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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

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## **The Independent SAGE**

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### **Why we must defend science, social science and medicine from attacks on diversity**

## Why we must defend science, social science and medicine from attacks on diversity

A diverse and inclusive science community is not just morally right, it *improves the quality of science*. [Companies](#) and [scientific research teams and institutions](#) that prioritise diversity perform better financially and scientifically. Our definition of science includes the physical, health, medical and social sciences.

### The new war on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in US science

Since his inauguration on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2025, President Trump has ordered the termination of programmes that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in federal agencies and their private contractors. High-profile multinational [private companies](#), including Google, Target and McDonalds, swiftly [cancelled their DEI policies](#). The administration has also [targeted programmes within education](#) that try to widen participation across often excluded groups.

Science has been singled out, with grant applications are being scrutinised for “woke” language. Research outputs [are being held back to purge banned terms](#) before publication. The list of [‘prohibited words’](#) include ‘gender’, ‘transgender’, ‘pregnant person’, ‘transsexual’, ‘non-binary’, ‘women’, ‘elderly’, and ‘disabled’. Universities who continue DEI initiatives are [threatened](#) with the loss of all federal funding, [with over 50 currently under investigation](#) by the administration. Grants funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are being [cancelled](#) if they address anything DEI related. All [social science research has been halted](#) in key government departments. Censorship is [even extending to international universities](#) receiving US funding.

Trump’s Executive Orders also erased references to LGBTQ+, gender and racial diversity, the climate crisis and even vaccines [from federal websites](#), jeopardising public health measures designed to address health disparities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) removed tools like the social vulnerability index and environmental justice index, essential for addressing health inequalities. A court order [forced their temporary and reluctant restoration](#) but no-one knows how long this will hold.

While [civil rights and labour unions have quickly moved to mount legal challenges](#), scientific agencies and academic journals have been notably silent on the reasons why DEI matters or how it makes science stronger - perhaps for fear of reprisals from the Trump administration. Significantly, the purging of DEI initiatives in science is not just a US issue. The leader of the UK Conservative Party [recently described DEI initiatives as “poison”](#), sending alarm across UK equality organisations. Pharmaceutical giant GSK has [just ended DEI initiatives](#) in its UK workforce.

### Diversity, equity and inclusion are not just morally required, they improve science

For centuries, scientific education and professions were almost exclusively the domain of [high-status men](#), to the exclusion of almost all other groups. Meanwhile, marginalised black and minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities and women were subject to unethical experiments<sup>1</sup>. Research has highlighted the devastating consequences of such unethical experiments in the past, highlighting the moral case for improving DEI within the sciences. But, beyond ethical considerations, diversity, equity and inclusion make science better.

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<sup>1</sup> The history of science has many ethical failures, from unconsented experimentation on marginalised groups, including the [Tuskegee Syphilis Study](#) (1932-72) which did not treat black men for syphilis or inform them they had it, horrific [experiments on Jewish, Romani and disabled people](#) in concentration camps under Nazi Germany, or [unconsented nutritional experiments](#) on indigenous children in Canada (1942-52). It also includes [forced sterilisations of Black and First Nation people](#) and [developing profitable cell line cancer research from a Black woman without her family’s knowledge or consent](#).

## *How Diversity Strengthens Science*

Science thrives on innovation, collaboration, and problem-solving. Scientific ability is not restricted to one sex, ethnicity, religion or to the able bodied. Embracing diversity has the simple advantage of [widening the pool of talent](#) from which scientists are drawn. But, over and above that, diversity enriches the scientific process by fostering different ways of thinking and problem-solving. [Research has shown](#) that diverse teams are more innovative, produce higher-impact work, and are better at tackling complex problems.

