions to challenges facing society.**

There are people who face systemic barriers to participating in the research endeavour. Their untapped potential means the product of this endeavour is at risk of being less informed and enriched.

SFI's ambition is that its EDI Strategy will be a key driver of an inclusive, engaged research culture and, through this Strategy, SFI will be an agent of change. In this role, SFI will lead in minimising barriers and ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to realise their role in addressing societal challenges.

In realising this ambition and in keeping with its core values, SFI's goal is to ensure that its investment reflects the input of researchers that are representative of society, and thus the outputs are relevant to society.

An effective EDI Strategy is therefore essential for a high-performing research and innovation system, supporting the aims of our organisational strategy, Shaping Our Future, and the national research and innovation strategy, Impact 2030[3].

SFI recognises that an EDI Strategy needs to be achievable. To this end, it must be rooted in reality, where we recognise our current position and embrace our goals, i.e., move from reactive policing to proactive change-making. We also recognise that achieving these goals may not be easy and will require meaningful change that must be managed appropriately.

Although this EDI Strategy builds upon the work previously undertaken as part of SFI's Gender Strategy[4], it requires a step change, reflecting our acceptance that there are significant challenges in tackling systemic inequities in pursuit of optimising our research and innovation system.

Our goal is to arrive at a point where barriers to inclusion are minimised and where a sense of belonging and collective purpose prevails. To attain this goal, a collaborative and consultative approach will be required in which SFI pro-actively leads where it has direct influence and, where that influence is indirect, plays a catalytic role in driving the EDI agenda forward.

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3    Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy
4    SFI Gender Strategy 2016-2020

# 3 Statement of EDI Strategy

## Our EDI Vision:

**Our vision is of a diverse and inclusive research ecosystem and culture, reflective of the diversity and aspirations of the society we serve.**

Our EDI vision is underpinned by our commitment to human rights and equitable inclusion. Driven by our public sector duty to prevent discrimination, this vision recognises and champions the evidence that diverse and inclusive research systems generate more valuable, engaged, and relevant research and innovation.

## Our Core EDI Values:

**Excellence:**
We strive to create a research environment where the broader impacts of researchers' endeavours are recognised and valued. We aspire to foster a more inclusive research ecosystem.

**Passionate:**
We are passionate about transparency in our approach to EDI and commit to sharing information on our EDI journey's successes and challenges.

**Progressive:**
We are committed to leading in best practice implementation and continuous improvement to better support our EDI objectives.

**Integrity:**
We strive to do the right thing to ensure that all our researchers have equitable access to opportunities, resources, and supports to succeed in their research endeavours.

**Collaborative:**
We commit to working with colleagues and external partners, stakeholders and communities to promote best practice in EDI and leverage all experiences and expertise to advance our collective objectives.

**Respect:**
We believe that every individual should be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their background, identity, or social characteristics.

# Strategy Context

**SFI's EDI journey began with its Gender Strategy in 2016. Significant progress has been made on the gender dimension, but it is recognised that further work is required.** Moreover, SFI recognises that, in addition to furthering the gender agenda, it is timely to progress other dimensions of EDI, as recognised by many stakeholders.

As such, our EDI Strategy is cognisant of the progress made since the first Higher Education Authority (HEA) National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions[5] was published, whilst acknowledging, following an interim review, issues that have emerged as key to the advancement of gender equality in higher education. One key area identified is the need to take an intersectional approach when addressing gender inequality. This is a central tenet of the new EDI strategy, moving beyond a focus on gender as a standalone issue and aligning with the changing 'equity' landscape within research funding and research design.

The new strategy also reflects Government's increasing commitment to EDI, as articulated in the National Research and Innovation Strategy, Impact 2030 – which includes a focus on increasing the number of women entrepreneurs and researchers, as well as increasing the number of research students from underrepresented groups.

Other substantive drivers include Horizon Europe guidelines[6], UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals[7], and legislation described in the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty (Section 42, Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014)[8].

Another key element of the policy context is the Athena SWAN Charter[9] which recognises and celebrates good employment practices for women working in higher education by improving their recruitment, retention, and promotion. It aims to change both the "numbers" and institutional culture by having institutions design and implement Gender Equality Plans using data from their organisations. The introduction of this gender equality certification scheme as an eligibility criterion for accessing SFI funding[10] programmes has had a positive impact on changing institutional culture for the better and in supporting progress on funder gender mandates. Moving increasingly beyond gender, the Athena SWAN Ireland Principles underscore the embedment of EDI in higher education culture, decision-making, and partnerships[11], as is evidenced by the Race Equality Charter[12].

