

Beyond the Protected Characteristics: Insights from Public Stories of ‘The Lost Voices’ UK National Campaign

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Abstract

'The Lost Voices' national campaign gathered experiences of inequalities and prejudices faced by researchers and sought solutions to improve current equality standards within research cultures. The campaign focussed on Early Career researchers (ECRs), often the worst impacted, and least heard. This research presents a qualitative analysis of the publicly available campaign data, to identify which 'inequality' characteristics impact higher education researchers (especially ECRs).

The campaign had four phases which collected qualitative data from 61 individuals (29 identified; 32 anonymous) in Phase 1 and 2 respectively. Phase 1 saw ECRs share their 'inequality stories' through a website portal, anonymous surveys, and social media. In phase 2, we interviewed senior academics on their experiences of inequality and how they overcame challenges. In phase 3, a panel discussion on our data was held with EDI decision makers, and in phase 4, we presented key findings and solutions for those responsible for EDI at four London Higher Education Institutions. Following collation of our qualitative data, we used framework analysis to find areas of significance within our qualitative data sets.

These stories drew on lived experiences, revealing a range of inequalities, within and beyond the nine characteristics protected under the Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation). These stories drove discussion with prominent cross-disciplinary/institutional EDI leads and academics about sector reform and working towards more supportive and inclusive research cultures. ECRs were widely recognised to have the least support within the academic community.

To further improve equality for all, and to develop a unified approach, acknowledging a more comprehensive range of inequalities and their intersections is needed. Continued efforts to improve representation in research, and local support and training addressing these issues is necessary - for those experiencing and reinforcing inequalities. A research culture that prioritises accessible support is critical, especially for ECRs.

Keywords

inequalities, academic community, early-career researcher, education, diversity, inclusion, prejudice, bias

Article classification:

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Introduction

The UK Higher Education (HE) sector has recently been in a period of intensified introspection about the impact of institutional research cultures on researchers' wellbeing and career progression. Work, spear-headed by The Royal Society (2018) and The Wellcome Trust (2020), has taken a more holistic examination of research cultures, particularly the impact on early-career researchers (ECRs) and their career progression. This added to an examination spanning over 25 years of how ECRs have been recruited, trained, and supported, the approaches taken (or not) toward promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in HEIs (Higher Education Institutes), and how these cultures that were created may have contributed to a 'leaky pipeline' of talent (UCL, 2022). The 'leaky pipeline' metaphor has its justified critics (e.g., Cannady, Greenwald and Harris, 2014). If the pipeline is 'leaky', this implied that those 'lost to the leak' were unsuccessful in reaching the professoriate. However, the skills and experience gained by PhD graduates is useful beyond the academic sector (McAlpine and Inouye, 2022).

In the mid-1990s, the Research Careers Initiative (RCI), a collective of funders, academies, Vice-chancellors, and Principals, drafted a Concordat to manage the careers of contract research staff in the sector (The Royal Society, 1996). This recognised the common use of short and fixed-term contracts for ECRs; specifically, those in-between their doctoral qualification and their first (permanent) academic post. The Concordat focused on the management practices of contract research staff in HEIs and made provisions that institutions and funders should promote career and skills development, as well as consider talent-management strategies for researchers below leadership grades who make 'significant contributions over the longer-term to the research aims of the institution'. Sir Gareth Roberts' report (2002) sought to provide a strategy to ensure the United Kingdom (UK) had sufficient individuals skilled in science, engineering, and technology (SET) disciplines to fulfil its longer-term Research and Development goals. It built on the RCI's foundations that identified the precarity of employment during the ECR stages, and recommended better salaries, and identified that clearer career paths are needed as 'previous efforts' were not sufficient to support ECR career progression (House of Commons, 2002). Roberts took the view that more time should be focused on transferable skills development for ECRs in Science, Engineering and Technology subjects in HEIs.

