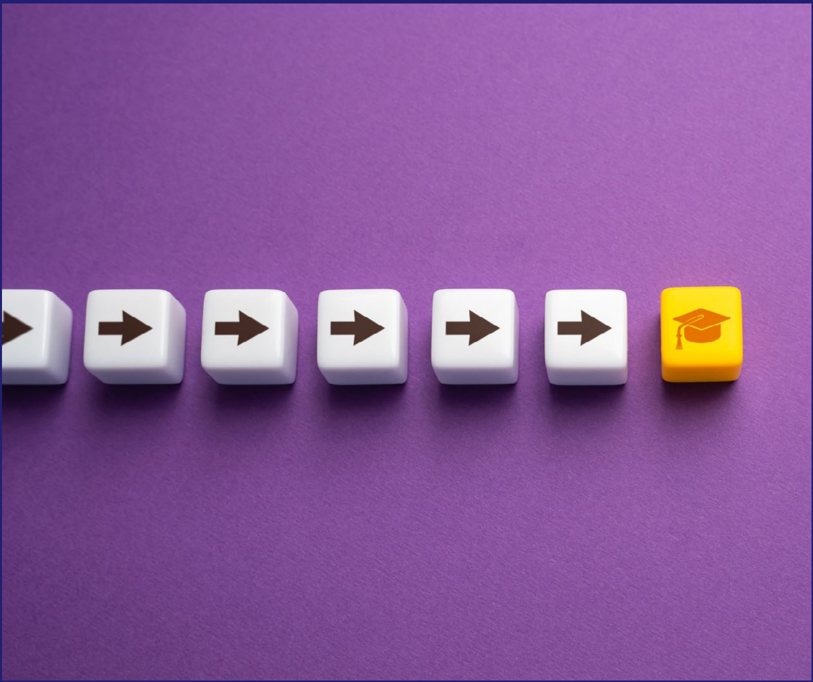
The lives of early career researchers



Higher Education Policy Institute

The British Academy

HEPI Report 169

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Contents

Preface

Dr Molly Morgan Jones, Director of Policy at the British Academy

In the dynamic landscape of higher education policy, pressing challenges persist and new developments add layers of uncertainty. The UK has confirmed it will associate to Horizon Europe but what will our relationship with the European research community look like? Will the Office for Students implement proposals for student number caps on so-called underperforming subjects, and if so, how? To what impact on staff? How might the rise in visa costs for overseas academics affect staffing and research activity across British universities? All of this is to say nothing of an upcoming general election which could pave the way for yet more change.

As we grapple with these complex policy questions it is essential not to lose sight of the lifeblood of our excellent higher education and research sector – our academics. They are the driving force behind progress, innovation and the diversification of research fields. They are the people who engage with the most pressing issues of the day to teach, publish and debate. The long-term success of the sector relies on the sustained support and nurture of each generation of academics.

In the pages that follow we shift our focus to the voices and perspectives of early career researchers who face an increasingly uphill battle. The hours are long, the work is often precarious and opportunities can be scarce. Regrettably, their voices are often overlooked in discussions about their wellbeing and career prospects. This oversight contributes to an uncertain world which may see universities lose out on their most valuable resource – their people.

To address this the British Academy and the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) have joined forces to provide a platform for the voices and perspectives of lesser-heard early career researchers. In 2023 we commissioned 11 members of the British Academy's innovative Early Career Researcher Network – a researcher-led membership body accessible to all UK-based early career researchers working in the humanities and social sciences and developed to specifically support them to address the challenges they face daily – to share their experiences of academic life. Their raw and unvarnished essays provide a unique window into the realities of academic life, offering creative solutions to multifaceted challenges.

These are challenges which need coordinated effort across funders and policymakers, but they are not ones that are going unnoticed. Together, we are already undertaking efforts aimed at improving research culture and practices through a range of initiatives. The *Researcher Development Concordat*, the *Concordat to Support Research Integrity* and the £3.4 million Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Caucus set up by the Research Councils, Innovate UK and British Academy are just some examples. In addition, the British Academy has set aside specific funding to support additional needs that applicants and award holders may require, and to make assessment fairer, the Academy is piloting partial randomisation as part of the selection process for our Small Research Grants.

While the obstacles faced are not universal, and the solutions presented are not those of the British Academy, they are those of the individual researchers said in their own voices. We hope this collection will be of great use for fellow academics, technicians, policymakers, university administrators and leaders, and those throughout the sector who may be facing similar challenges.

I would like to express my gratitude to the contributors for their courage and honesty, and to the Academy's Early Career Researcher Network for bringing together an exemplary group of authors representing diverse disciplines, institutions and experiences. And of course, to HEPI for its unwavering support in bringing these voices to life.

I hope this collection will be a catalyst for meaningful discussions about the wellbeing, career prospects and support available to early career researchers, ultimately shaping a brighter future for higher education and research in the UK.

The PhD Parenting Penalty

Sarah Howard, Birkbeck, University of London

I became a parent while studying for a PhD. Having a baby was life-changing in many predictable ways, however prepared I thought I was. The biggest shock, however, was something I had not fully absorbed: that PhD parents are specifically penalised in an already failing childcare landscape. Despite the low level of PhD income – the minimum full-time annual stipend paid by research councils is £18,622[1] – PhD parents in England are excluded from virtually all available means of childcare assistance.[2]

Let me count the ways:

1. No tax credits: stipends are tax-free income, so full-time students cannot claim tax-free childcare.
2. No 30 hours free childcare for three- and four-year-olds: PhD students are not counted as 'employed' and are ineligible.
3. No Universal Credit childcare: to be eligible for 85 per cent reimbursement of childcare costs, claimants must be 'employed'.[3]
4. No Student Finance Childcare Grant or Parent's Learning Allowance: these are only available to undergraduates.
5. Subsidies from individual universities or university childcare facilities are piecemeal and often financially insignificant. The government payment for the 15 'free' hours of childcare for two-year-olds in low-income families does not cover the actual cost of providing the care, so many childcare institutions do not accept it.[5]

My personal story is complicated, as real lives tend to be. When my son was born in 2015, I was living between London (studying for an Economic and Social Research Council-funded PhD while teaching on and off) and Ethiopia (where my partner was finishing his medical training). Despite the teaching income on top of my stipend I did not earn enough to sponsor my husband to come to the UK, a burden that rests entirely on the British applicant whatever their spouse's ability to earn.[5] As a *de facto* single parent for the next three years my salary barely covered the cost of childcare on the days I taught. The university nursery – whose wonderful, dedicated staff earned significantly less than the London Living Wage – charged more than £60 per day to student and staff alike and did not offer the 15 'free' hours once my son turned two.

As I squeezed my own research into early mornings and naptimes I felt perpetually behind and under pressure. Attending conferences, workshops and training events was difficult or impossible. I increasingly worried that the quality of my research would be compromised and that I would not be able to compete post-PhD in a ruthless job market. That often elusive headspace required to think deeply and creatively needed to write was, indeed, elusive. On many occasions, such as when I attempted to read journal articles with half an eye in the playground, I also felt guilty for not paying full attention to my child.

On the other hand, as many parents can attest, having a child changed my work habits for the better. Finding time to work became such a precious and expensive commodity, I found myself able to work with more focus and efficiency in short bursts. I am proud of my determination to finish my PhD and grateful that my mental health did not suffer in the process, as it easily could have done. But individual resilience is not a solution to a systemic problem.

The wider childcare crisis in the UK is undisputed. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the UK's '(largely) market-based system' is the third most expensive in the world with 'insufficient coverage in poorer, less-profitable areas'.[6] The cost of childcare has increased by more than a quarter since 2009, four times faster than wages rose between 2008 and 2016 – and seven times faster in London.[7] A nursery place for a child under two costs between 45 per cent and 60 per cent of women's average salaries in England.[8] These high costs fuel social inequalities from the gender pay gap to educational outcomes for children. Despite the cost to parents, childcare providers are struggling to stay afloat, even while those actually providing the care are among the lowest-paid workers in the country. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these trends.

In this landscape of crisis and long-term under-funding, graduate student parents are specifically penalised even further.[9] In an already difficult situation PhD students with children are restricted from almost all available childcare support, as I have described. The only proposed solution, the Postgraduate Doctoral Loan introduced in 2018, is a sticking plaster that does not even nearly cover the astronomical and rising costs of childcare. More fundamentally it is an injustice that those who choose to have a child during doctoral studies are supposed to go into debt rather than have the same access to assistance with childcare as other low-income parents.

The costs of this situation are felt in the career, research impact, health and family life of PhD parents. They result in discrimination on gender grounds and disproportionately affect students – or potential students – from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds, compounding inequalities already entrenched in academia. They impact the ability of students to produce high-quality work with unquantifiable but serious costs to both the economy and the furthering of knowledge in the broadest sense.

The childcare situation in this country is unsustainable and must be fixed. Affordable or universal high-quality childcare would be transformational in so many ways – but that demand is beyond the scope of this short essay. My aim here is to advance a more modest but immediate demand: that PhD parents are no longer excluded from childcare assistance available to others. It would surely not be difficult to reverse this exception by granting full-time graduate students an exemption to the requirement of 'employed' status for childcare purposes. Just as surely the benefits of this decision would far exceed the short-term economic cost. It would also be the right and fair thing to do. PhD parents deserve better.