Together, these policy drivers inform and support SFI's vision of an inclusive research culture where barriers are reduced/minimised and equity of access to, and benefit from, the Research and Innovation ecosystem are maximised.

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5   HEA Gender Equality in Higher Education, 2016-2021; 2nd HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions
6   Horizon Europe Gender equality in research and innovation
7   UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals
8   IHREC Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty
9   Athena SWAN Charter
10  https://www.sfi.ie/research-news/news/irish-funding-bodies-to-require-athena-swan-gender-equality-accreditation-for- higher-education-institutions/
11  Athena SWAN Ireland Principles
12  Advance HE Race Equality Charter

# Independent review of progress and current state of the art:

**A review of SFI's Gender Strategy 2016-2020 was commissioned to understand how well SFI had performed and where improvements could be made.**

**Significant progress was demonstrated on:**

- Increasing the representation of women in leadership roles, on teams, and as part of review panels;

- Enhancing STEM careers awareness, skills development, and role models amongst school-age girls;

- Ensuring funded research embedded best-practice gender-dimension in research design and ethics.

Gaps were identified, however, where SFI fell short of the revised target of 30% women grant holders by 2020[13]. Furthermore, the gender gap was shown to remain substantial amongst applicants to (and as a result, grant recipients of) mid-career and advanced-career SFI funding programmes. Despite these gaps, success was evidenced where targeted recruitment of early-career applicants through incentive schemes for host research organisations (SIRG[14], SFI-IRC Pathway[15]) was implemented and a gender tie-break criterion (amongst other measures) introduced in select programmes, such as Frontiers for the Future[16].

An analysis of SFI's Gender Dashboard[17]- the purpose of which is to examine success rates and funding awarded across SFI's portfolio of grants and to expose any unintended biases which may exist between the genders (binary) in SFI's review processes - supports the success of SFI's endeavours and initiatives in improving the visibility of this underrepresented gender[18]. Where gaps remain, it is accepted that a sustained effort and escalation of initiatives in programme calls to strengthen the representation of women in SFI's portfolio of grants is required to achieve the ambitions identified in this Strategy. Some of the actions proposed to support delivering on these ambitions are described below.

**Further, SFI commissioned:**

- Research on best-practice EDI-initiatives amongst (17) research funders nationally and internationally, and

- A major community consultation exercise to identify key challenges and enablers to advancing gender and EDI in SFI's funded research and the research ecosystem more generally.

The findings and recommendations arising from these separate but integrated bodies of work, combined with the outcome of the review of SFI's Gender Strategy, provide the bedrock which informs SFI's EDI Strategy. A cross-functional (internal) working group, assisted by an external EDI expert[19] provided insight and oversight on the process, and was in place throughout these reviews for stage-gated feedback in the development of this strategy, which moves beyond gender to a comprehensive approach encompassing intersectional EDI.

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13   The percentage of award holders who identify as women has increased from 23.3% in 2016 to 29.0% in 2020.

14   SFI Starting Investigator Research Grant (SIRG)

15   SFI-IRC Pathway Programme

16   SFI Frontiers for the Future Programme

17   https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/gender/dashboard/

18   Measures implemented by SFI were undoubtedly enhanced by the introduction of gender equality certification scheme (Athena SWAN) as an eligibility criterion for accessing SFI funding programmes.

19   Dr Jayasinghe, Associate Professor & Head of Department – Molecular Medicine at University of New South Wales, brings both her lived experience as a woman of colour and STEM scholar, together with her professional activities and publication record in the area of underrepresented communities within STEM.

# Our EDI Goals:

**Our strategy will be achieved through the execution of a number of cross-cutting objectives, which are aligned to these five overarching strategic goals:**

## 1

### Goal 1

## Research community

SFI's research community – inclusive of applicants, reviewers, grantees, and stakeholders – reflects the diversity of society.

## 2

### Goal 2

## Grant leadership

Leadership on SFI grants represents the diversity of the research community.

## 3

### Goal 3

## Historically Underserved Community engagement

Historically Underserved Communities[20] are increasingly engaged with SFI in the design, conduct, and evaluation of research.

## 4

### Goal 4

## Talent pipeline

Barriers to entry in STEM education are identified and initiatives to help remove these barriers are implemented, enhancing the diversity of the talent pipeline.

## 5

### Goal 5

## Best practice

The research SFI funds embeds best-practice considerations of EDI in its design, methods, and ethical approach.

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20  For the purposes of this Strategy, Historically Underserved Community encompasses a broad and diverse range of historically marginalised groups including but not limited to the nine protected grounds established in the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 and socioeconomic status.

