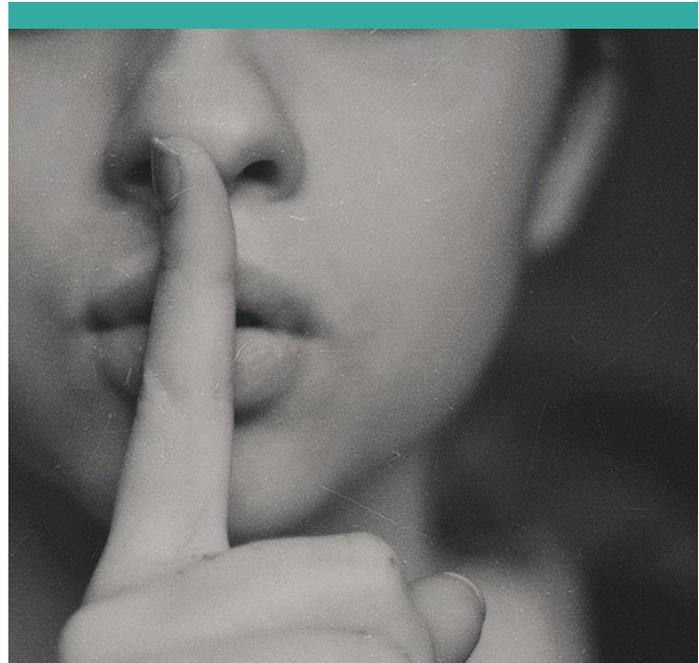

‘The Lost Voices’ National Campaign on Inequalities in the Academic Sector: Final Report



LOSTVOICES

JUNE 29

The London Postdocs

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Executive Summary

'The Lost Voices' campaign is led by The London Postdocs, and supported by NIHR ARC North Thames.

Introduction

'The Lost Voices' is a national campaign, gathering researchers' experiences of inequalities and prejudices, with the aim of improving current equality standards within research cultures. The campaign focused on early career researchers (ECRs), who are often less heard, but most impacted by inequality. We summarise the stories and concerns shared, present discussion and solutions from equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) leaders, and suggest future directions.

Key Solutions

- **ECRs:** upskill, mentor, nurture passions, network
- **Leaders:** training, accountability, lead by example
- **Sector:** reimagine ECR structure, improve disconnects, value overcoming inequalities

Conclusion

The sector must wholeheartedly acknowledge the need for change and commit to doing so. To further improve equality for all, a unified approach for addressing the comprehensive, intersectional range of inequalities is essential. Continued efforts to improve representation in research (especially at senior levels), and local support and training on how to manage issues is necessary both for those experiencing inequalities, and those consciously or unconsciously reinforcing them. A research culture of accessible support is required especially at the critical ECR career stage.

WHAT DID WE DO?

Phase 1

National 'inequality stories' were collected through a [website portal](#), anonymous surveys, social media and a cross-institution blog campaign. Stories drew on lived experiences, revealing a range of inequalities not limited to race and gender, such as financial support, sexuality, religion, accent, country of origin, class, mental health, diet, caring responsibilities, and disability.

Phase 2

Advice from senior academics with experience of overcoming inequalities was also collected.

Phase 3

Stories drove a discussion with cross-disciplinary academics working at the forefront of EDI, about sector reform towards a more supportive, inclusive, and considered research culture, predominantly for ECRs.

Phase 4

Findings were presented to institutional EDI leaders to push for solutions for a truly inclusive research culture.

'The Lost Voices' Resources

Campaign Summary Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fR2pbmGa21I&t=1s>

ECR Toolkit:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73zLWF_koYU&list=PLE7iu0Ez9BO8ISdKbUozkcrAOlcb158IX

Diversity in Research Podcast:

<https://diversityinresearch.buzzsprout.com/1026718/8757901-the-lost-voices-postdocs-precarity-and-diversity>