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Journey into Academia at the Intersection of Race, Class and Gender

Blessing Marandure, De Montfort University

> *In particular, there exists a stubborn refusal to acknowledge that academia itself might be complicit in the (re)production of racial injustices, that it does not just passively 'reflect' disadvantages already existing in society but actively (re)creates inequalities.*[1]

The journey into academia begins well before one is admitted into a higher education institution. For decades, it has been recognised that there are disparities in access to higher education, particularly for racialised minorities. This essay seeks to discuss the journey from initial entry into undergraduate study through the postgraduate research pipeline. These issues will be discussed through the lens of intersecting identities of race, class and gender. In line with Jason Arday and Heidi Mirza's assertions quoted above, the essay will highlight systemic barriers that (re)produce racial injustices and (re)create inequalities in the academy.

While racial disparities in access to higher education are widely acknowledged, there is a general tendency for institutions to cite deficits within students as drivers for the inequality. Most touted, particularly by elite institutions, is the underachievement of racialised minority students in relation to entry tariffs.[2] At face value the data appear to support these assertions. These data show a gap of about 10 per cent between Black and White students awarded three A grades or better at A Level.[3] The impact of these disparities seems evident in undergraduate admissions data. For example, 2020/21 HESA returns show an approximately even split in admissions into high, medium and low-tariff institutions for White students.[4] Conversely the highest proportion of Black students was admitted into low-tariff higher education institutions (53 per cent), while the lowest proportion was admitted into high-tariff higher education institutions (18 per cent). At the intersection of race and class, regional disparities are also evident. There is a north / south divide whereby students from London and the south-east have a higher percentage of A and A* grades.[5] Using entry tariffs as a heuristic for institutional prestige it can be asserted from these data that Black working-class students are less likely to be found at the elite, predominantly research-intensive, institutions.

What is more concerning is that when access data for the prestigious institutions are subjected to scrutiny, even those racialised minorities meeting the entry tariffs are significantly less likely to be admitted than their White counterparts.[6] This should give pause for thought and highlights structural inequalities in admissions processes. Ironically there has been very limited focus on gatekeeping processes in admissions, together with adoption of 'colour-evasive' widening access policies not directly addressing race.[7] As a result these widening access practices have not yielded much in addressing racial disparities in access to higher education.[8] Particularly, access into prestigious institutions matters for several reasons related to social mobility and graduate outcomes. Within the context of early career researchers (ECRs) and entry into academia, research-intensive universities are rich in research culture. They offer more opportunities and resources for students to get involved in and gain research experience. This ultimately feeds into the postgraduate researcher pipeline. Therefore, there is a higher level of under-representation of racialised minority students at research postgraduate level compared to taught postgraduate courses.[9]

Academic achievement is a key entry criterion for admission into doctoral study. Considering the competitive landscape, particularly for funded positions, it is imperative that students apply with the right academic qualifications. However, racial disparities are evident in degree awards. For example, a 23 per cent gap exists between Black and White students awarded a 'good' degree (First Class Honours or Upper Second Class Honours).[10] While reasons for the awarding gap are complex, racialised minority students often cite structural reasons such as the whiteness of the curriculum (for example, curricula dominated by White western epistemology and representation), lack of belonging and unrelatable lecturers.[11] These racial inequalities in higher education have thus inspired student protest movements such as, 'Why isn't my Professor Black?'.[12] Such is the recognition of the extent of the disparities that UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has ringfenced £8 million for projects that seek to improve access and participation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students into postgraduate research.[13]

In considering the key facilitators for entry into academia, working-class early career researchers have previously highlighted the importance of PhD scholarship funding and of having a key contact from a relatable background who demystifies academia.[14] However, the limited nature of PhD funding means many from working-class backgrounds give up before they can even start their doctoral journey, as it is often not financially feasible to self-fund.[15] Additionally, access to PhD funding is far from equitable with racial disparities evident. A paltry 1 per cent of UKRI studentships were awarded to Black students in 2020/21, though ethnicity data was missing for about a third of awardees.[16] Nevertheless, chances of these non-disclosures being predominantly Black are very unlikely. Thus, it is important to elucidate the role racial biases may play in selection processes for PhD funding. This is because racialised students report being subjected to stereotypes of low intellectual ability as part of their student experiences.[17] It is reasonable to infer that such biases are likely to permeate the selection process for PhD funding, particularly considering the lack of adequate ethnic representation in senior academics and by extension the decision-making committees. Additionally, initiatives such as protected studentships for students from racialised minority backgrounds are a welcome strategy to level the playing field.[18]

Those who manage to overcome these barriers and make it into academia must contend with a lack of belonging. This is accentuated by the significant lack of relatable role models (therefore, mentors), particularly in senior positions.[19] What is striking is that there are Black early career researchers who will never have encountered a single Black professor throughout their studies. In a post-racial utopia this would very much be the exception to the norm. The reality however is that 136 institutions have no Black professors according to HESA returns for the 2021/22 academic year.[20] That constitutes about 87 per cent of UK higher education institutions, signifying widespread systemic issues in academic promotions. At the intersection of race and gender only a meagre 41 out of over 22,000 professors are Black women in the UK.[21] These kinds of figures perpetuate and reinforce structures of epistemological injustice against racialised individuals. In the case of Black female early career researchers the message this sends is that they do not belong in the academy. The crème de la crème of knowledge creators simply does not look like them.

In conclusion, racialised minority early career researchers face a fraught, Herculean journey into the academy. The number of barriers they need to overcome at each stage is significant, particularly considering intersections of disadvantage. Clearly, several barriers are present that negatively impact on chances for admission into research-intensive institutions and into postgraduate research. Without funding, those from working-class backgrounds are unable to pursue their PhD due to financial constraints. Those who do finally make it into the academy are faced with a very evident glass ceiling, particularly for Black female academics. It is thus imperative for universities to understand that access to university is inextricably linked with inclusion at university.[22]

Finally, I end with a personal anecdote, illustrating the plausibility and lived experience of discriminatory practices. As a Black female who successfully challenged an unjust predicted A Level grade entered on UCAS (from a C to a B), I am cognisant of discrimination in admissions processes. This maddening experience propelled me to a final grade of an A. Had the initial grade stood, I would not have received an offer and subsequent admission into my Russell Group institution of choice. It is thus imperative for efforts to create equitable solutions to recognise explicitly and address the structural barriers for specific groups that (re)produce racial injustices and (re)create inequalities in the academy.

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The Importance of Networking and Mentoring: Nurturing the Non-Academic Academic

Joanne Mills, University of Wolverhampton

I write this as a first-generation academic who entered university for my undergraduate degree with a Business and Technology Education Council qualification (BTEC). This often-daunting experience for scholars such as myself has been previously discussed within HEPI, for example by Dr Louise Folkes who describes the experience as akin to 'constantly treading water':

> *[i]t requires a constant effort to understand and carefully manage the world around you, otherwise you sink.*[1]

Within this essay I use the term 'non-academic' to indicate early career researchers who are not working in an academic role, for example within higher education, industry or elsewhere – however, alternative terms are used in other contexts. For example, Dr Celia Whitchurch refers to 'Third Space' professionals, as those occupying professional roles within teaching and research in higher education.[2]

I have worked in administrative and support roles within higher education since the mid-2000s, where I had the privilege of working with practitioners and researchers whose infectious passion for their subjects remains with me to this day. For the first time in my working career, I was treated as an equal rather than as an underling. I gained the confidence to return to Art and was encouraged to study first for my Master's degree in Fine Art, then to exhibit my work and finally to undertake my doctoral qualifications. I am grateful for these experiences, including being invited to participate within another researcher's own doctoral practice, as well as for the encouragement which has shaped my research interests and career aspirations.

While these words and actions of encouragement were not formalised as mentoring, retrospectively they share similarities. Professor David Clutterbuck describes the nature of mentoring:

> *mentors provide a spectrum of learning and supporting behaviours; from challenging and being a critical friend, to being a role model; from*

helping build networks and develop personal resourcefulness, to simply being there to listen; from helping someone work out what they want to achieve and why, to planning how they will bring change about.[3]

Clutterbuck further suggests that the relationship is reciprocal between mentee and mentor, where the former is given skills and confidence to grow; while the latter may gain managerial and pastoral skills.[4]

As a research student I was provided with many opportunities to mix with peers in different fields by my institution, from training sessions to public lectures. We were also encouraged to take part in departmental student conferences to gain experience and confidence in public speaking and networking. In my second year of study, I was appointed student representative, so I also had the opportunity to raise student concerns and share updates from relevant committees.

In this way I believe that a network of supportive academics in the field is crucial for early career researchers, both for encouragement in exploring ideas and providing mentorship and support. Networking is a key skill as a researcher, both to remain aware of the current and changing landscape of research within our fields, and to make connections with potential collaborators and stakeholders.