For many, the option of an academic career is obscured by their experience of the working and organisational cultures of their research environments. Having to navigate these cultures along their academic pathways places a larger burden on those who experience different inequalities, in addition to the perceived pressures of navigating an academic career, like research productivity (outputs), impact, and the expected 'collegial' contributions to the research environment, which are the three main pillars of the Research Excellence Framework (2021) – the yardstick by which the Higher Education research effort is judged.

In the UK, it is against the law to discriminate against anyone because of age, gender reassignment, being married or in a civil partnership, being pregnant or on maternity leave, disability, race (including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin), religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation. Under the Equality Act (2010),

individuals cannot be discriminated based on these 'protected characteristics' whilst in education or at work. Unfortunately, harassment and discrimination in HE is still widespread, underreported, and contributes to a toxic research culture (The Wellcome Trust, 2020). Amid highly politicised debates on equality and diversity, and growing calls for decolonising Higher Education (HE), the UK HE sector may be witnessing a historic moment that holds promise for shaking up the long-held legacies of institutional injustices (Kapilashrami, 2021).

In the UK, equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives at HE institutions were initially rooted in the 2005 Athena SWAN (Scientific Women's Academic Network) Gender Equality charter from Advance HE (2022). The original purpose of this charter was to initiate actions that generate gender equality in UK HEIs following longstanding feminist efforts and advocacy for gender equality, which highlighted the institutional, social, and structural barriers faced by women in HEIs (e.g., short-term contracts, pay gap, career progression, among others). Following this, Advance HE set up a 'race equality charter' to deal with equality issues experienced by ethnic students and staff and students in HE.

Nowadays, EDI is a phrase commonly used to highlight ongoing efforts to rectify the problems that are linked to EDI of students, and academic and non-academic staff. The focus has broadened from gender to include other underrepresented groups who fall under the nine 'protected characteristics' (The Equality Act, 2010), and even Certification Award Schemes like Athena SWAN have modified their guidance to promote intersectional narratives amongst submissions (Steinmetz, 2020). Most recent inclusions of the principle of intersectionality and Advance HE's Race Equality Charter echo the current thinking on gender equality that goes beyond the gender binary and examines the complex and compounding discrimination that differently situated women experience based on their social location.

Advance HE is seen to define intersectionality as recognising that people's identities and social positions are shaped by several factors, which create unique experiences and perspectives. These factors include, among others: sexuality, gender, ethnicity, disability, age, and religion (Senulyte, 2019). Although the term intersectionality is used widely throughout HE, it appears the concept is not always fully understood. Kimberlé Crenshaw (professor at UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School) is credited as the creator of the term. Dr Crenshaw (1990) used the concept of intersectionality to explain the way in which minorities with multiple diverse identities experience the world through the overlapping and compounding of their identities rather than entirely separately. Despite the UK government's denial of racism in the recent report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021), these developments have brought concerns around EDI centre-stage in UK HE, establishing the imperative for making education more inclusive.

'The Lost Voices' UK national campaign aimed to gather experiences of inequalities and prejudices faced by researchers and sought solutions to improve current equality standards within research cultures (Jasim et al., 2021). The campaign focussed on ECRs, self-defined as PhD students and junior researchers (The London Postdocs, 2021). As the term 'early-career researcher' means different things to different people, and across different disciplines – the campaign aimed to include as many as possible. These stories drew on lived experiences, revealing a

range of inequalities, within and beyond the nine characteristics protected under the Equality Act (2010). The stories were used to drive discussion with prominent cross-disciplinary/institutional EDI leads and academics about sector reform and working towards more supportive and inclusive research cultures. ECRs were widely recognised to have the least support within the academic community (Jasim et al., 2021).

The 'leaky pipeline' will always disproportionately impact under-represented groups. Researchers who face inequalities, prejudices, or bias, who would otherwise want an academic career, are increasingly considering options outside of HE, citing meagre long-term career prospects and poor research cultures (Kromydas, 2017). However, not much evidence is available of what inequalities are faced by HE researchers, beyond 'the nine protected characteristics' (The Equality Act, 2010). This research study focusses on using public campaign data from 'The Lost Voices' national campaign, to identify which 'inequality' characteristics are impacting HEI researchers (especially ECRs).