Further information: <https://linktr.ee/londonpostdocs>



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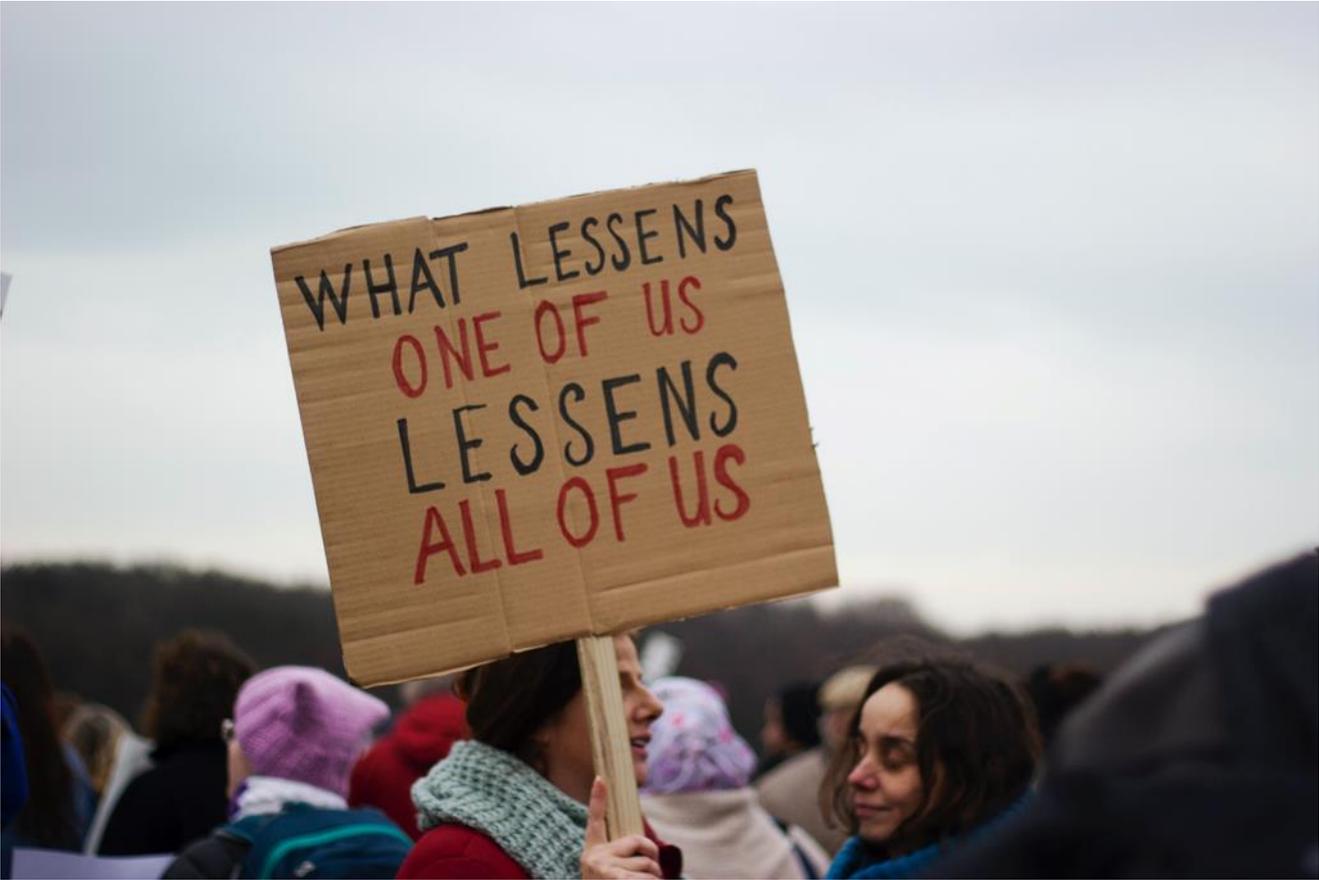
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Phase 1: Early-career researcher 'inequality stories'

"A senior male and Caucasian researcher used to find any opportunity to put down my ideas and work, particularly during lab meetings and in front of junior members whom I was managing. I was a younger female of BAME background, I published well and was liked by senior staff. When he was promoted to lecturer the bullying stopped. I will always wonder whether he would have treated me the same had I been Caucasian, male or older."