Academic and professional networks can be built in-person through faculty, cross-departmental events and conferences. While the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns and restrictions on travel initially made such networking impossible, institutions responded in innovative ways, moving to host conferences and events online and embracing platforms which support remote and collaborative working. The pandemic has led to a new digital or hybrid scholarly normality where remote working has become standard academic practice.[5] This format enables more flexible participation for attendees and presenters across multiple locations and is particularly valuable for students and emerging researchers working in non-academic fields. Furthermore, David Nicholas notes that this move 'has also substantially increased ECR endeavours to obtain digital visibility and promote themselves and their work'.[6]

However, while novel forms of networking are possible through chat rooms and shared spaces, it can feel more forced and formal than networking during a coffee break. More traditional forms of online networking are enabled through viewing institutional profiles and making email contact, and through social media. Through following researchers and groups in my field of interest I have gained knowledge of relevant work, funding and research opportunities which I would otherwise not have been aware of, together with the opportunity to share and discuss my own research with others.

The newly established British Academy Early Career Researcher Network has also been a lifeline. Through my current role I was lucky enough to be part of the consortium of universities which make up one of the pilot Hubs. Without this, as a 'non-academic' I may not have been aware of its existence. This is something which I am actively working to change by raising awareness of the Network both within my own institution and other regional universities – particularly with colleagues employed in similar roles. The Network has allowed me the opportunity to attend highly relevant training sessions – such as on postdoctoral funding and publishing edited works – while at the same time meeting peers from across the country, both validating my own position as an early career researcher and enabling me to develop contacts within my own field. Through the online network I have also been able to join cross-institutional subject groups related to my work and wider interests and hope this will lead to some exciting opportunities for collaboration.

These external networks and newsfeeds of relevant research really helped to motivate me and provide inspiration through the final stages of my doctoral submission. Now, as an early career researcher, I have the confidence to develop ideas for my post-doctoral research and coordinate my own events.

Clutterbuck notes that 'Mentoring is often at its most effective when people are on the brink of, or in the middle of, significant transitions'.[7] While in this case he refers to employees at the points of both induction and progression, this can equally be seen to be applicable to those transitioning from study to employment (for example as an early career researcher) or those looking to change career.

While my doctoral journey was not an easy one and took considerably longer than I originally intended it to, the skills and the confidence in my ability that I have developed as a result cannot be measured in words. I am naturally an introvert and without the encouragement and support of both my colleagues and other researchers and artists who I have met both online and in person, I would neither have considered applying for PhD study or pushed myself to present or publish my work. I would also not be in the position I am in today with the privilege of looking both back over my journey and forward to the work which I am able to undertake in the future. I am grateful to the spaces I have been afforded to grow as a researcher and believe that all opportunities to develop skills and knowledge should be accessible to all those who seek them.

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Everyone Struggles: A Cautionary Tale of an Independent Early Career Researcher

Anastassiya Mahon, an independent researcher and creator of UnlimitedPolitics.com

This essay reflects on the challenges facing an independent early career researcher that arise from a lack of access to institutional resources, academic or otherwise. Often, such access is implied when the challenges that early career researchers face are discussed; however not all early career researchers are interested in or are able to join an institution. In this essay I discuss the concept of struggling as an early career researcher as being formative for identity, the challenges of an independent early career researcher and the potential to seek employment outside of academia.

'Everyone struggles': struggle as a formative characteristic of early career identity

It is often implied that early career researchers struggle with work / life wellbeing and securing academic employment. The existing attitude to the early career researcher's path is that struggle becomes part of the identity of an early career researcher – a 'what does not kill you makes you stronger' type of rhetoric is often thrown around at conferences and informal gatherings.[1] However, these struggles have often been created and perpetuated by academics. For example, some universities pride themselves on offering mentorship to early career researchers as part of their position and career development, but do not lower the substantial demands of an entry-level position. Academia demands more and more from us: excellent knowledge of one's subject areas; qualitative and quantitative research methods; knowledge of different learning assistance technologies; success in securing funding; an impeccable publishing record; and other types of expertise are expected even for an entry-level faculty position. However, many early career researchers have not had a chance to develop those competencies due to the uncertainty of their academic contracts, the absence of time to do it all themselves and the need to balance their academic life with their private life. With such demands for an academic post, it is no surprise that early career researchers are considering other options to academia.

An alternative to an academic post is to become an independent researcher, which can be attractive for the freedom it offers to determine one's own research agenda. However for many this path is not easier: long hours with no guarantee of academic accomplishments in sight; being condescended to as less of an academic if you are not part of a university-based team; and the prospect of a precarious financial situation. Most people from my PhD cohort have continued in academia and are trying to make it – and those who left went on to become involved in industries unrelated to their research interests. As inspiring as it might be, I do not feel the call to change my occupation completely, but academia seems to hold few answers. While some PhD students might be lucky with a lined-up postdoctoral position or an alternative position in a project, I was not one of them and have not been given advice regarding future employment, in academia or elsewhere. Many early career researchers face the same dilemmas.[2]

The many challenges of an independent early career researcher

Non-institutionally affiliated early career researchers face a unique set of challenges. For an independent researcher there is no help with the administrative, legal or institutional workload that goes into research, and especially into securing funding. Also, many funders require an institutional post in order to apply for funding – often funding requires a 20 per cent or even 50 per cent contribution (match funding) – thus preventing independent researchers from accessing it. As an early career researcher and an independent researcher, I do not have access to a support network or a mentor who would help me to navigate academic employment. Since many funders' eligibility criteria rule out early career researchers interested in conducting independent research, this lowers the chances of independent early career researchers securing funding as much as it affects the desirability of pursuing independent research. The situation with securing funding becomes even more dire for independent early career researchers from under-represented backgrounds or those with caring responsibilities.

Another hurdle that independent researchers face on a daily basis is the need to explain their affiliation or lack thereof. For some conferences and journals, both academic and industry-based, being an independent researcher even causes difficulties building a profile, as being affiliated with an institution is a requirement for creating an account. Independent early career researchers need to market themselves harder as they do not have access to educational institutions' marketing and promotion strategies. Such attitudes put to the test academia's core principle of meritocracy, when independent early career researchers tend to face more scrutiny as they are not covered by an institutional umbrella.

Another, often unaddressed, challenge faced by independent researchers is loneliness. While putting in the long hours of grinding work, the absence of people around me can feel intolerable. There is no one to discuss my ideas with, no one to ask for a quick look at my work and no colleagues to simply go to lunch with. Living in such a void makes me question foundational considerations pertaining to my work: are my ideas interesting? Would anyone read what I write? Having a support network is important and is often underestimated by those taking support for granted. Being an independent early career researcher often means that I walk my path alone while constantly doubting myself.

Seeking employment outside of academia: what is there for me?

Many early career researchers do not feel confident contemplating a career outside of academia, even though they might be interested in pursuing employment opportunities in industry. There is the initial question of how to translate academic achievements into something that is understood easily outside of academia. How do I convey my value? How do I explain my accomplishments? What is the benchmark for the position I am applying for? Often academia is perceived as a superior career choice for an early career researcher but, for many, academia can prove to be a world of impossible demands and expectations.[3]

So, what should early career researchers do if they feel like they want to leave academia? I would start with evaluating the experience and expertise that one has acquired and see what kind of positions are open that look for those characteristics. Many early career researchers I have met severely underestimate their project management expertise, as well their skill to write for different audiences. As academics we, at times, downplay skills and achievements that should instead be celebrated and honoured. The skills and capabilities developed during a PhD should be stressed and universities should show how graduates with PhDs can get positions outside academia, including as independent researchers.

By drawing attention to the unique set of challenges faced by an independent early career researcher, I hope to challenge the idea that struggling with everything as an early career researcher is normal, or even desirable, as it prepares us for the frequent disappointments and rejections that academics face. We should aspire to make academia a kinder, more welcoming space by developing more supporting conditions and policies for early career researchers and independent researchers.

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Code-Switching Higher Ed: The UK and US Systems for Early Career Scholars

Anna Meier, University of Nottingham

When I arrived in the UK as a US-trained early career researcher I had no idea how much would be foreign to me. A shared language and intellectual tradition provided only the shakiest of common grounds. Even the term 'early career researcher' was new, despite it applying to me. I am still learning how to code-switch between two entirely different vocabularies and how to make sense of the different circumstances that landed my colleagues and I in our current jobs. This essay is an attempt at creating a resource I did not have, along with critically considering strengths and weaknesses of the US and UK systems.

Variations in typical early career researcher experiences between the US and UK could fill a book. Rather than painstakingly walk through comparisons, I focus on three major areas: PhD training, early career researcher hiring and funding practices. These areas structure the entire early career experience and also encompass the areas in which US and UK academia could learn the most from each other. The UK would do well to consider some of the US's approaches to PhD pay. Meanwhile, adopting the UK's more open-minded approach toward research and methodology in academia would enrich and diversify US-based research. I write as a social scientist, so my observations and suggestions may not apply in disciplines with which I am less familiar.