Methods

'The Lost Voices' campaign was co-ordinated between March-June 2021 and solicited input from researchers and academics across the UK. It had four phases, beginning with phase 1, in which 47 ECR 'inequality stories' were collected through a website portal, anonymous surveys, and social media. In phase 2, we collected 14 'overcoming stories' from senior academics who had faced inequalities and prejudices, through semi-structured interviews and anonymous surveys. The latter phases of the campaign involved panel discussions to strengthen our findings. In phase 3, we presented our data to four EDI decision-makers from different institutions and held a closed panel discussion about the issues brought to light by our data. Key findings and solutions were presented and discussed with those responsible for EDI at four London HEIs.

We adopted a novel multi-level approach, beginning with 'The Lost Voices' from the ECR community so that their stories could inform our conversations with more senior academics, who offered not only their own stories, but also tips and suggestions for their junior colleagues facing similar experiences. From there, we summarised the data to ask questions of people working at more senior levels, first those who were in positions to make changes at a local level, and then those with responsibility for EDI at entire institutions. To our knowledge no other EDI campaign had involved staff and students at different career levels.

For our data collection phases (1 and 2), we disseminated our requests for stories as widely as possible, through social media platforms (i.e., Twitter, Instagram, YouTube), a cross-institutional blog campaign, our project website (The London Postdocs, 2021), funder and partner websites, ECR networks, and personal connections. For our member checking (Birt et al., 2016) phases (3 and 4), we approached people with whom we had connections to ask for their input and their responses to the data we had collected.

Project Phase	Dates	Purpose	Methods
1: Collecting ECR Inequality Stories	March-May 2021	To collect stories describing the struggles faced by ECRs to overcome barriers caused by inequalities.	Anonymous surveys Video stories Testimonials
2: Senior Academics' Overcoming Stories	April-May 2021	To gather tips and skills from people who have "been there", equipping the ECR community both to overcome barriers and to improve the research environments for each other.	Anonymous surveys Semi-structured interviews

Table 1: Data Collection Phases

Project Phase	Dates	Purpose	Methods
3: Closed Panel Debate	May 2021	To highlight the issues and explore how HEIs are understanding and attempting to solve the problems.	Panel discussion
4: Presentation of findings to EDI-leaders	June 2021	To initiate conversations and to push for solutions for a truly inclusive research culture.	Small, focussed discussions

Table 2: Member Checking Phases

Phase 1: As shown in Table 1, we collected 'inequality stories' from ECRs from across the UK. Initially we aimed to only use videos collected and made available through YouTube, but to encourage as many responses as possible, we also provided a survey through Google, and collected plain text entries on a 'story collection' website, both of which offered anonymity. We adopted a broad definition of 'early career researcher' and wanted to hear from people who had worked alongside ECRs, or who had previous experience of being an ECR. We collated these responses and summarised them, ensuring anonymity remained, to present to senior academics (Phase 2).

Phase 2: As shown in Table 2, we planned to collect both stories and advice from more senior academics. We used anonymous surveys to collect responses from a range of people (e.g., professors, readers, lecturers, clinical academics, and EDI leads). We interviewed seven more senior academics and asked their advice to ECRs based on their own experiences of overcoming inequalities, using the same set of questions to enable comparison of their answers. Interviews lasted for approximately 1 hour and were carried out both in-person and remotely. Six interviews were recorded and auto transcribed, and the interviewer (SS) took notes for the seventh non-recorded interview. With agreement and consent from some of the interview participants, we have summarised their responses in text form and made clips from these interviews [publicly available on YouTube as a toolkit for ECRs](#), and a form of knowledge exchange of this work.