National 'inequality stories' from early-career researchers (ECRs) were collected through a website portal, anonymous surveys, social media and a cross-institution blog campaign. We received a total of 18 stories and supportive comments for the campaign through our website portal and 25 responses to our anonymous survey (majority current postdoctoral researchers, also PhD students and previous postdoctoral researchers), as well as comments through social media (some were later deleted), and direct feedback from other ECR peers and members of the academic community.

Stories drew on lived experiences, revealing a range of inequalities not limited to race and gender, such as financial support, sexuality, religion, accent, country of origin, class, mental health, diet, caring responsibilities, and disability.

Our collected stories demonstrate how common microaggressions are. These come in all forms, from obvious ones such as open casual 'jokes' about a person's accent, race, and xenophobic comments, to the less obvious issues such as a lack of awareness of other peoples' struggles for unclear reasons. A common issue which came up is socioeconomic status, which has a huge effect on a person's identity and sense of belonging, people, but is often overlooked as an equality and inclusion issue. ECRs reported assumptions being made about them which denied them opportunities, and the effect of the wider societal context, for example the effect of the Brexit vote. The problem with microaggressions is that they are small but constant, and as one

participant put it, they are "detrimental, cumulative and ultimately fatal to job/career prospects".

The most common theme emerging from our stories was direct discrimination, both in the form of microaggressions and open bullying and harassment, from peers and from figures of authority such as supervisors or heads of department. Our ECRs frequently felt they were taken advantage of and had little recourse to object. This reflects the precarity of the ECR experience. Low salaries and short-term contracts make for a highly stressful situation, and it is difficult to raise a complaint against people upon whom you rely entirely for your next job. Even when complaints were made, very little was done to resolve it.

Accordingly, everyone who responded to our Phase 1 call for stories wanted to do so anonymously, and some were too afraid to respond at all. There was a deeply felt need for direct action to address discrimination, to educate supervisors about the issues faced by marginalised groups and to hold people to account for their actions.



While many people reported direct discrimination, there were also many stories which described indirect discrimination, where ECRs from underrepresented backgrounds struggled or were excluded because of a lack of awareness or support. For example, many inequalities have an impact on a person's time. Being a parent or carer or having physical or mental health issues means that time available for research is limited. This makes it harder to do those things typically done outside of the working day - writing grants, networking, and travelling for conferences – which puts people at a disadvantage. Socioeconomic background also came up often, particularly for ECRs, who face several hidden extra costs, e.g., visas, constant moving and conferences. This is compounded for someone facing substantial extra costs in their personal life, e.g., for caring for a loved one.

It is critical to widen accessible opportunities to all, because more diversity is good for research, but that cannot stop at the recruitment stage. Institutions must support ECRs and PhD students with specific needs and this includes assessing them by the quality and value of their work rather than solely on traditional research outputs that will be affected by their ability to work overtime.

Finally, many of our respondents were very aware that they lacked wider guidance and did not have access to the academic “old boys’ network”, or any authority figures who share their situation.

Read our ECR blogs!