Differences in US and UK academia start with PhD programmes. In the UK, PhD programmes are intended for students who have already completed a Master's degree. There is no (or very little) coursework expected, with students jumping directly into the dissertation. Indeed, students apply to programmes with a full PhD proposal somewhat akin to a US-style prospectus, and their admission is contingent upon identifying a supervisor willing to guide their project along. Researching and writing the PhD thesis is designed to take three to four years, with the fourth year constructed as a 'writing up' year. While researching, UK PhD students are likely to be exposed to a much wider range of methodological approaches, even if they are not formally trained in them, simply by virtue of the UK's academic character. Though not necessarily embracing these approaches with open arms, the UK on the whole is more accepting of critical, interpretive and post-structural research than the US, at least in my discipline of Politics.

By contrast US PhD programmes include a Master's degree within them and are designed to take at least five years. Many students however take longer, with the median time to completion for social sciences, humanities and arts PhDs being 5.7 years as of 2021.[1] Following coursework students take 'comprehensive exams' and write a dissertation proposal. If successful at both endeavours they advance to PhD candidacy (ABD – 'all but dissertation') and spend the next several years researching and writing their dissertations (theses in UK parlance). During the first two to three years US students complete a series of classes on substantive academic debates and research methodology. 'Methodology' here is primarily understood as positivist and quantitative: a positivist approach presupposes there is an objective social reality that can be measured using tools similar to those employed in Biology and Physics. Methodologies which reflect a positivist orientation, such as statistical analysis, experiments and automated text analysis, are becoming more and more dominant in US social sciences. I took seven methods classes as a PhD student which was not abnormal in my programme, but only two dealt with qualitative methods, and only one challenged the hegemony of positivist approaches in US social science.

Meanwhile a non-positivist approach to research methodology refers to the view that social reality is multiple, subjective and experienced differently depending on one's background and identities. This is rooted much more deeply in UK academia than in the US, meaning US PhD students who discover non-positivist approaches may feel more at home in the UK. This was, indeed, my experience. On average then, US academics spend more time in postgraduate training and thus have more time to learn skills and publish research before seeking an academic job. This can make them especially competitive in the UK market, especially as interest in quantitative methods and 'data science' in undergraduate courses increases. By comparison, US scholars using critical and / or non-positivist approaches are likely to struggle during the PhD.

One might assume that US PhDs are more financially precarious due to more time spent scraping by on a PhD stipend, but this is not necessarily the case due to the US structure of early career researcher (ECR) hiring. In the US, it is expected that students seeking academic positions will go on the market during the final year of the PhD, such that they will go more or less straight into a tenure-track position after defending – and that job will, on average, pay far more than a comparable job in the UK.[2] In fact, it is common for students not to schedule their dissertation defence until they have a job lined up. 'Tenure-track' means a job is permanent for another five to seven years but not guaranteed for life: early career scholars must hit certain research and teaching benchmarks which vary from institution to institution and are somewhat analogous to the UK promotions process, before achieving tenure. This can make the first few years of their career extremely stressful, as not gaining tenure means having to look for a different job at a different institution.

Meanwhile, in the UK students are often not eligible to apply to full-time permanent lectureships until after defending their theses, and so to avoid a long stretch of unemployment post-PhD many take positions as postdoctoral or teaching fellows while continuing their search. Though a scarcity of tenure-track jobs in the US means precarious and temporary positions are on the rise there as well, the result is that US PhD students are more likely to begin jobs as lecturers / assistant professors after their PhD than UK students, at the cost of considerable stress during their final year. Conversely, UK PhD students can wait until after the dissertation is completed to search for jobs but may be forced into prolonged precarity or unemployment as a result.

A final area of significant difference is in funding structures for PhDs, which can have long-term financial implications. Though there are exceptions, highly ranked US PhD programmes 'fully fund' their students, covering tuition and providing a stipend. This is often conditional upon working for the university in some way, usually as a teaching or research assistant, which further helps students build essential skills for academic jobs. This stands in stark contrast to the UK, where funding award offers are not standard with admissions packages, unless students apply to a funded

PhD position to work with a supervisor on a specific topic (similar to the natural sciences model in the US). About one-third of students self-fund their PhDs.[3] Horrific stories of UK students living in tents to make ends meet have been reported and, as Bethan Cornell observes in a HEPI report on UK PhD student experiences, the average PhD student earns under the minimum wage.[4]

Whether PhD funding in either country is enough to cover the cost of living is a separate question, and waves of graduate student strikes across the US in the past few years highlight that it is often not.[6] In both countries early career scholars are likely to enter their first job post-PhD in a state of financial distress, exacerbated if they have had to move long distances or go months without pay. Nevertheless, US early career researchers may be marginally better positioned thanks to having received a stipend during their degrees, and it remains appalling that UK PhD students are not guaranteed funding, turning access to a job in academia into a pure pay-to-play game. Doing a PhD is a job and should be treated as such, with a living wage and benefits, especially given universities' professed commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Otherwise, PhDs will continue to be restricted to those with generational wealth or the capacity take on considerable debt, with ever-greater competition for limited funding.

Both the US and UK systems, then, come with serious drawbacks for early career scholars. Neither system places researchers or teachers in a financially secure position; neither is set up to guide PhD students into stable jobs. For all my initial dismay at a shared intellectual tradition not leading to more similarities between the two systems, shared economic and political factors in both countries have produced analogous structural constraints that bend higher education toward exploitation of its early career members. Still, there is much these systems can learn from each other to take steps toward a more just and inclusive academy.

From a professionalisation perspective, US academic programmes could better integrate exposure to, and training in, theoretical or qualitative approaches. Rather than marginalising these approaches, US social science academia would benefit from recognising that teaching a singular way of doing academia is dogma, not science. More expansive training would also open the door to international dialogues and a possibility of more thoughtful engagement with the structural bases of equality, diversity and inclusivity initiatives.

On the subject of structures, UK academia could significantly improve the experiences of early career researchers by guaranteeing funding to all admitted PhD students and dropping the requirement that academic job candidates have their PhD in hand before applying. Here, too, would indicate a more careful commitment to equality, diversity and inclusivity by changing the boundaries around who is able to enter academia and under what conditions.

Endnotes

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The Road Less Travelled to Academia

Louise Oldridge and Maranda Ridgway, Nottingham Trent University

Introduction

Much has been written about the move from academia to industry but little on the opposite journey. This essay examines the experiences of early career researchers, and the challenges and strengths of working in operational Human Resource Management roles before becoming academics in this field. Here we reflect upon the competencies used in both roles and how we responded to the unplanned 'calling' we felt to make the move.

Louise

At 18, not knowing what I wanted to do, I attended university to study my favourite subject, Classical Civilisation. Upon graduating I worked on a zero-hours contract for the local city council in museums, and in a full-time administration role. It was in this role that I learnt what Human Resource Management was, and while in a company training role completed my Master's in Human Resource Management, gaining Chartership with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). I then worked in several employee relations-focused roles ranging from small to medium enterprises to finishing an operational role with a multi-national corporation. I was also the vice-chair of the Leicestershire CIPD branch. Turning 30, I decided to pursue my new dream of studying and working in higher education, taking a significant drop in income to study full-time for a PhD in Human Resource Management. While studying I worked as an hourly-paid lecturer, vital experience in helping secure a lecturer role with Nottingham Trent University. Since obtaining my PhD in December 2018 I have progressed to Senior Lecturer.

Maranda

I dropped out of further education at 17 with four AS Levels. I started working full-time and, after a few years working in entry-level HR jobs, I studied part-time to attain a CIPD qualification that would enable career progression. After achieving Chartership with the CIPD I completed a

Master's in Human Resource Management at the University of Worcester in the hope that an internationally recognised degree would open the doors to international work. It did, and I spent five years working in the United Arab Emirates, during which time I completed a Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) with Northumbria University. While undertaking this qualification I delivered a guest lecture and received feedback that I would be suited to a career in higher education. Simultaneously, I was completing a career coaching course and it became apparent that perhaps a career change was due. Upon returning to the UK I joined Nottingham Trent University as a Senior Lecturer in the Human Resource Management Department.

Challenges along the way

Reflecting on our routes into academia we have shared some challenges along the way. First, the undeniable (and arguably ongoing) sense of imposter syndrome. As practitioner-turned-academics we have experienced challenges in confidence in our ability among peers who have followed a more traditional academic career path. This sense of imposter syndrome is often amplified as we have joined academia with degrees from post-92 universities. In Maranda's case this is intensified by holding a DBA rather than a PhD and not holding a first degree. It is important to note here that we recognise these are self-imposed standards and (so far) we have not encountered any career barriers as a result.

Another unexpected challenge we encountered during our career transitions was a prevailing sole-trader mentality. In a practitioner setting we were used to shared resources and collaboration as a standard way of working. Upon joining academia, we found a reluctance, or even refusal, to share materials or allow attendance at lectures and seminars to support our on-the-job learning. Having worked in academia for a while we have a better understanding of why this is the case. However, as a first experience of the industry it was a significant culture shock.

Using perceived weaknesses as strengths

After a few years of working in higher education we recognise how our first careers have aided our academic work, driving our desire to pursue teaching and serendipitous opportunities. This recognition resembles Mark Crowder and Maria Mouratidou's research that the lack of work / life balance in industry amplifies a 'calling' that fuels the transition to academia.[1] Although first perceived by us as weaknesses, we have learned to apply our experiences to the benefit of our jobs. For example, having worked as practitioners we consider the practical implications of our research at the design stage and articulate these carefully in publications. Students, particularly in our university, also welcome our practitioner backgrounds and value our ability to bring theory to life, because we draw from our real-world experience to bring context to our teaching and explain how theory does and (in some cases) does not explain practice.