Phase 3: These stories drove our discussion with four EDI-prominent academics at four different UK HEIs. Each held positions within their department where they were able to influence the experience of ECRs working in that department (e.g., Pro-Vice-Provost, Gender Equality Champion, Dean and Director). Prior to the discussion the data from phases 1 and 2 was collated and summarised and presented to the panellists in PowerPoint slides along with selected anonymised quotes to illustrate specific points. All acknowledged the issues raised, and shared their own stories, and went further in suggesting approaches for improvements, some of which had been implemented in individual institutions. This was a closed panel debate held virtually. The meeting was recorded and auto-transcribed, observations in the form of field notes were also taken.

Phase 4: Finally, we presented our findings to seven EDI leaders, again from a range of London HEIs. These were all people who held senior leadership positions, where they had responsibility for promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion within their institutions. Our aim was to initiate conversations and to push for solutions for a truly inclusive research culture. Due to the sensitive nature of these closed meetings, recording was not permitted. The presenters (SJ, SS, ML, RP, and JM) recorded field notes and requested consent and permission to use direct quotes on some occasions.

Ethics statement: Only publicly available campaign data was included in this research study; therefore, institutional ethical approval was not needed.

Analysis: All public campaign data from the four phases were coded using the qualitative software programme NVivo. Codes and themes were charted into a table using Microsoft Excel (SJ), and framework analysis was used to draw comparisons between the different phases and find areas of significance, absence, coherence, and dissonance (Gale, 2013). Findings were collaboratively checked and discussed by the research team to ensure data accuracy.

Reflexivity Statement: Reflexivity relates to sensitivity to the ways in which the research and the research process may have shaped or influenced the data collected, including the role of prior assumptions and experience (Steier, 1991). During 'The Lost Voices' campaign, we paid close attention to the role of the research team as collaborators in knowledge production. Collaborative research is highly valued for its ability to bring together multiple researchers with distinctive and specialist perspectives to tackle large or complex research problems (Mauthner, 2008). We were a group of researchers (SJ, ML, JH and SS) and researcher development staff (RPM) who were part of the organisation the 'London Postdocs'. There was a strong commitment from the outset to work collaboratively in the collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting of the qualitative data, though individual involvement with the various stages of the research process necessarily varied. The team members most closely involved in the campaign (SJ, ML, SS, JH, RPM) met frequently (on average at least once per month) to discuss the progress of fieldwork and reflect on data collection. Throughout the data collection and iterative analysis phase, we explored all the material that had been collected, and the notes and transcripts from member checking to gain a sense of the data that were emerging, the effectiveness of the topic guides and whether there may be additional participants who we wanted to invite to take part. A coding framework was used to

inform the analysis (and interpretation) of all the campaign data. Dingwall has suggested that one way of reducing bias in qualitative research is to ensure that the research design explicitly incorporates a wide range of different perspectives, so that the viewpoint of one group is never presented as if representing the sole truth about any situation, an analytic technique he has referred to as 'fair dealing' (Dingwall, 2020). Our campaign was specifically designed to elicit contributions from a broad range of stakeholders in open disclosure. During the analytic process no particular group's views were 'privileged' over those of others; that is to say, data analysis included a process of constant comparison between accounts of each group of participants, to uncover similarities and differences, which were subsequently highlighted.

The researcher involved in fieldwork (SS) was sensitive to the possibility that focusing on the research topic around individual experiences of prejudice, bias or inequality could potentially provoke anxiety in the research participants concerning the disclosure of adverse events. At the end of each semi-structured interview, the researcher took time to ensure that participants were not feeling distressed by their participation. In these interviews, none of the participants expressed such concerns or appeared to be distressed or uneasy. Most interviews were conducted in participants' workplaces, either face to face or remotely, as this was usually more convenient for them. Although the researcher (SS) was welcomed as a peer researcher, they were also mindful of being a guest in the participants' workspace, and aware of how belonging to the collective academic community would influence participant responses. The researcher (SS) considered the ways in which their interactions with participants might be influenced by their own professional background, experiences, and prior assumptions. When drawing conclusions from the data, the whole team considered whether knowledge of our professional backgrounds could have impacted on participants' willingness to talk openly about their experiences or engage with us, and how this knowledge might have shaped the narrative.