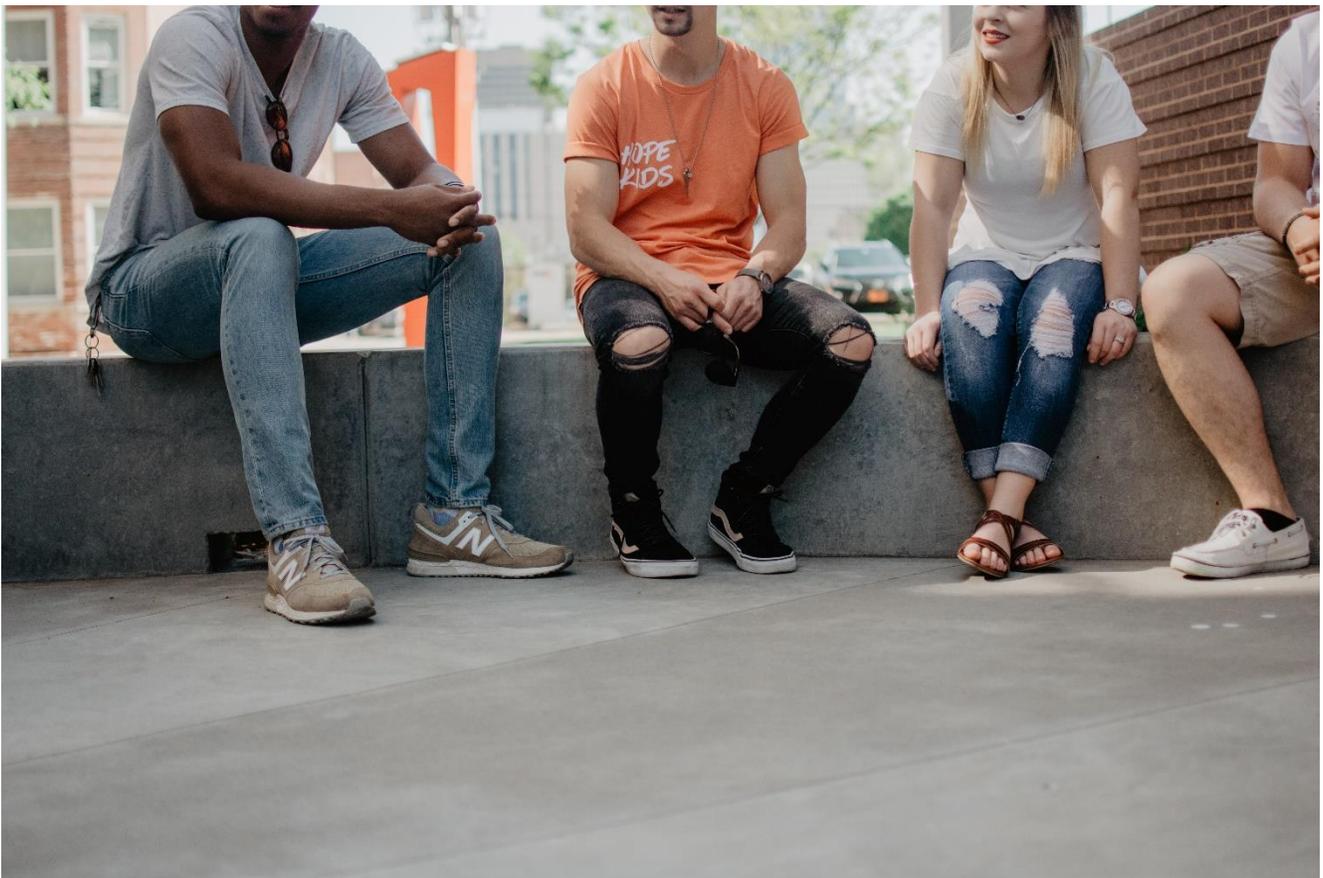
[‘Dear Jasmine...’: Sarah’s Story](#)

[‘Food for Thought’: An Anonymous Story](#)

[‘The Man in the Mirror’: Shaakir’s Story](#)

Relevant role models are hugely important. Additionally, a simple lack of awareness of what ECRs from marginalised backgrounds are dealing with means they can feel isolated and unsupported in their day-to-day lives.

On a more positive note, several people reported being encouraged by their peers. It is important for higher education institutions (HEIs) to encourage the existence and creation of peer networks and mentoring, and it is also important for ECRs themselves to reach out and encourage each other.



Phase 2: Senior Academic ‘overcoming stories’

Interviews were conducted with seven individual senior academics whose responses are summarised below (others provided named and anonymous written responses separately). Interview questions were given in a general format and interviewee had the choice to respond to these in brief or to detail their experience, as well as provide advice for ECRs who are facing inequalities, and discuss future actions for creating a more diverse community within academia.

Who has inspired you along your academic journey?

“There were no people of colour to inspire me in my field.”

Overall, the inspiration differed between each senior academic. For most they gained inspiration from people around them who instilled strong values to pursue education. This was either a family member who stressed the importance of education and a love of knowledge, or individuals who have striven against a system that was not built for them. All our interviewees reported that there were few role models for them in academia.