# 4 EDI Strategy

## Goal 1

# Research community

SFI's research community – inclusive of applicants, reviewers, grantees, and stakeholders – reflects the diversity of society.
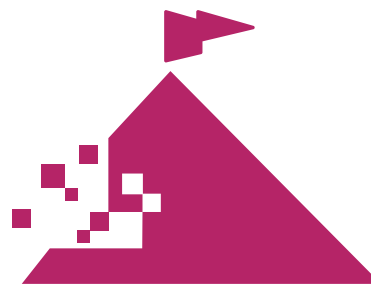
Associated with this goal are a number of key objectives.

### Objectives

| | |
|---|---|
| 1.1 | **Require that applicants to grant programmes of scale submit a plan addressing team diversity. Plans to be assessed by those who are knowledgeable of EDI endeavours, informing the final funding decision.** |
| 1.2 | **Establish the strength of an EDI plan as a tie-breaker with applications submitted under competitive funding programmes awarding grants of scale.** |
| 1.3 | **Encourage applicants to target one or more Historically Underserved Community as part of cohort-based PhD training.** |
| 1.4 | **Develop guidance for SFI staff to ensure those reviewers selected have appropriate levels of EDI competence/expertise.** |
| 1.5 | **Set minimum diversity requirements for reviewer/panel selection.** |
| **Key measure(s) of success** | Demonstrable increase in Historically Underserved Community presence among:<br>• Applicants<br>• Reviewers<br>• Grantees |

# Goal 2

# Grant leadership

Leadership on SFI grants represents the diversity of the research community. Associated with this goal are a number of key objectives.
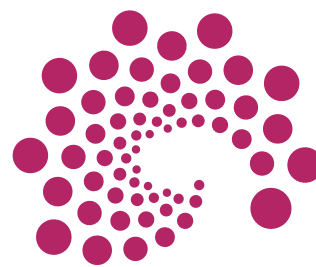
## Objectives

| 2.1 | **Require measures to increase the number of senior career women applicants and grant awardees, including a minimum percentage of women in the leadership team at application stage as an eligibility criterion for grants of scale.** |
|---|---|
| 2.2 | **Develop specific measures to include other Historically Underserved Communities in leadership teams of applications made to programmes awarding grants of scale.** |
| 2.3 | **Require Research Body statement of commitment in regard to EDI – and, in particular, EDI in leadership – as part of applications made to programmes awarding grants of scale.** |
| 2.4 | **Advance the use of the Narrative CV[21] in evaluation processes, ensuring broader impacts of an applicant's research history are brought to the fore and reviewers are guided to take a more holistic view of an applicant's achievements.** |
| 2.5 | **Explore ways to improve the diversity of leadership on grants by addressing PhD equivalence (in subject areas where women and other Historically Underserved Communities are underrepresented) and joint appointments, enabling a wider applicant pool.** |
| **Key measure(s) of success** | • Demonstrable increase in women leaders on grants of scale (reflecting progress already made with women leaders at early- and mid-career grants).<br>• Evidence of step change in institutional/Research Body supports in advancing women and other Historically Underserved Communities as candidates for leadership on grants of scale. |

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21  A narrative CV is a type of CV format that provides structured written descriptions of academics' or researchers' contributions and achievements that reflect a broad range of relevant skills and experiences.

# Goal 3

# Historically Underserved Community engagement

Historically Underserved Communities are increasingly engaged with SFI in the design, conduct, and evaluation of research.

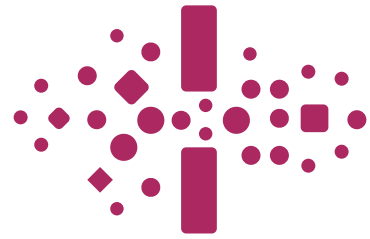Associated with this goal are a number of key objectives.

## Objectives

| | |
|---|---|
| 3.1 | **Initially encourage and subsequently mandate grant holders to target researchers from one or more Historically Underserved Community as part of cohort-based PhD training.** |
| 3.2 | **Implement a Historically Underserved Community participatory/co-creation mechanism[22] to feed into the design of funding programmes – with the overall aim to increase Historically Underserved Community application success rates in such schemes.** |
| 3.3 | **Proactively support the removal of barriers and address eligibility blind spots, unchallenged assumptions, and bias in funding process and policy.** |
| 3.4 | **Review the grant application process and explore ways to make it more accessible, e.g., to Historically Underserved Communities.** |
| 3.5 | **Consider research topics that are more relevant to the needs of Historically Underserved Communities.** |
| 3.6 | **Implement additional policy measures to support Historically Underserved Communities undertaking research.** |
| **Key measure(s) of success** | • Historically Underserved Communities are manifestly and measurably involved in key SFI processes (funding programme design, evaluation, etc.), such that their successful participation in SFI programmes demonstrably increases. |

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22  For example, workshops with a cross section of Historically Underserved Communities, including but not limited to racial minorities, women, low socioeconomic status, the Traveller Community, LGBTQ+, etc.