Results

Throughout the national campaign we collected public responses around inequalities, prejudices, and bias from early-career researchers (N=47) and senior academics (N=14), these findings were then strengthened and built upon through member checking with EDI local decision-makers and representatives (N=4) and EDI leaders responsible for institutional strategy (N=7), as shown in Table 3.

We distilled the findings into themes of inequality, prejudice and bias that have been collected and member checked across 'The Lost Voices' national campaign.

Project Phase	Methods	Number of Respondents	Composition
1: Collecting National ECR Inequality Stories	Testimonials and supportive comments (1 deleted)	N=22	Majority current postdoctoral researchers, also PhD students and previous postdoctoral researchers
	Anonymous survey responses	N=25	
2: Senior Academics' National Overcoming Stories	Semi-structured interviews	N=7	Senior Academics (e.g., lecturer / professor level)
	Anonymous survey responses	N=7	
3: Closed Panel Debate		N=4	Senior Academics (EDI decision making capabilities)
4: Presentation of findings to EDI-leaders		N=7	HEI EDI leaders (institutionally responsible)

Table 3: Number and group composition of 'The Lost Voices' respondents

Within and beyond the nine 'protected characteristics'

During data collection, seven of the nine 'protected characteristics' (Equality Act, 2010) were frequently cited as examples of inequality, prejudice, or bias (aside from marriage, civil partnership and gender reassignment). In Phases 1 and 2 of the campaign, intersectionality, sexuality, parenting, and disability were reported the most by early-career researchers and senior researchers. Despite the legislative protections given through the Equality Act (2010), there were clear self-reports of discrimination based on these characteristics.

In Phases 3 and 4, there was an acknowledgement and recognition of the advancements made through charter-work for some of these characteristics. In some instances, participants in these phases acknowledged that the advancements had not come far enough, and more top-down solutions were needed, more quickly.

Many of the issues raised in the campaign did not fall neatly into the nine formally recognised 'protected characteristics' (Equality Act, 2010). The campaign uncovered issues such as: class/status, geography, accent/language, mental health, caring responsibilities, did not receive a British education/only recently started to work in the UK, financial/socioeconomic, power dynamics, reporting structures, lack of time, physical appearance, and dietary requirements. Power dynamics were reported the most, and this fed back into the earlier theme of the importance for anonymity.

Across Phases 3 and 4, participants commonly recognised that "universities weren't designed to serve researchers" (Phase 4), and the early-career researcher space

was thus less developed than that occupied by students or long-term staff. Participants acknowledged that at least some of these inequalities were amplified by the current practices that impact ECR career progression across the sector, including precarity of employment, conventions and ethics around attribution and authorship, the need for a stronger mentoring culture, and rigid contract structures that introduce barriers to gaining teaching experience or guarded time for research.

Need for Anonymity

During Phase 1 and (in some instances for Phase 2) many respondents were uncomfortable with providing their identity, or even naming their associated institutions. Many entries in the anonymous surveys and informal responses and comments stated their fears of speaking out. These were reported as being adversely related to future career prospects, and loss of credibility within the field. Comments on the initial video, '[Sarah's Story](#)' (Jasim, 2021), were made and then deleted. Others, in response to '[Shaakir's Story](#)' (Salam, 2021), told us they were fearful of career repercussions if they were too open about their experiences.

Across Phases 3 and 4, there was a slight recognition of early-career researchers' precarious contracts, and how this may lead to a fear of speaking out – but there was an obvious disconnect between how fixed-term employment issues, lack of confidentiality in some institutional reporting systems and how these could be exacerbated by inequalities, prejudices, or biases – were inter-related from the perspective of the researcher.

Intersectionality

In Phases 1 and 2, many participants reported multiple inequalities, prejudices, or biases – also known as 'intersectionality'. Early-career researchers and senior researchers offered accounts of how at different points in their academic career, they had experienced different inequalities; and sometimes there were experiences of multiple inequalities 'all conflated at one point' (Phase 1).