Furthermore, all gave examples of individuals who were vocal in breaking down barriers, from [Marie Curie](#), one of the most well-known female scientists, to [Srinivasa Ramanujan](#), who overcame the class system, racism, and issues with his faith at Cambridge. Each interviewee took strength from these role models when facing prejudices in academia.

What were the inequalities and prejudices faced?

“Like a constant pressure that makes you feel you are not doing your job well enough.”

Each interviewee had faced a variety of prejudices towards them at every step on the academic ladder. This included being considered part of the cleaning staff at conferences, their work being overlooked or undermined due to their ethnicity and being sexually harassed by senior males in positions of power in their field. A common experience among all the interviewees was the experience was of their work being regularly questioned and undermined, an experience not faced by their (predominantly male and white) colleagues.

Moreover, when they did speak up about these issues, their complaints were often brushed off as untrue or exaggerated, due to the lack of representation of different minorities at the senior level. A major issue faced by all was that the departments they were in did not take their claims seriously. One participant reported the disheartening realisation that it was easier and more beneficial to keep his sexuality ‘invisible’, to avoid the stigma associated with being gay in academia.

To overcome these issues each person employed their own strategies, but a common theme was that they surrounded themselves with like-minded individuals who would help voice their concerns and empower them to not feel isolated.

We applaud these individuals’ strength, and their willingness to support each other. However, that ECRs, individually or collectively, have had to develop coping strategies to side-step these inequalities whilst still prioritising all the other expectations placed on the shoulders in planning a successful career, speaks to systemic problems that need to be robustly addressed across the sector.

What is your advice to ECRs trying to achieve a senior role in academia?

“Find your tribe.”

“Remember what made you passionate about your field in the first place.”

“Be brave, outspoken and develop your self-belief.”

Each interviewee understood the path to a senior role in academia is extremely difficult for anyone, especially those from groups not traditionally represented in the field. However, they also had encouraging words for ECRs who have chosen this career. A common theme was how vital mentors are, as many supervisors are not taught how to manage the common issues experienced by groups facing inequality, such as those associated with race or sexuality.

Two interviewees specifically encouraged ECRs to be proactive at finding a mentor, by the way of someone higher up the ladder in their department who supports and encourages them and offers opportunities. This could be their first step to building or strengthening their network to help them realise their career aspirations. Strong and supportive networks and mentors are vital to groups who are regularly burdened, without support.



WE GENERATED AN ECR ADVICE TOOLKIT DIRECTLY FROM ADVICE GIVEN BY SENIOR ACADEMICS ON HOW TO OVERCOME INEQUALITIES AT THIS CRUCIAL CAREER STAGE. [ACCESS THE TOOLKIT ON YOUTUBE.](#)

How does the diversity in your institution reflect the diversity in your surrounding community?

It was noted by many of the interviewees that institutions celebrate and encourage diversity at the undergraduate level, but this slowly becomes less and less prominent towards the top of the academic pyramid. The dearth of diversity at the senior academic level is still shocking and, although each interviewee recognised the importance of role models for ECRs, they readily acknowledged that there are few role models who are not white and middle class. The lack of celebration and representation of particular groups at senior levels results in many ECRs feeling they are not ‘good enough’ to reach a senior role. A message that resonated throughout these interviews was that institutions are very cut off from the local communities in which they exist and operate, something we know is directly detrimental to research impact. Many acknowledged that HEIs are historically set up to support white males to achieve and retain their positions of power, and, until institutions recognise and celebrate the diversity that is “the oil of their institution”, they will continue to remain isolated from, and less effective in, their communities.

Nurturing talent from underrepresented groups requires HEIs to become proactive at involving the surrounding community. HEIs should seek to engage in grassroot schemes that encourage those from underrepresented communities to understand that academia is not an unattainable ivory tower but instead a potential and attractive career path for them.



What are the short-term, realistic goals that you would like addressed in academia?

This was the toughest question for our interviewees and there was no clear answer, rather there are many areas where improvement is needed.