We have more control over our workloads in academia than we ever had in industry and while we have made financial sacrifices, we have gained greater flexibility and work-life balance (see also HEPI's *Comparative Study of Higher Education Academic Staff Terms and Conditions*).[2]

Transferable skills

Notably, person specifications for our roles state good interpersonal skills and an ability to communicate complex ideas effectively to students using a variety of teaching methods, thereby enhancing the student experience. On reflection, and considering our transferable skills, we have structured this section to capture the key competencies our roles require and highlight the transferability of our experience.

Organisation and delivery

Working operationally, we were required to manage day-to-day tasks and administration, alongside complex caseloads (such as grievances), and projects such as restructurings or acquisitions. This delivery required leadership and administrative skills, which we use today. We bring the ability to manage conflicting deadlines and work under pressure to short timescales, for example leading and teaching on modules, alongside progressing our research careers, embracing industry-gained project / programme management techniques.

Making informed decisions

In academia it is important to analyse data to challenge the validity of options and assess risk before taking decisions. Working as a support function, our Human Resource Departments play an important role in minimising organisational risk by taking evidence-based decisions and interpreting legal advice.

Team working, creativity and innovation

Working in an operational Human Resources role has required us to work as part of the team, but also cross-functionally, in combining different organisational structures, supporting and contributing to departmental development. This work often required collaboration with, but also management of, multiple stakeholders. This experience has been instrumental in the work we now do with course teams to develop and deliver high-quality degree outcomes for students, bringing operational insight to their experience.

Communicating, influencing and customer focus

Our previous roles necessitated excellent communication and influencing skills, for example coaching and training managers to deliver Human Resources outcomes, and leading change programmes, for our internal customers. Working in higher education we have both undertaken teaching qualifications, but the experience of having provided training programmes for our organisations brought self-confidence in our teaching capability. While there remains debate about students as customers, we can use our experience to communicate both theory and practice for the benefit of their degree outcomes. This has included acting as External Examiners for other institutions as well as taking on roles with external project teams, funders of research projects and professional bodies.

Conclusion

We are not suggesting that academia is an easy alternative to a career in industry; it certainly has unique challenges. However as former practitioners now working in higher education, we have been able to draw upon significant strengths and experiences which have benefitted not just our academic careers but the students we work with and our disciplinary fields.

Endnotes

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Chronic Illness and Disability in Academia

Rebecca Williams, University of Glasgow

The proportion of staff in universities declaring health conditions or impairments was reported at 5.1 per cent in 2020/21.[1] However, the studies suggest that one-in-five of working age adults in the UK and around 15.2 per cent of undergraduates have a known disability.[2] Despite expecting more of academia in terms of humaneness and awareness of diversity, these statistics suggest an under-representation of disabilities, chronic conditions, invisible illnesses and neurodiversity among academic staff. This comes at a time where large proportions of academic staff generally report feeling overworked and emotionally drained due to rising administrative, teaching and research demands within the profession.[3] These difficulties are only amplified for early career researchers managing chronic conditions. This is despite an increasing awareness of chronic conditions in the context of surging long-COVID cases or recent public attacks on chronic illness communities.[4] This essay unpacks the impact of chronic illness on academics and early career researchers, focusing on two key issues:

(i) the implications of the 'post'-COVID pandemic world; and

(ii) an underlying issue in the divergence between staff and student provision of support for those with chronic conditions.

Lastly, a shift towards a social model of support for academics with disabilities is suggested to overcome the structural inequalities that exist in the academic profession.

The post-COVID academic world

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly altered the provision of higher education with large-scale shifts towards online teaching and student support. For academics, a large shift to working from home was experienced – often to the relief of disabled academics who can struggle with the physical teaching and support demands of the job, such as long teaching days, commuting and administrative meetings. The normalisation of a new 'working-from-home' culture during the pandemic has often helped disabled academics become better included in university activities previously shrouded by inaccessibility, whether in terms of hybrid provision of meetings or because it is simply less stigmatised to choose to work from home.[5] However, with strong pushes to 'return to campus' this may undo the work to increase inclusion.

Increasingly, hybrid provision of meetings and events are becoming a thing of the past as academics are expected to return to campus. This is despite the fact that COVID-19 infections are still rife, with surges in other flu-like illnesses following the initial waves of the pandemic.[6] Mask mandates have been lifted widely, and early career researchers in particular are less likely to have received booster vaccinations due to their age unless they fall within a select vulnerability category. Some universities have set up long-COVID support networks for staff, yet those with chronic illnesses are still being exposed to a high risk of contracting illnesses that exacerbate or cause their symptoms to flare in an unsustainable way. In the UK, these additional health stressors come at a time when healthcare provision is particularly inaccessible for disabled people. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing healthcare budget cuts, NHS waiting lists are at an all-time high for specialist care. Certain types of support packages and care, such as physical therapy, became totally unavailable during initial waves of the pandemic.[7] As a result, chronically ill academics are faced with delayed treatments, or having to pay out for private healthcare during a cost-of-living crisis in order to gain some kind of control over their symptoms, to enable them to work effectively.

A secondary issue is the impact of managing student wellbeing during a time of surging illness and mental health following long periods of lockdown.[8] Increasing numbers of students are disclosing disabilities and a return to campus and in-person teaching and assessments has amplified the scale and depth of mental health support required for students.[9] There is extensive provision for student disabilities with entire teams and processes for funds, accommodation and extensions that are often well-utilised and promoted by staff to students who are experiencing periods of physical or mental ill-health.

With student wellbeing commonly occupying front and centre in universities' post-COVID strategies, the emotional burden placed on disabled academics can be overwhelming at a time when managing their own health is already a difficult task. It is not a surprise that those academics with marginalised identities often find themselves in wellbeing or inclusion support roles, yet the emotional labour of these roles during this period of crises can be overlooked.[10]

Student versus staff provision of support

There is a visible discrepancy in higher education between the provision of support for disabled staff at universities compared with disabled students in the UK and other parts of the world.[11] While occupational health assessments and Human Resources teams are parts of staff provision for those with disabilities, these are shrouded by a layer of stigma and inaccessibility. Schemes that exist to support disabled workers, such as the Government's imperfect 'Access to Work' scheme, are essentially unknown to academic staff and most accommodations require additional work on the part of disabled staff member to instigate.[12]

Since the rise of home-working, simple adjustment measures such as ergonomic office set ups are more commonplace, but beyond this the core ableist issue of the 'heroic stamina' required by academics is still pervasive in the face of mounting workload pressures.[13] This does not undermine the emotional support of colleagues who may show pity or provide sympathy towards those who are ill, but emotional support can undermine the need for professional support such as mentoring or providing solutions to professional challenges faced by those with disabilities. In a reputation-based system like academia, even disclosing a disability can have an impact on your professional image, particularly in your early career.[14] Lack of awareness about disabilities means those with a disability or chronic illness can encounter a range of stressful negative responses, whether it be frequent awkward social interactions or even prejudice about their competence at work.[15] Alongside this, evaluations for promotion and reviews in the academic workplace are usually objective and can be affected by prejudices associated with stigmatised illness.[16]

The lack of diversity in many university departments only compounds this more for those with a disability and another intersecting identity – such as race, gender or sexuality – only struggle more. Diversity decreases with advancing career stage due to prejudicial factors like ableism, classism, racism and sexism – often leaving disabled early career researchers (and other marginalised groups) without community or role models in the profession.[17] The struggles of working in academia with a chronic illness are reported in detail elsewhere, but the lack of representation and accommodation of disabled academics ultimately perpetuates the exclusivity of the profession – regardless of the talent of disabled academics for research and teaching.[18]

Towards a social model of support

Piecemeal solutions, such as reasonable accommodations by the Equality Act 2010's standards, only touch the surface of the issue.[19] Currently, higher education approaches disabled academic staff with a medical model – or in other words, thinking of the disabled staff member as 'different' and as the problem to be fixed to maintain the status quo.[20] It focuses on what disabled academics 'cannot do', placing individual responsibility for the disabled person's situation, rather than broader structural issues within the academic workplace. Universal and objective standards driving university strategy, such as the Research Excellence Framework, perpetuate a system of 'fitting in' and homogeneity that does not reflect the reality of the workforce that currently exists in higher education, such as those managing chronic health conditions. By embracing a social model approach, attention can be turned instead to the overall structural and exclusionary practices that have become the questionable norm in higher education, most often to the detriment of marginalised communities.[21]

A social model recognises that people are disabled through barriers in society, not by their impairments or differences.[22] In academia, these can be physical barriers, such as a lack of accessible bathrooms, but also attitudinal barriers to difference, such as viewing in-person conferences as the superior format to host events. Through revealing these practices and beliefs, the inequalities that exist for disabled communities can be recognised and undone to provide opportunity for the survival of these groups in the field. In academia, much of this undoing may stem from an active recognition of the culture of burnout and box-ticking in the profession that places additional strains on disabled academics already working in ableist environments. Sadly, embracing the social model in this context is not as simple as outsourcing occupational health reviews of staff members, but instead contributes to general calls for a reorientation of academic priorities that are able to embrace inclusivity and diversity in a long-term and sustainable fashion.