Across Phases 3 and 4, many participants spoke of how current approaches involving charters were only partially effective and risked segregating these issues and overlooking the complexities of intersectionality. In the latter parts of the campaign, it was suggested that a systemic approach for combating inequalities may also be beneficial, rather than a fragmentary approach for each of the various forms of inequality, which fails to handle intersectionality well.

Discussion

During 'The Lost Voices' national campaign, the authors aimed to engage with the ongoing conversation about research culture and to contribute to the changes which need to be made, through a national campaign (Jasim et al., 2021). Through this research, they wanted to identify the 'inequality' characteristics that researchers face and amplify 'The Lost Voices' in the academic community which are seldom heard, to hear from ECRs who are currently facing inequalities, prejudices, biases, and barriers; and to improve research culture.

HEIs have traditionally adopted diversity and inclusion plans to achieve equity for specific areas. Following the lead of international human rights and domestic legislative frameworks, most institutions have previously siloed their plans and practices so that each plan or strategy deals with a single attribute. This has resulted in strategies that focus exclusively on race (and ethnicity), disability, gender, or sexuality. Although this focus on a single attribute achieves positive results for a person with a single attribute, it does not adequately support a person with multiple or intersecting attributes. When plans and strategies only deal with a single attribute, people with multiple attributes find themselves only partially supported by each plan or strategy (Harpur, Willox, & Szücs, 2022). This leaves people with intersecting attributes in limbo, having to navigate systems that do not fit and fail to understand or support their lived experiences. Discrimination is not merely additive, but also intersectional or 'mutually reinforcing' in its nature too (Roberts, 2002). Although widely recognised, this understanding is yet to percolate into the institutional responses to address inequality and discrimination within the larger ambit of EDI initiatives. Contemporary initiatives continue to be grounded in the 'protected characteristics' identified by the UK's Equality Act (2010). While a first step in recognising the multiple levels at which discrimination and inequalities are experienced, this approach promotes an isolated understanding of these characteristics; failing to appreciate the systemic basis and interacting nature of these discriminations, and how these co-create systems of disadvantage and exclusions that undermine attainment of education and other development goals. Intersectionality offers a promising departure from the above approach (The Royal Society, 1996). It refers to the understanding that social inequalities are not experienced as unitary exclusive phenomenon of race, class, age, gender, sexuality, ability, and other aspects of social position but as mutually constituting or 'reciprocally constructed phenomenon' (The House of Commons, 2002). It rejects the idea of defining human experience based on singular identity or category of difference and assuming the primary importance of one category (Equality Act, 2010). In 2019, an intersectionality conference was held in the UK, in association with the LGBT Network of Networks in Higher Education – looking at the intersections of disability, sexuality and gender identity (Haroon, 2020). Sessions included faith and race intersecting with disability and how Athena SWAN includes Trans* identities. Academics such as Dr Fran Amery, have welcomed the introduction of intersectionality to the Gender Equality Charter: "Equality initiatives that only explore a single dimension of inequality (i.e., 'just' gender or 'just' race) do benefit some, but often end up leaving members of the most marginalised groups behind" (Senulyte, 2019).

While it was not one of the nine protected characteristics, socioeconomic background plays a large role in the life choices available to individuals, including their choices to proceed to doctoral education (Gardner & Holley, 2011). One recent study examined the effects of six characteristics of interest on career progression in ECRs studying specific biological fields. Five of the chosen characteristics belonged to the nine protected characteristics, but socioeconomic background was also included, and the results suggested that people from a lower socioeconomic background were significantly more likely to report facing a barrier than those from a higher socioeconomic background (Wanelik et al., 2020).

