

What works?

Development of an EDI protections policy, Dr Karisha George

Project summary:

The project sought to develop a policy document outlining best practice in relation to working equitably within the area of EDI. Not infrequently, staff and students who take on pioneering roles within the EDI arena in higher education come from minoritised backgrounds themselves. This adds a layer of complexity given the inevitable intermingling of their identities in this work. The policy document outlines a framework for equitable treatment of minoritised individuals working within EDI - with a recognition of the role of staff and student's own identities in this work. The document is informed by a research project which involved interviewing minoritised staff and students who work within the EDI arena across as many HEIs as possible. Their lived experiences fed into the final policy document, ensuring that the recommendations for good practice and the necessary core protections that it outlines when engaging minoritised staff in EDI work, are founded on the lived realities of these individuals.

[The policy document can be accessed through the tool resources.](#)

What challenge did this project set out to address?

The experiences of minoritised research staff have generally improved through the widespread adoption of equitable research practices across the UK Higher Education research sector. However, to effectively embed equity within research policy and practice, we must recognise that standard recommendations do not cater to the unique experiences of minoritised staff working in

the EDI research sector. These staff typically find themselves working in an area that has deep personal relevance, adding a unique extra layer of emotional labour which is exacerbated by existing research practices – such as time-limited funding and limited resources. This suggests that specific protections are needed to achieve equity for this group. This project sought to explore their lived experiences to develop a policy brief detailing what such protections should entail.

What worked, for who and why?

- The policy brief was developed through 42 interviews with minoritised HE staff working in EDI (across as many HEs as possible). This variety was a plus as it helped us to ensure the brief reflected the lived experiences of those working across the many different EDI areas. Given the toxic competition that exists within the EDI research arena, it was important to adopt an intersectional lens so as to not isolate any participant.
 - *Practical idea: always be aware of research politics and use this knowledge to inform how your project develops.*
- To ensure confidentiality and enable full honesty, the project lead performed all interviews and analysed the data – this also ensured consistency in the analysis and helped the policy brief to be developed easily.
 - *Practical idea: when dealing with potentially traumatic experiences, focus on a research process which prioritises trust and transparency.*
- On the other hand, as the project lead was also a minoritised member of staff working in EDI research, there was a dual impact of exposure to these lived experiences. Firstly, there was a 'me too' movement – whereby personal experiences were validated, leading to a sense of camaraderie and the development of a network of solidarity. Secondly, there was a sense of 'when will things change' – many staff members interviewed had been working in EDI for many years and the consistency across experiences suggested that the future may be bleak. This started off as a stumbling block but eventually led to the generation of more projects to generate change at a faster pace.
 - *Practical idea: Consider how proposed research projects can benefit researcher wellbeing. Also adopt a challenge-focused mindset which transforms stumbling*

blocks into ideas for further change. Finally, wherever possible, use your research to also engage participants in change past the end-date of the project.

What didn't work and why?

- The policy brief was also meant to be developed from student focus groups led by a Graduate Research Associate. The focus groups were in fact performed but did not eventually inform the brief as the policy group were uninterested in undergraduate student experiences. The data was instead used for a publication.
 - What would change: at the start of the project, conversations with the policy group members were second-hand through another researcher. This led to a lack of clarity. From the outset, it is important to be clear in what is expected through direct conversations with the leading bodies as such sensitive research should proceed with extreme care.
- The project was meant to be developed from a preliminary systematic review. This did not go to plan as the literature on the area was very sparse, leading to the need for multiple revisions in the scoping criteria.
 - What would change: we were able to proceed with the interviews and focus groups using an understanding of the literature and findings of past projects rather than the results of the systematic review. To avoid this delay in the future, the research plan would begin with a literature review and then branch off into the more complex stages (systematic review, interviews and focus groups). This would ensure things are better paced and a bit more manageable. However, it is also key to always be able to adjust throughout the research process – so that adjustment factor will remain.
- The final sample was smaller than anticipated on both sides of the project (student focus groups and staff interviews). We ended up with 42 interviews and 24 students in the focus groups but had aimed for 50 on both sides.

- What would change: the timing of the project would be adjusted. Approaching participants with a longer period during which they could participate would have helped make the project more attractive. Many said they would be able to take part but in July/ August, which was when the project was completed.

What changed as a result of your project?

- The project informed the development of a policy brief which will be introduced to policy makers, principal investigators and relevant funding bodies through Vitae policy group networks.
- The co-funder (Valuing Voices) supported the integration of recommended changes at the University of York.
- Participants used the policy brief recommendations to instil change within their own institutions.
- A publication has been developed around student experiences of working in EDI, and the scoping review and staff experiences will also be published. A book chapter proposal was also submitted.
- The findings directly informed the development of a cultural awareness training programme targeting UK HEIs.

What next?

- Launch events to increase visibility of the policy brief.
- Promoting intersectionality as a promising framework in which to organise the EDI research arena. This will also help promote a sense of shared understanding and collegiality rather than toxic competitiveness.
- Developing an EDI research staff network which will provide a space for continued discussions (similar to what was enabled during staff interviews and student focus groups).
- Having some form of recognition for the invisible labour that many perform within the EDI

research arena (e.g. integration into promotion criteria and EDI-related service prizes particularly for those working in *grassroots EDI initiatives*).

- Integrating a framework for career advancement for those working in EDI (e.g. Departmental, Faculty, and cross-institutional positions).

Progress towards equitable and responsible research practices

- The project lead was a T&S Lecturer at the University of York, and the project proceeded with the support of two Graduate researchers – with all in the team coming from minoritised backgrounds.
- Within HE, T&S staff are pressured to feel as second-class citizens with sub-standard research skills and a siloed focus on SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning). The fact that the project lead spearheaded the development and completion of a project with policy implications disrupts this narrative and showcases the potential of all staff within HE.
- The project proceeded outside of the standard hierarchical ways of communication – the Graduate interns took charge of the systematic review project with minimal supervision for instance, and were treated as experts as the project progressed. Similar mechanisms were put in place for the student focus groups and the publication proceeded as a priority (as both interns are completing their PhDs and needed strong publication profiles). This meant that the needs of the interns were integrated as a core part of the project.