Two participants immediately asked what HEIs are doing to become actively anti-racist. They acknowledged that, for there to be a shift in the prevalent racial hierarchy in academia, we need those in the most senior roles to actively push for change, as this can only come from the top. The burden to change the system must not fall only on the shoulders of the groups who are experiencing inequalities but be driven by peers who have already established themselves in senior roles and are allies of change.

“Our bite must equal our bark.”

All interviewees recognised that HEIs were very good at talking about inclusion and diversity, but noticeable changes within departments are largely absent. Suggested actions include unifying and championing role models from underrepresented groups, which will encourage ECRs to seek and gain mentorship in their academic path.

Additionally, many discussed the need to create schemes to develop the professional skills that are essential to career growth, but the intense pressure and instability for ECRs created by short-term contracts, mean they often fall by the wayside. Recognition of achievements which do not involve publications is critical. This will not only create a more diverse workforce but will also develop the transferable skills of ECRs to allow them to pursue careers in other areas of academia and beyond.

Phase 3: Panel debate with EDI-prominent academics

We held a panel discussion with cross-disciplinary senior academics from different HEIs who possess strong interest in equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)-related academic matters. While it was clear that recent attention to EDI topics have been of benefit, efforts to tackle many of the complex issues surrounding EDI have been insufficient. Suggestions for change aimed at principal investigators and senior stakeholders included improved training on EDI-aware supervision, encouraging accountability and leading by example. For example, leaving early on occasion shows junior staff that flexibility is allowed. In addition to the current incentives from funders, penalties were suggested for academic groups / institutions to encourage consideration of EDI as a priority in the workplace.

Regarding sector-wide changes, it was suggested that stamping out the shame or taboo of certain topics (such as sexuality) would provide greater comfort in sharing personal lifestyles or experiences. A systemic approach for combating inequalities may also be beneficial, rather than a piecemeal fashion for each of the various forms of inequality, which fails to handle intersectionality well. Additionally, reassessment for how postdocs are employed by institutions would be welcomed as the current structures (being employed under a grant to complete a project) do not place enough importance in ECR growth or development and often leaves ECRs in a precarious financial position. Greater interaction between funders/stakeholders and ECRs was also eagerly discussed, as well as the observation that whilst academic merits were certainly of value for employees, the same is not observed for overcoming inequalities along the career path. It was considered that the current loss of talent from various demographics are due to a lack of incentives for specific groups to pursue an academic career.

Suggestions for ECRs were also made, and primarily focused on taking responsibility for one's own development of skills (upskilling).

Phase 4: Presentation of findings to EDI leaders

‘The Lost Voices’ campaign culminated in a presentation of our findings to seven people who lead on or help to drive EDI efforts across five HEIs. We shared a short video that presented an overview of the types of the campaign and some of the messages that could be distilled from the submissions. These included how some of the inequalities experienced by ECRs went beyond, or at the intersection of several of, the nine protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation). Following the presentation, the leaders were invited to give their thoughts on the campaign and comment about how it may resonate with their institutional experience.

All leaders spoke about how research culture reform is proceeding at their institutions. Many of them acknowledged that at least some of these inequalities were amplified by the current practices that impact ECR career progression across the sector, including precarity of employment, conventions and ethics around attribution and authorship, the need for a stronger mentoring culture, and rigid contract structures that introduce barriers to gaining teaching experience or guarded time for research. They spoke of how current approaches involving charters were only partially effective and risked segregating these issues and overlooking the complexities of intersectionality. Some suggested that we need to look at different funding models for ECR stages, recognising that at least some degree of precarity experienced by postdocs, for example, was down to limitations in how their positions are funded.





We find ourselves at a time where institutional leadership is not just tacitly trying to address EDI across the sector; that our leaders passionately champion these cultural reforms and are dedicating unparalleled resources to drive them. However, something seems to be getting lost as these

visions trickle down to lower levels of institutional organisation. Unfortunately, some of the people working hard to change research cultures ‘on the ground’ will not reap the benefits of those reforms in their time as an ECR.

One important theme that came up was an increasing acknowledgement of the fear that some ECRs have in reporting the inequalities they face. This is being addressed in some institutions by the implementation of confidential reporting and support services. Encouragingly, there was also discussion that we, as a sector, had to consider a harder stance with those whose behaviour directly or indirectly enables inequalities, regardless of how senior or ‘successful’ a researcher they were.