Conclusion

Overall, the path of disabled academics and early career researchers is not an easy one. Implications of the post-COVID academic world places additional strains on disabled staff, with divergence between staff and student provision of support for those with chronic conditions, leaving disabled academics unsupported. The current unsustainable and standardised nature of higher education does not accommodate for the reality of the academic workforce that includes disabled people and other marginalised groups. Shifting towards a social model approach in higher education will enable more than piecemeal solutions to these issues to ensure disabled people can contribute to the academy in a way enjoyed by their able-bodied peers.

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Demystifying Funding Applications[1]

David Grundy, University of Warwick

In 2019, I was awarded a three-year British Academy early career Postdoctoral Research Fellowship, which came with a salary for three years, money for a mentor and research funds. After completing my PhD, I had spent several years on short-term and hourly contracts doing teaching with hardly any job security – a pattern that is all too familiar in the contemporary climate – so securing funding from the British Academy felt like reaching an oasis.[2] The Fellowship provides the financial resources to conduct extensive and expensive archival trips. More importantly, it provides the time to focus on research without as intense a teaching commitment – time which can be hard to find when one has to constantly compartmentalise everything from research to teaching, job applications and paying the bills.

I began the project in 2019 but, six months later, the COVID pandemic disrupted a number of my initial plans. Archival work planned for the first year of the project, for example, only took place in early 2022. In the meantime, I spent the first year drafting sample chapters of a book and a proposal to send to publishers, and eventually got the contract in the second year of the project. As I write, I am finishing up the manuscript. I have also used the time to work on some side projects which carry on from my previous research, including co-editing a journal special issue and some edited collections from university presses.

That, in short, has been my experience of holding the grant – an experience undoubtedly shaped by years of global pandemic. But I can speak to the more general experience of applying for funding: the practical and psychological experience of what can be an exhausting process, and the lessons which can be drawn from such experiences for others in a similar position.

I could write about these experience as if they were all plain sailing – a success story that progresses smoothly from A to B. But this would not be entirely accurate. Being an early career academic in the humanities can sometimes feel almost impossible, and we have to be honest about that.

In total, my progression from first conceptualising my project to being awarded a fellowship lasted a good three years. This means that the entire process lasted as long as the fellowship itself. Within the humanities, the academic job market is in an appalling state – and has been for the past few years. Given this situation, one cannot underestimate just how stressful the whole process of job applications, short-term contracts and the lack of job security can be. It can therefore feel like there is a lot riding on applications like this, so strategising is a vital part of the process.

Start work on your application early. It is worth taking time out of your regular projects, depending what stage you are at, as the application is a time-consuming process. It is not as laborious as applying for something like the European Research Council funds or other really large projects that you might consider applying for further down the line, but it still takes quite a lot of time and mental energy, first to come up with a project, and then thinking about the mechanics of applying for it, and finally getting on with it.

My advice is to get in contact with someone at your proposed institution as soon as possible. It is the institution that administers the funds, even though the money comes from the funding organisation, so you want to make sure you are working with them on this. The first thing I did was contact a potential mentor at the University of Warwick and, when he was enthused about the project, we began a dialogue by email, and I was offered advice both by my proposed mentor and by the Research Funding Officer about how to approach the application strategically. The expertise of those at your proposed institution with experience of supporting winning grants – whether it is a mentor, head of department and funding or finance officer – is vital.

Tailoring the written part of the application itself is also key. You have to conceptualise your audience and identify who are you writing for. Likely, they will not be experts in your field, or even your discipline, so you want to make your argument clear to a non-specialist reader while also showing that you have expertise in your subject or subjects. You also have to be able to explain why it matters more broadly.

After I had written the first draft of my proposal which concerned twentieth century American poetry, I worked with contacts at my chosen institution who helped me shape the language and structure of the various parts of the proposal to fit with the language that would appeal to the funding body. The process was in some ways similar to the grinding undertaking of job applications: the minutiae of tweaking a cover letter for the requirements of particular jobs or institutions, and the various ways in which those applications are formatted.

Getting good references, particularly relating to your research skills and potential, is also crucial. In the case of the British Academy's funding, you cannot rely on an interview to get your points across; the writing has to be crisp and intelligible outside your field.

Those assessing the applications will want to see that the project is realistic and manageable, and that you are able to manage the considerable resources you will be offered. Personally, I found that there was so much money involved in the early career fellowships – not just a salary, but all the funds for archive trips, conferences and so on – that it seemed almost impossible to conceptualise this myself. Struggling to pay the rent and operating on temporary teaching contracts while finishing my PhD, I was suddenly talking about these huge sums of hypothetical money the likes of which I had never seen in my life. The Research Funding Officer at Warwick was extremely helpful in finessing the financial calculations for the proposal, in which you have to provide a quarterly breakdown of hypothetical expenditures. I certainly could not have done this on my own.

Finally, my recommendation would be to work hard on the proposal while also cultivating the ability to put it to the back of your mind. As with a job application, you must try not to invest too much emotionally in it, while of course realistically imagining how you might make good use of the Fellowship if you did happen to be successful. This involves patience and resilience in the face of anxiety. In my experience, the application process had to run in the background while I was teaching, doing job applications and research, and figuring out how I was going to survive financially month to month and year to year.

There is no point in sugar-coating things. Early career academics, particularly in humanities subjects, increasingly bear an unreasonable burden, with little job security, constant anxiety and material shortage as universities cut departments, slash salaries and rely on precarious short-term labour. During my Fellowship, I have seen these conditions become even more pernicious in combination with the effects of the cost-of-living crisis. The stakes of funding success can seem higher than ever.

But my experiences show, I hope, that it is certainly possible to make a successful funding application: what looks like a mountain is in fact eminently scalable. And it is worth it. I can still remember the moment I opened my email after a day of teaching in my office. I saw the name of the sender and prepared to shrug my shoulders philosophically: 'another rejection, time to move on and plan the next application'. Instead, as I read the text of the email, I realised I had been successful. It is hard to describe the relief. I still feel as though I am pinching myself today.

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Hanging onto the Ladder – The Impact of Biased Student Evaluation of Teaching on Early Career Researchers

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The higher education sector has an outstanding reputation as one of the most culturally diverse and equal places to work in the UK. As a female Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) immigrant, the diversity and inclusion represented in UK higher education is one of the major reasons that attracted me to stay in academia. The past two decades have seen positive outcomes derived from equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and the Athena Swan Charter across the UK in the higher education sector, where the gender pay gap decreased and the proportion of female and BAME staff in academic institutions grew steadily.

However, females, ethnic minorities and other protected characteristics are still poorly represented at the higher levels of higher education: only 28.5 per cent of female staff and less than 10 per cent of BAME staff progressed to a professor or management level or higher. BAME female professors account for only 2.7 per cent of the total professor roles in the UK in 2020/21. The fight for equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education is far from over.

Earlier in 2022, a job interview made me re-examine EDI issues in academia from a very different, and often overlooked, perspective: the gender and cultural bias in Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) and the weightings of such evaluation in a job application, performance review and promotion. More specifically, the impact of such bias on the employment and career progression of early career researchers.

As an important performance indicator adopted by many academic institutions, SET has a big impact on staff recruitment and promotion. In other words, how students evaluate staff directly influences staff members' career development. However, very rarely was the topic of bias mentioned under the EDI context, despite a growing body of literature repeatedly reporting on the gender and cultural bias inhabited across the world in different subject areas. Evidence derived from research literature reports on gender and cultural bias against female and non-native-English-speaking academic staff, with an increasing amount of literature on more complicated bias correlated with other factors such as age and subject area. Not understanding such bias has a detrimental effect on the career prospects of those disadvantaged academics, and on the diversity of the faculty as a whole. At the same time, misinterpreting the biased result in SET could further divide student and staff communities, affecting both teaching and learning experiences.

In navigating the job market or hanging onto the first rung of the academic career ladder, early career researchers are even more disadvantaged by gender and cultural bias in student evaluations than their established academic counterparts. Negative evaluations resulting from these biases in a job interview or probation panel could have a significant negative impact on their confidence, hindering their leadership aspirations and career progression in academia. In turn, this could increase career precarity for researchers, if not burying their academic career altogether. It is critical and urgent, more than ever, to shed light on the fairness and representativeness of SET upon which teaching effectiveness is assessed.

Recent research shows clear gender prejudices in SET in favour of male tutors. One study reports that female instructors receive a score as much as 37 percentage points lower than male instructors. The bias is driven by male students, and is worst for junior female instructors.[1] This trend has also been reflected in self-reported effectiveness of learning, where both male and female students rank classes taught by male teachers higher than classes taught by female counterparts.[2] Furthermore, research shows that the students' grades in the course also influences the grade they give to the course, in such a way that a lower grade disadvantages the female teaching staff.[3] Students gave lower SET ratings to female professors after receiving a grade that was worse than expected, than they gave to male professors under the same circumstances.