A continued aim of HE is to give equal opportunities to all vulnerable and underrepresented populations and to recognise the challenges that they face without discriminating them in their endeavours to gain future employment. Once such population is those that have caring duties, in particular parents undertaking HE. A large proportion of student-parents (SP) undertake HE part time which reduces their access to financial aid, which then leads many to have a poorer quality of life than others (Huelsman et al, 2013). Furthermore, due to their additional responsibilities such as childcare, domestic workload etc, the financial insecurity can negatively impact this population's chance for degree completion and leads to a significant impact on their mental health and wellbeing (Scharp et al, 2019). This population overlaps significantly with minority, low income, and disabled groups due to the vulnerabilities felt by this population (Wladis et al, 2018). Often, this population are going through a 'developmental phase' where important life choices which impact their future career and relationships are being made and this can be particularly disrupted when individuals need to balance caring responsibilities with fulfilling their independent social and professional aims (Becker and Becker, 2008). The lack of studies in this topic makes it difficult to draw a conclusion however, the studies that have investigated this topic have linked a higher amount of caring responsibility to a higher degree of poor mental health outcomes (Pakenham et al, 2015; Bacharz et al, 2017; Becker and Sempik, 2018). Therefore, it is clear this population would benefit from targeted support in HE to alleviate their burdens and this must be taken into consideration by policy makers within HE.

There is comparatively little previously published research on the effects of disability policies on ECRs. Many studies have been carried out on the problems faced by disabled undergraduate students, some of which will be similar (e.g., the absence of or ineffective accommodations, the lack of good role models, and the general tendency for institutions to take a minimalist approach, which places the onus on the individual affected (Karellou, 2019; Wertans and Burch, 2022)). However, challenges specific to ECRs are less studied, for example, the extra struggle faced by ECRs with disabilities in presenting and discussing their work at conferences (De Picker, 2018), or simply the fight to get adequate support, which has been described as "equivalent to having another part-time job" (Hannam-Swain, 2017). Both these papers highlight the extra work involved simply for a disabled researcher to do their job, a theme which was also emphasised in a recent study based on interviews with 75 disabled academics in the UK (Sang et al, 2021). This study concluded that interacting with human resources management in pursuit of suitable accommodations can itself be disabling, constructing barriers to disabled researchers which are not faced by the "idealised academic" (a highly productive, flexible individual who can work long hours). What is supportive official policy all too often fails in translation into practice.

Before the introduction of the Employment Equality (SO) Regulations (2003), progress concerning protections against sexual orientation discrimination and harassment, in both the public and private sectors, relied on the culture of specific organisations or companies, and were typically based on social justice business case arguments (Colgen et al. 2007). Much of the scholarship at the interface between HE policy and LGBTQ+ issues do not always directly address the early-career researcher and postdoc groups in isolation. That said, there are relevant works to consider as they inform how policy has influenced the landscape and

examine the experience of members of HEI communities who identify as LGBTQ+. English and Fenby-Hulse (2019) speak about how though most LGBTQ+-identifying respondents have experienced no limitations to their career aspirations or experience while a PGR in the UK, their phenomenological approach documented the full breadth of experience of these UK doctoral students. They highlight that while they don't often experience overt or violent forms of discrimination or harassment, doctoral students identifying as LGBTQ+ do experience a series of micro-aggressions that typically involve different forms of assumptions often rooted in hetero- and cisnormativity that that serve to isolate them from their wider researcher communities in different ways, as the micro-aggressions discourage participation. Thus, in a similar manner that was argued by Vicary and Jones (2017), this kind of isolation limits the development as a full-fledged member of the workplace community, and therefore discourages engagement with the leadership development necessary to be competitive for advancement to more senior academic roles. Lee (2002) describes how the workplace visibility of LGBTQ+ signs and symbols gave staff the confidence to come out more in an environment where academic staff felt comfortable being public about their sexual and gender identities with colleagues but not students. In considering new directions for academic leadership, Formby (2015) discussed examining the prevalence of hetero- and cisnormativity in HEI settings to better care for LGTB+ students, at large; following Msibi and Jagessar's (2015) suggestions from within a South African academic context which they found to be heterosexualised and misogynistic. To this end, Lee (2021) argued for more diverse leadership in HE, and that those that have lived identities that have been marginalised or 'othered' by systems and organisations are ideally placed for the transformative change required across the sector.