Even if we get to a point where we have implemented the change necessary to meaningfully address most of these inequalities, the sector and specifically institutions need to continuously learn from their initiatives to bring about change and retain this learning. There will always be different iterations of inequalities, and as COVID has shown us, new ones emerging. Retaining learning means the sector will be better placed to rapidly respond to future inequalities as they present themselves, so that more time is spent resolving issues instead of being fixated on their complexity or difficulty.

Conclusion: Common Issues

The persistence of microaggressions and open bullying which is being experienced by ECRs from inequality backgrounds of all kinds. Many of our respondents in Phase 1 **feared** the consequences of speaking up, and several reported receiving no help (or worse) when they did.

The lack of recognition of how difficult it can be for people dealing with inequalities, especially those which are typically overlooked, e.g. class and socioeconomic background. This has wide implications across an ECR's period of employment, from recruitment to funding applications, assessment of progress and writing references.

The lack of support at all levels. While there is some effort put in at the recruitment stage, there are few role models for ECRs from inequality backgrounds, and a general lack of awareness of the problems caused by inequalities results in people feeling isolated, with nowhere to turn.

Next Steps & Proposed Solutions

To address the needs raised by ‘The Lost Voices’ national campaign, we suggest:

1. That HEIs need to take direct action to address discrimination. HEIs recognise the need to address EDI issues. Many of the senior EDI leaders we spoke to were passionate about their work. However, it is equally clear that these efforts are frequently not having enough of an impact at the ECR level. People must be held accountable for their actions which consciously or unconsciously reinforce inequalities, and supervisors, line managers, and people in authority should be properly educated about the issues faced by underrepresented groups in HE. It is important to note that this is not a problem just for ECRs, it is a problem for the whole HEI, including those who do not face the same inequality challenges.
2. That support needs to be better implemented across the board, and this needs to be proactive where possible, rather than always being reactive. Flexibility is vital for dealing with inequalities of different kinds. Assessment of ECRs, whether for recruitment or ongoing progress, should consider their entire experience, not simply narrow measures. Recognition of other aspects of their work such as teaching and training, as well as the challenges they may face in their personal lives, is critically important. A supportive, inclusive research culture not only benefits researchers, but also research and institutions, and subsequently communities.
3. That the importance of peer support and mentoring be recognised. HEIs should encourage the former and enable the latter. Diverse role models are particularly important. Encouraging wider discussion and understanding of inequality issues, for example by facilitating discussion groups, is helpful. Engaging with local communities not only encourages young people from all backgrounds to see academia as a viable option for them, but it is also vital for HEIs to retain their connection to the communities they serve. Isolation helps nobody.

On a sector-wide level, we note that:

1. A systemic and adequately funded (or penalty) approach to tackle inequalities, beyond the existing Charters, would help level the field. At present, some HEIs and departments are making a concerted effort, but some are not. Sharing and encouraging good practice is highly valuable, however the sector may want to consider additional approaches to encourage strategic prioritisation of support for ECRs and EDI efforts.



2. A re-imagining of the ECR period is long-overdue. This needs to consider more equitable levels of remuneration and financial support, greater stability, or greater support to manage multiple contracts, and clearer expectations and career development support for people seeking a career in HE, as well as for those who will leave the sector after some time as an ECR, and reliable processes to handle inequality disclosures. This group falls into the gap between fee-paying students and highly valued researchers with a string of successes behind them. They are employed on short-term, grant-funded contracts, and their experience of career development support is variable across the sector, ranging from bespoke support for high-performing individuals to being entirely left up to them. Contending with precarity of employment whilst needing the balance the rest of the concerns of ECR life places a huge strain upon people. For ECRs already facing the inequality struggle, it is often too much to handle.
3. While the charter approach to EDI has been successful to a point, more holistic and intersectional approaches are needed. There will always be inequalities, so it is important that the sector become more flexible and quicker to adapt to enable everyone to make the most of their talents and their time in the sector.

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NIHR ARC North Thames



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