Female teachers are also facing different expectations from students than male teachers. Qualitative comments on male teachers often refer to their subject knowledge, whereas female teachers receive comments on their service to students and relatability.[4] During COVID-19 and online teaching, research shows an increase in negative comments on teaching style and attitudes toward female teachers.[5] As a result, female teachers are expected to give more time and perform more labour-intensive work than their male colleagues.[6]

A growing body of literature highlights the cultural bias represented in SET scores. Studies show overwhelming evidence of biased SET results that are in favour of White males and disadvantage non-White faculty, particularly for women of colour.[7] Research on the influence of age on SET scores reveals that older faculty receive lower overall evaluations than their younger counterparts.[8] The rating becomes more interesting when the factor of age, cultural background and subject area come into play. Research shows that students rate the young male professor higher than they do the young female, old male and old female.[9] Students also rate older female staff as less organised than younger ones, although male professors are rated the same regardless of age.[10] In another study, the cultural effect appears to override the gender effect. Namely, non-English-speaking male teachers get lower scores despite being male.[11]

Given such compelling evidence, it is critical that we re-examine the weighting of students' evaluation of teaching during the process of interview, performance evaluation and promotion, in conjunction with the bias in play. However, the complex nature of such bias is difficult to be accounted for, and there are few examples where the bias could be mitigated successfully during any form of a review or career progression panel.

Previous research has shed light on mitigation and screening strategies to alleviate the effect of such bias. For instance, one group of researchers designed an experiment asking students to perform a self-affirmation task (listing their values) before answering the SET survey.[12] The result of the self-affirmation proved to be effective in adjusting the bias where the male teachers' evaluation scores have been lowered after the self-affirmation. Another student found that informing students about potential gender bias and stereotypes has improved the SET scores of female teachers.[13]

There is also research suggesting that universities should consider other measures that would decrease the emphasis placed on student evaluations, including peer review and trained evaluators to perform moderated in-person evaluations.[14]

In the academic year 2020/21, female postgraduate research (PGR) students outnumbered their male counterparts for the first time. The BAME population represented in PGR students is also growing steadily. For such a demographically diverse group of ever-growing academics, the higher education community as a whole is in need of a grander aim of overall institutional cultural change, where the bias in SET is recognised and understood through further research and dialogues. With our assessment framework of students' performance constantly being scrutinised and revised to reflect EDI values, it is critical that we place equal emphasis on understanding the bias involved in SET, review and revise it accordingly through institutional policy support. Only by doing so could we better support early career researchers in building a more diverse and inclusive academic environment.

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Getting in, Getting on or Getting over a PhD

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Early career researchers have a lot on their plate. First getting a PhD, then, the boomerang question: to stay in academia or to leave? But what if the thing that truly keeps doctoral graduates up at night is not how to get into academia, or how to get out of it, but how to get *over* it? Then again, what does that actually mean? And whose responsibility is it to help post-doctorates overcome the poor mental health and unreasonable work practices ingrained by years of precarity?

Of course, a PhD is an unrivalled educational experience. You spend years digging deep into a research area, gaining expertise and an exceptional capacity for critical analysis, project management, communication, attention to detail and much more. It is often enjoyable and enriching. But every coin has a flip side. Precision can slip into perfectionism, project management into panic. In time, overwork can fizzle down to burnout. Add in the well-known pressures facing early career academics – financial strain, lacklustre institutional support, loneliness and years of temporary contracts just to get your foot in the dangerously unstable door of academia – and it is easy to see how negative thoughts can spiral.[1]

These thoughts are indiscriminate in who they affect.[2] If you are among the more than 30 per cent of staff in UK higher education on a temporary contract, fatigue, low self-esteem, anger and envy of friends in other professions may be familiar.[3] Yet, even in a permanent post, the reality can feel anything but secure. According to a 2021 study of 2,046 UK academic and academic-related staff, over half experienced unrealistic time pressures, with 62 per cent of respondents regularly working over 40 hours a week and 22 per cent over 50 hours. One third 'always' or 'almost always' neglected personal needs due to work.[4] Over half showed probable signs of depression. In 2020, among 1,122 US academics, 35 per cent had seriously considered leaving higher education.[5] By 2022, academia was gripped by what has been termed 'the great resignation'.[6]

Yet even if you leave, these thoughts and behaviours can be tenacious. It is not for nothing that the phrase 'recovering academic' has a three-season podcast to its name.[7] Some have left academia, only to find it will not quite leave them: from the person who never says no, to the uncompromising colleague, to the one signed off with stress. In the UK, in 2021/22, 17 million working days were lost to stress, depression or anxiety, at a cost of billions of pounds to the economy.[8] Meanwhile, in 2021, nearly 1.5 million people in the UK were either holding a doctorate or pursuing one.[9] If just a small proportion of this group carry with them poor mental health and poor work practices, cemented during early career research years, this leaves us with a big problem. One that has real costs for workplaces, families, the economy and the NHS. Quite simply, it is a problem the nation cannot afford to ignore.

These are problems we could relieve, however, by helping early career researchers improve their wellbeing and job prospects. So, what can governments, funders, individuals and institutions do to help?

Solutions and priorities

Those just out of a PhD need money: this much we know. But they also need time. Time to rest and recalibrate after years with all eyes on the finish line. So, what could you do if you are a funder? Append a three-month stipend to all PhD funding. Activated upon thesis submission and available to all those without a salary above the living wage, a 'post-PhD transition fund' would relieve new post-docs of the pressure to accept any old work, however poor the conditions. Three months is not much, but it could be a lifeline for those needing the headspace to recover, complete PhD corrections, job hunt or retrain. Such post-PhD support should be available to all PhD graduates, regardless of funding status.[10] But while we wait for that to arrive, funding bodies are well-placed to lead the way in piloting such a scheme, and conducting research into its outcomes for careers, health and wellbeing.

Governments, too, could help post-docs by incentivising non-university employers to take them on. The French Government does just that with its Research Tax Credit scheme, which includes tax incentives for businesses that employ new doctoral graduates.[11] Helping employers discover the valuable skills and experience gained during a PhD would produce a virtuous circle, in which post-docs have increasingly rich and varied job prospects; businesses profit from highly-skilled employees; and universities must begin to offer genuine careers again – with progression from early career academia through to late – so as to retain their primary asset: their people.[12]

But support must also come at the beginning of the doctoral path. Here, academics can assist. Talk honestly about academia to prospective students. Help students define a thesis topic that is intrinsically meaningful for them; research has shown it is easier to maintain motivation and satisfaction if a project is not externally-imposed or motivated only by extrinsic goals (such as to gain reward or respect).[13] Model good work – and work-life balance – practices. Set realistic academic expectations. Be mindful of your own foibles (disorganisation? anxiety? perfectionism?) and try to avoid imposing them on students.

That said, academics are not superheroes. And they are not mental health professionals either. Research has found that academics often feel unsupported by their institutions to address student mental health concerns.[14] Universities must take action: fully resourcing Student Services; being clearer about academics' student support roles; training staff comprehensively; and fully recognising the time and emotional cost of this work by giving it weight in workload calculations and promotions applications.

Besides committing to a 'whole-university approach' to wellbeing, what else can you do if you are a higher education provider, to help your graduates surmount years of pressure and precarity?[15] Above all, ban contracts that keep them tethered to those conditions. Staff will commit to you, if you commit to providing them with stable careers. Governments must urgently invest in supporting universities to do this.[16] From my perspective as an historian of debates about education, it is clear that inaction over national discontent leads only to national crises.

In the meantime, no contracts should be less than 12 months long. How can world-leading experts be offered contracts shorter than the length of the average UK tenancy agreement? Academics have a role to play in opposing – in refusing to advertise or recruit for – such exploitative contracts. Temporary staff should also receive the same benefits as permanent colleagues: employer pension contributions, IT hardware, research allowance and parental leave. Longevity of service must be recognised across repeated short-term contracts, so that benefits – such as occupational maternity pay – can accrue.[17] How is a new mother with around a decade of higher education and tens of thousands of pounds of student debt to overcome negativity, anger and hopelessness with a small baby, no job security and £156.66 per week?[18]

Finally, those currently in or recovering from early career academia – us, you – also have a role to play. Understand the signs of burnout and act if you spot them.[19] If you can, take a break post-PhD hand-in. Stay physically active. Maintain strong relationships and keep communicating with others. Negotiate your contract, then know it and stick to it. Resist working overtime. If your hours are 'flexible' and you really must work more than 40 per week, record the surplus and give it back to yourself later as time off in lieu. Separate yourself from your work. One place to start is to determine your values. What matters to you? What makes you happy? Who do you most respect, and why? Make a list and use it as your North Star.

And in case you need them, know your resources. GPs can direct you to mental health support. If you are in work, investigate staff wellbeing support. The Wellbeing Thesis website and The PhD Life Raft podcast are two dedicated sources of support for postgraduates and recent post-doctorates. Education Support promotes wellbeing among UK education staff; their free, 24-hour helpline is staffed by qualified counsellors. Vitae provides resources, and hopeful testimonies from former researchers now in different sectors. One of Vitae's 2025 strategic priorities is 'championing a healthy research culture and environment'.[20] There lies a priority for us all.