Across the national campaign, we noticed a strong disconnect between the institutional efforts in EDI and the experiences of both senior and early-career researchers. This disconnect was further worsened by the fear that some researchers, especially ECRs, have in reporting the inequalities that caused them to receive prejudice or bias at work. This fear was frequently expressed in our campaign, particularly in phases 1 and 2, where it formed an underlying theme to the different inequalities being described. There was a consensus across the campaign that louder voices are heard and realised more than 'lost' or 'unheard' voices – which further exemplifies the disconnect between researchers and the institutional policies that seek to improve EDI. This is being addressed in some institutions by the implementation of confidential 'reporting + support' services (University College London, 2021). Encouragingly, there was also discussion that we, as a sector, had to consider a harder stance with those whose behaviour directly or indirectly enables inequalities, regardless of how senior or 'successful' a researcher they were. Even if we get to a point where we have implemented the change necessary to meaningfully address most of these inequalities, the sector and specifically institutions need to continuously learn from their initiatives to bring about change and retain this learning. More focus is needed on inequalities that do not fit neatly into the nine 'protected characteristics' (Equality Act, 2010). There will always be different types of inequalities and, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, new ones are emerging. Retaining learning means the sector will be better placed to rapidly respond to future inequalities as they present themselves, so that more time is spent proactively resolving issues instead of being fixated on their complexity or difficulty.

Fair employability and access are corner stones that higher education (HE) is built upon. These form the foundations that are designed to enhance employability and student learning, especially at the undergraduate level. It has become increasingly apparent to institutions that they must prepare a student to not only advance their own academic prowess in their chosen field but to ensure that they are prepared to join the wider work force (York, 2006). Over time, HE is slowly being redefined as it is no longer recognised as a personal endeavour to gain expertise in a field of interest but is a requirement for many individuals to prepare for a more globalised, complex society which demands a diverse range of skills and experiences (Chan, 2016). Overall, this leads to the conclusion that HE must equip those to become employable however, many stakeholders within different HE institutions lack a cohesive measure of employability which leads to a lack of cohesive policies that are equitable for different communities across the UK (Sin and Neave, 2016; Tymon, 2013). This lack of cohesion has led for calls to create more equitable policies which work towards similar goals and outcomes (Small et al, 2018).

A significant part of the reputation that attracts individuals to study or work at a particular institution is supported by their research output and impact. Therefore, some retention of skilled and diverse individuals is necessary – to support and provide continuity to a research environment for the benefit of the sector, as well as to develop research and innovation that benefits HEIs and the diverse communities they serve. It is important to recognise the impact that a diverse workforce can bring within HE institutions. These can ultimately lead to beneficial innovations within communities that have large populations of ethnic minorities, the same communities in which many HEIs exist.

Strengths and limitations

This national campaign was novel in its multi-level approach that involved participants at all stages of the academic career pathway. Our recruitment channels were limited to UK early career researcher and researcher development networks. As this campaign was conducted in the middle of the global COVID-19 pandemic, recruitment avenues were limited, and the research sector was under considerable pressure which impacted how many voices we were able to reach with limited resources and funding. Furthermore, perhaps due to the fears of anonymity, we could not reach all 'The Lost Voices' – therefore our views are limited, and further work is needed to build upon this pilot campaign.

Conclusion

Currently, institutional leadership is not just tacitly trying to address EDI across the sector; our leaders are passionately championing cultural reforms and are dedicating unparalleled resources to drive them. However, something seems to be getting lost as these visions often fail to trickle down to the lower levels of an institution. Unfortunately, some of the people working hard to change research cultures 'on the ground' will not reap the benefits of those reforms in their time as an ECR.

To further improve equality for all, but especially 'The Lost Voices' which are currently unheard, a unified approach acknowledging a more comprehensive range of inequalities and their intersections is essential. Continued efforts to improve representation in research, especially at senior levels, and local support and training addressing these issues is necessary both for those experiencing inequalities, and those consciously or unconsciously reinforcing them. A research culture of accessible support is required especially at the critical ECR career stage.

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