# Goal 4

# Talent pipeline

Barriers to entry in STEM education are identified and initiatives to help remove these barriers implemented, enhancing the diversity of the talent pipeline.

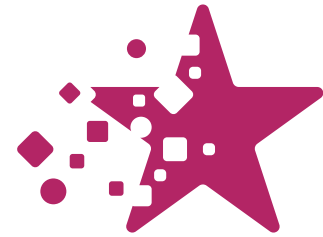Associated with this goal are a number of key objectives.

## Objectives

| | |
|---|---|
| **4.1** | **Education & Public Engagement (EPE) initiatives to become increasingly considerate and inclusive of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic background (i.e., Historically Underserved Communities).** |
| **4.2** | **Continue to publicise successful EPE initiatives to serve as exemplars of best practice and to support mutual learning in the development of effective projects.** |
| **4.3** | **Continue to expand the use of inclusive language, visuals, and examples for STEM teacher resources and professional development programmes.** |
| **4.4** | **Seek to understand how to better reach and support parents and guardians in guiding children's learning, educational, and career outcomes.** |
| **Key measure(s) of success** | • An increased contribution by SFI to minimising obstacles that prevent Historically Underserved Communities from pursuing or succeeding in STEM education and careers.<br>• An increase in the representation of Historically Underserved Communities in STEM fields. |

# Goal 5

# Best practice

The research SFI funds embeds best-practice considerations of EDI in its design, methods, and ethical approach.

Associated with this goal are a number of key objectives.

## Objectives

| | |
|---|---|
| 5.1 | **Integrate sex- and gender-based analysis (SGA) in all programme calls.** |
| 5.2 | **Extend SGA to dimensions of social discrimination other than gender that are considerate of intersectionality.** |
| 5.3 | **Determine whether incorporating SGA and/or intersectional training in research content should be an eligible programme cost.** |
| 5.4 | **Develop and implement guidance and training (for SFI staff, applicants, and reviewers) to ensure capacity is developed to support the progression of SGA and the introduction of other elements of diversity into its funded research.** |
| **Key measure(s) of success** | • Extension of SGA into new SFI programmes calls.<br>• Introduction of other elements of diversity (race, disability, age, etc.) into SFI programme calls. |

# Our EDI Enablers

**Leadership commitment:** Our senior executives and heads of department will commit to supporting this EDI Strategy by providing visible and sustained support, embracing opportunities, and navigating challenges in order for our strategic goals to be realised.

**SFI community engagement:** Our research community will be consulted to ensure the measures we undertake in support of a culture that promotes EDI are effective.

**Monitoring and evaluation:** How we monitor and evaluate progress on our EDI journey will ensure, to the best of our abilities, that we gather information on changing demographics and equity across our research investment, enabling us to identify gaps and inform opportunities for improvement.

**Policies, procedures, and processes:** Our policies, procedures, and processes will undergo regular review and refresh to ensure they align with national and international best practices and are fair and inclusive.

**Communication and outreach:** Our EDI goals will be regularly communicated internally and externally to raise awareness and garner support from all our stakeholders.