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Imposter Phenomenon and the Early Career Researcher

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As an academic developer, I often speak with early career researchers who disclose that they are struggling, often in silence, with 'imposter phenomenon'.[1] Many think that they are the only ones who feel this way, and that their colleagues and peers are confident, focused and free from the angst they are experiencing. This essay considers what imposter phenomenon is thought to be, what it actually is, why we experience it and what we can do to challenge these feelings. The essay will close with some ideas about what institutions can do to support early career researchers and reduce imposter phenomenon in higher education.

What is imposter phenomenon?

Imposter phenomenon was first written about in 1978 by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Ines. They identified that many high-achieving women experienced 'Imposter Phenomenon' defined as 'an internal experience of [being] intellectual phonies' despite being highly qualified, having significant work experience, and being very successful.[2] As more work was carried out in the area, the definition was developed to include not being able to recognise or internalise success, persistent feelings of anxiety, depression, self-doubt, attributing success to luck and apprehension of being exposed as a fraud. It is likely that approximately 80 per cent of us will experience imposter phenomenon at some point, and while phenomenon can be experienced by everyone, it is women and people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds who are most likely to experience it.[3]

At some point, imposter phenomenon was pathologised and called a syndrome, despite it not formally recognised as a medical condition or mental disorder. This pathologising may be because of links to burnout, depression, anxiety and exacerbation of other behavioural issues, as well as relationships between imposter phenomenon to family upbringing and high levels of family conflict.[4]

Not all research into the causes of imposter phenomenon links to individual pathology. There is evidence that imposter phenomenon is generated through social situations, such as gender stereotyping or because of periods of transition.[7] However, a search of the internet will bring up reams of articles, blogs and videos that blame imposter phenomenon on individual traits, and often link it to psychopathology while acknowledging that it is 'not yet diagnosable'. In making such links, those who experience imposter phenomenon are left fearing that they are not good enough, as well as being told this is because they are faulty in some way.

Imposter phenomenon among early career researchers

Not all authors agree that imposter phenomenon is an individual trait. Indeed, some argue it is a feeling of not belonging in a particular space, place or within a group of individuals.[8] Higher education, for example, is a space that has been built on centuries of male-centric, predominantly westernised elitism. In some interpretations, universities were designed by the ruling classes to educate the sons of the elite. Despite years of working on being more inclusive – for many – academia still feels like a homogenous space that has an unconscious elitist bias.[9] And in being so it is not a comfortable space for all. It is not always sensitive to diversity and sometimes expects occupants to assimilate to biased and institutionally racist, homophobic, ableist and sexist norms.[10]

University practices have been built on and ingrained with centuries old beliefs, ideals and norms that grew from the practices, language, capital and culture of their original intended occupants: White elite males. It is not surprising that female and ethnic minority academics are less likely to become professors than White male academics. Meanwhile, ethnic minority and disabled applicants for doctoral studies are less likely to be successful.[11] So early career researchers who are working class, first in their family to study in higher education, female, disabled, LGBTQ+ or from BAME backgrounds, often feel that they are in a space that is not made for them and is unwelcoming. It is unsurprising that many feel like an imposter and internalise this feeling to one of not being good enough for the space, when in reality it is the space that is not welcoming enough.

What can early career researchers do to challenge feelings of imposter phenomenon?

If we accept that imposter phenomenon is about place and not about the person, there is a lot that individuals can do. First, think about when imposter phenomenon is experienced – where, when and with whom does this occur? Look for the trends. Compare this to when imposter phenomenon is not experienced, to identify what the differences are in the situation. This might give some clues to why and where imposter phenomenon is experienced. Recognise the feelings involved with imposter phenomenon and accept that this is not about the individual but the lack of inclusivity within the environment. Talk to others about imposter phenomenon – it is surprising who else experiences it. Talking to them about how they manage it might provide some useful techniques. Colleagues are also a useful source of feedback on performance, so get feedback from trusted individuals and believe the good things that they say. Negative self-talk is our worst enemy. Examine self-talk, accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. Remember the things that you do well, be kind to yourself and celebrate your successes, however small you think they are. Finally, take action. Challenging the status quo makes it easier for others to do so too.

But what can organisations do in the long term to value diversity and help early career researchers feel that they belong?

The first step is to evaluate institutional culture.[12] When, where and how does a lack of diversity show itself? Work with minoritised groups to eliminate it, including early career researchers. It is also important to foster an organisation philosophy where every voice is encouraged, valued and listened to. When issues are raised, respect it and act on it. Do not prejudge the issue especially when these are raised by younger or less experienced colleagues, such as early career researchers. They may have an innovative solution that you might not have thought about. Also be open, honest and transparent about any areas of your organisation where a lack of inclusivity exists, and about the plans to tackle this. Include a diverse staff group in the related work groups and ensure that early career researchers are included.

A diverse leadership encourages a diverse culture but also allows early career researchers from all communities to feel a sense of organisational belonging. So evaluate the diversity of leadership on a regular basis, especially after periods of reorganisation. Finally, words matter, so it is critical that you review all your policy and documentation to ensure inclusive language is utilised. Where early career researchers are concerned, it is imperative that all promotional documentations are inclusive, so they can see a promotion pathway and therefore a place for themselves within the organisation.

Conclusion

Tackling the lack of diversity in higher education is critical on so many levels. An inclusive and diverse higher education will help liberate many of us from the negative impact of imposter phenomenon, especially those early into their careers. It will increase organisational belonging and, through this, motivation, productivity and quality of experience, while also reducing staff turnover. Additionally, it will increase the likelihood of retaining talented individuals who aspire to a career in teaching and research in higher education. More importantly, it is only through an inclusive higher education sector that our full potential can be met. If we allow all those involved in higher education (students and staff) to be confident to share all that they have to offer, we can grow stronger and progress in the future. It is only through welcoming diversity and being more inclusive that higher education can offer a representative, inclusive, diverse and transformational experience for students and staff, at all levels.

Endnotes

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Afterword

Dr Alex Lewis, Director of Research at the British Academy

Will my research deliver any results? Am I good enough to succeed? Can I get my results published? Will anyone fund me? Does anyone have time to review my application? How do you progress in academia? What is the magic ingredient to getting an academic position? What impact will relocating to take an academic position have on my family life? What work experience should I be doing? Where are the best places to publish? What is FWCI? What on Earth is FEC and TRAC!

These are all questions I remember asking myself as an early career researcher and nearly 20 years on it has been interesting to see many of these questions raised in this collection of essays, plus many more. The collection has caused me to reflect on my time as an early career researcher and think about what has changed (if anything) since then. Clearly, precarity is still an issue, diversity has not significantly improved and the pathways to and from academia are still challenging to achieve. In addition to these, new challenges such as trusted research, visa issues and the uncertainty surrounding major funding programmes, such as Horizon Europe, have added to the pressures felt by early career researchers.

However, despite the many challenges facing higher education I feel there is hope. As this collection shows, people are more vocal about poor research cultures and are no longer willing to tolerate them. There is a new generation who feel able to speak out and there are more robust frameworks in place to support them. I have welcomed movements such as a focus on 'team science', which recognises the importance of diversity within a team and that, invariably, research success is not due to a single researcher but the result of many people working effectively and collaboratively. The Academy's own campaign around the importance of Connected Knowledge has shown this too – we are strongest when we work together across teams, disciplines or geographies. Finally, a greater spotlight is being shone, by funders, on research culture. The Enhancing Research Culture Fund from Research England offers c.£30 million to address topics such as EDI, leadership training, research integrity, open research practices and the importance of reproducibility of results.

As my colleague Dr Molly Morgan Jones outlined in the Preface to this collection, early career researchers are pivotal in driving progress. That is why we at the Academy have established the Early Career Researcher Network, and why we continue to offer major career development opportunities through our flagship Postdoctoral Fellowships.

Thank you to the contributors who have made this essay collection possible and have spoken so powerfully about their own experiences. By seeking out their stories, giving them a platform and championing their voices, HEPI has allowed us to shine a light on the myriad of experiences an early career researcher can have. Without their drive and support this collection simply would not have happened, which would have been a great loss to the policy debate. This is a talented and diverse community who, with proper care, stand to become the leading thinkers, researchers and entrepreneurs of the years ahead.

In 2023, the British Academy commissioned 11 members of its Early Career Researcher Network to write about their experiences of life and work in UK higher education. The essay collection shines a light on the voices, perspectives and journeys of early career researchers, poignantly showcasing the realities and challenges faced by researchers at this stage of their careers, ranging from precarious contracts and grant applications to balancing parenthood with the pressures of academic life. The authors offer a mixture of personal insights, policy solutions and practical advice to some of these hurdles, while also highlighting the fulfilling and rewarding moments in their careers.

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February 2024 978-1-915744-18-0
Higher Education Policy Institute
99 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6JX
www.hepi.ac.uk

Printed by BCQ, Buckingham
Typesetting: Steve Billington, www.jarmanassociates.co.uk