1. **Improved Creativity and Innovation:** Diversity fuels innovation, as different viewpoints challenge conventional thinking and encourage creative solutions. For instance, [one study found](#) that while authors on a scientific paper were of the same ethnicity more often than you would expect by chance, in fact it was scientific papers authored by more ethnically diverse teams that received more citations, indicating broader impact and influence. However, when compared to comparable innovations by scientists from majority groups, scientific innovations by minority scientists [have been shown](#) to lead to poorer careers.
2. **Enhanced Problem-Solving Ability:** Homogenous groups may suffer from similar perspectives and life experiences that can limit creative problem-solving. By contrast, both [modelling](#) and [observational](#) research suggests that diverse teams consider more alternatives and make better decisions. This is particularly important in scientific fields that require interdisciplinary, global, approaches, such as climate science, biomedical research, and artificial intelligence – fields crucial to humanity’s continued ability to thrive.
3. **Better Representation of global challenges and possible solutions:** Many scientific challenges—such as disease outbreaks, climate change, poor infrastructure (e.g. housing, transport), service provision (e.g. access to health care), and resource management—disproportionately affect certain populations. Scientists from diverse backgrounds are [more likely to ask research questions that address these disparities](#). For instance, research of [Sickle Cell disease](#) (which affects mostly black communities) was neglected until [activism from black groups](#) in the 1970s repeatedly brought the issue to medical and popular attention, eventually resulting in more research funding for treatments. The first gene therapy for Sickle Cell disease was [finally established in 2019](#). Another example is the lack of women at the highest echelons of medical science leading to [relatively fewer studies tackling important menstrual and reproductive health problems](#). For instance, endometriosis affects one in ten women of reproductive age, an estimated 190 million women globally [according to the World Health Organization](#). The first oral combined therapy for the condition was only licensed in 2025. Lack of attention to issues of both gender and ethnicity, meant that it was only in 2018 that it became widely known that black and Asian women were much more likely [to die in pregnancy or childbirth](#) than white women. It was only in 2020 that a black second -year-medical student produced a [handbook showing what diseases look like on black skin](#).
4. **Diversity in Research Design:** Medical sciences have long suffered from a lack of diversity in research design, leading to findings that do not apply to all populations. For example, clinical trials have [tended to test treatments mainly on men](#), leading to poorer health outcomes for women. Ensuring diverse participant recruitment in clinical trials and inclusive data collection ([including in international genome studies](#)) improves scientific validity, societal impact and supports more equitable outcomes from medical treatment.

*Equity and Inclusion in Science: rebalancing the playing field*

Equity is not only about ensuring that scientists, regardless of backgrounds, have the same opportunities, but also about recognising that not everyone starts from the same place: there is no level playing field. Inclusion is not only about scientists from different walks of life feeling that they belong and that their voices are being heard; it is also about ensuring that we produce better science which takes account of everybody's lived experiences. Without equity and inclusion, calls for diversity in science will never achieve meaningful change while historically excluded groups, including women, those from ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, remain disadvantaged. Addressing inequities requires **systemic changes** in science policy and institutional structures.

1. **Reducing Bias and Discrimination:** [Bias](#) affects hiring, funding decisions, and publication rates. Women and minorities face additional barriers to career progression, with female scientists receiving [less credit](#) for their work. DEI initiatives, such as blind peer review and bias-awareness training, are crucial to mitigate these disparities.
2. **Equitable Access to Funding and Resources:** Scientific funding has historically excluded researchers from [minoritised ethnic groups](#) and [women](#), and continues to favour white male researchers from prestigious institutions. [Structural biases in grant allocation require reform](#), such as implementing transparent evaluation criteria, double-blind peer review and increasing funding for minority-led research projects.
3. **Workplace Flexibility and Support Systems:** Policies that support work-life balance, such as parental leave, flexible working arrangements, adjustments in the workplace and anti-harassment measures, help create equitable work environments. Institutions that implement these policies see [higher retention rates](#) among [women](#) and [minority](#) researchers. Additionally, more diverse workplaces are associated with [attracting and retaining more diverse staff](#), not least by [providing role models](#) – creating a positive feedback loop
4. **Increasing trust in science:** As well as improving the science itself, a diversity amongst scientists also improves the willingness of marginalised communities to trust, engage with and accept scientific developments. For instance, [recent research](#) has shown that where there are black researchers, black people are more likely to participate in a clinical trial – and this in turn is critical for [acceptance of the findings](#) as relevant for the black community. This was a major issue during Covid where distrust of the medical establishment led to [far lower rates of vaccine take-up amongst black communities](#).

## Conclusion

Diversity, equity and inclusion in science are not “nice to have” or about “wokeness”. They are essential for scientific excellence. Silencing minoritised voices restricts the pool of talent, leads to knowledge gaps, and exacerbates inequalities in society. US scientists already feel they need to [self-censor](#) because of the administration’s aggressive stance.

By fostering diverse, inclusive, and equitable research environments, science can produce **more** innovative solutions, **improve** societal outcomes, **increase** trust in science, and **address the most pressing global challenges**. We cannot afford to let the political and ideological motivations of the Trump administration taint and undermine robust, rigorous and inclusive science. Now is the time to stand up – loudly – for diversity, equity and inclusion in science

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