**Transparency and accountability:** Accountability will be underpinned by transparent measures in how we monitor progress in achieving our EDI goals, including regular reporting to inform decision-making and continuous improvement. We will solicit ongoing feedback from relevant stakeholders across the sector.
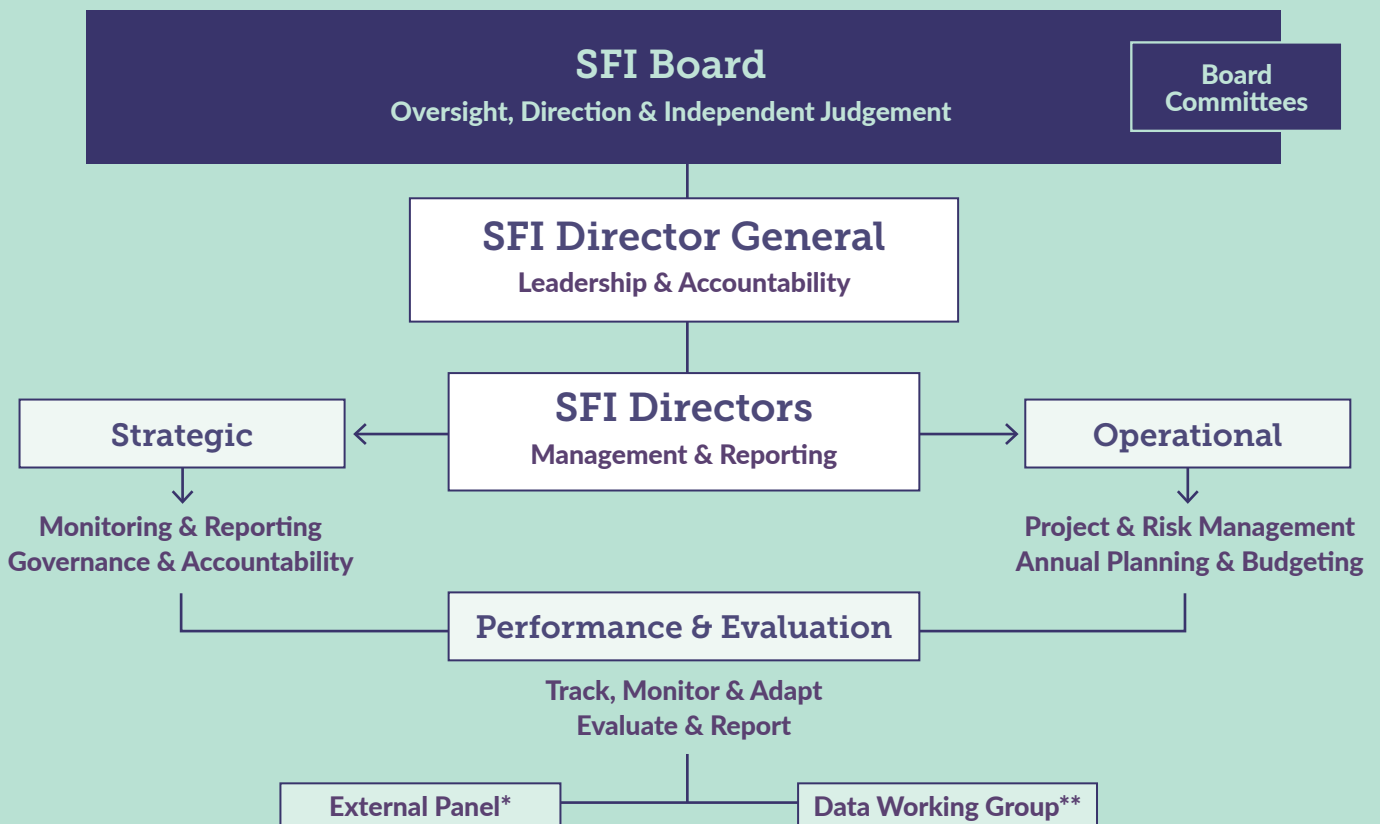
# 5 Implementation

**SFI's EDI Strategy has been created to reflect the views of a broad cross section of stakeholders. Although it sets the direction of travel towards achieving our goals on this critical topic for the organisation over the next five years, it has been developed with inbuilt flexibility to ensure we can adopt an agile approach and adapt where internal or external[23] circumstances arise that may require us to change our course of action and pivot towards emerging needs.**

To support this approach, we have developed a robust implementation framework that enables dynamic action plans, whilst permitting clear accountability and regular monitoring over the term of the strategy. In this regard, each action will be attributed to an owner and timeline where progress will be monitored and reported on at regular intervals.

The realisation of our ambition requires the commitment, collaboration, and engagement of all staff across the organisation. Moreover, its success is dependent on ongoing constructive dialogue with a broad stakeholder group whose representation in the research endeavour we seek to support and increase.

## Our EDI strategy is governed as follows:

**SFI Board**
Oversight, Direction & Independent Judgement

Board Committees

**SFI Director General**
Leadership & Accountability

**SFI Directors**
Management & Reporting

**Strategic**

Monitoring & Reporting
Governance & Accountability

**Operational**

Project & Risk Management
Annual Planning & Budgeting

**Performance & Evaluation**

Track, Monitor & Adapt
Evaluate & Report

External Panel*    Data Working Group**

\*    External Panel comprised of representatives of a broad cross section of stakeholder groups — including Historically Underserved Communities

\*\*   Data Working Group comprised of relevant personnel from Higher Education Institutions

23   The forthcoming amalgamation with the Irish Research Council.

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