

# Differential and resonant solidarities: A materialist approach to the early career experience

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## Abstract

Navigating academia as early career academics (ECAs) is increasingly challenging, with many facing structural inequities, the rise of precarious work, and the increased marketisation of higher education in the United Kingdom and beyond. The purpose of this article is to provide a platform for learnings and insights gleaned from our experiences as five ECAs who worked together to lead the 'early career network' for a learned association between 2021 and 2023. In the article, we explore some of the challenges, opportunities, and call for actions that come out of our own encounters with the neoliberal higher education landscape as both students and workers in the social sciences. We propose a dual conceptualisation of solidarity as both resonant and differential, and mobilise this theoretical contribution to reflect on themes of community, materiality, care, knowledge, and labour as key strands which shape the interface between ECAs and complex higher education ecologies. Theoretically and practically, we aim to facilitate solidarity in early career communities, mobilising 'ECA' as more than a purely temporal category. Finally, we make recommendations to colleagues across the discipline for forging and nourishing collaborative, healthy, and inclusive environments in which ECAs can thrive.

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Navigating academia as early career academics<sup>1</sup> (ECAs) is increasingly challenging. Many of us are facing and resisting structural inequities, precarious working conditions, and the marketisation of higher education (HE). These challenges are nested within evolving landscapes of challenges at the national and international levels to disciplines like Politics and International Relations (IR; Moran, 2022). Social sciences and humanities departments across the United Kingdom have been ravaged by unprecedented real term cuts to government funding under marketised models of education (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015). Such cuts arise in the aftermath of the United Kingdom’s departure from the European Union (EU) and hostile government policies on immigration (Courtois and Sautier, 2022), leaving universities struggling under fees-based structures which depend on international students for revenue (Amuedo-Dorantes and Romiti, 2024). If Brexit was not enough, further difficulties were produced by the COVID-19 pandemic, deepening existing inequalities and worsening cultures of presenteeism and precarity (Ballif and Zinn, 2023; Hadjisolomou et al., 2022). Such challenges are only magnified as the wars on Gaza and Ukraine unfold, with implications of issues such as educide, academic freedom, and the cost of living (Cooley, 2024; Fúnez-Flores, 2024; UNCTAD, 2022).

This article shares learnings and insights from our experiences as ECAs who worked together as an ‘early career network’ committee for a learned association (2021–2023). We explore challenges, opportunities, and recommendations from our encounters with the neoliberal HE landscape as students and academic workers. We reflect on themes of community, materiality, care, knowledge, and labour as key strands shaping the interface between ECAs and HE ecologies. We call for the continued building and strengthening of solidarity-based communities which understand the term ‘ECA’ as more than a temporally defined career stage. Hence, we use a materialist approach to ground our analysis, and conceptualise ‘differential solidarity’ and ‘resonant solidarity’ as frames within which to address issues of precarity, unpaid labour, and inequities across the profession. We reflect on our work *as* ECAs *for* the ECA collective and our discipline more broadly. These reflections result in calls to action.

We come to the reflections presented here from our lived experiences as a diverse group of ECAs in the discipline of Politics and IR, *and* the established scholarship on these themes. Our experiences and identities include ties to working-class backgrounds, immigrant and global majority communities, minoritised genders and sexualities, and dependents whom we care for. We all live and work in the United Kingdom – but not all of us are British. The axes of identity which organise material, cultural, and political aspects of our lives and social relations are important to note. Analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data by the University and College Union (UCU) in 2021 shows the unequal way casualisation hits employees in academia. Women are

more likely than men to be on fixed-term contracts; BAME [sic] academics are more likely to be on fixed-term contracts than their white colleagues, Black academics are 50% more likely as

white academics to be on a zero-hours contract; white men are the least likely group to be on a fixed-term contract (28%), Asian women are the most likely (44%) (UCU, 2021: 25)

and disabled academics are negatively affected by casualisation (UCU, 2021: 19). Taking seriously the politics of intersectionality (Bailey and Mobley, 2019; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989), we recognise that some of us in academia are caught simultaneously at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability (Ahmed, 2009; Mirza, 2006). To be clear, these data are important, although has clear limits: categories such as disability, gender, and ‘race’ can be reductive. For, as critical scholarship tells us, they interact – or even co-constitute each other (Ali et al., 2010; Collins and Bilge, 2020; Tamale, 2020). As such, these categories and experiences of marginalisation are neither singular nor homogeneous (Arday, 2022; Loveday, 2018) and existing research on the experiences of marginalised academics illustrates the intersectionalities of these experiences (Leigh et al., 2022; Mahmud and Islam, 2023; Sang, 2018).

The structural lines of power which produce and organise our ‘visible identities’ (Alcoff, 2005) are important for understanding academic experiences. Precarity and inequality are not unique to academia, or to the United Kingdom (Churchill et al., 2019; Kwan, 2022; Yerby, 2020). More than simply reeling off an aggregated list of identities (King, 2024), we situate ourselves in this way to make visible the structural and embodied marginalities that shape and are shaped by our ‘ECA-ness’ – and our analysis of it. These marginalities should be understood *in relation to*, not distinctly from, the temporality and materiality of our careers. As we noted in a statement, published in response to industrial action across the sector in 2023, ‘the category “early career researcher” exists because it signifies a shared mode of labouring within a career stage foundationally defined by material precarity’ (PSA Early Career Network, 2023). We argue, then, that this precarity should be understood within relation to existing infrastructures of power and inequality: being an ECA is not simply about being in the early stages of one’s career. It is a category which is defined by the embodied encounter with precarity and signifies our entanglements within wider relations of power. To challenge power relations, we draw on our experiences as ECAs to conceptualise *differential* and *resonant solidarities*. We propose ‘resonant solidarity’ as a framework through which to encourage empathy with other group members through directly relating to them. This conceptualisation of a particular type of solidarity allows us to clarify collective aims that are distinct from academia in general, and generating a sense of community among members. We also propose ‘differential’ solidarity as a way to differentiate experiences *within* the ECA category by responding to more acute needs and specific forms of marginalisation. We affirm that differentiating the category is necessary to empathise with others in the group who may have had different experiences, and also to avoid reductionist analyses.

The discussion proceeds as follows. First, we further contextualise who we are and how we came to these reflections. Second, we provide the materialist approach adopted to understand the status and challenges of ECAs. Third, we present our conceptual framework of solidarity. Specifically, we propose an understanding and enactment of ‘resonant’ and ‘differential’ solidarities in order to move away from an individualised analysis (and treatment) of ECA-specific challenges, and encourage active solidarity (Einwohner et al., 2021) within academic communities (Christou and Janta, 2019). Fourth, through this framework of solidarity, we examine some tensions and set forth recommendations; particularly in regard to issues of unpaid labour, building academic communities, and meaningfully addressing issues around diversity and representation. We conclude with a

provocation to colleagues both in and beyond their ‘ECA-ness’ to engage with our recommendations as a way of being in active solidarity across our profession.

## Context

In mid-2021, we came together as an ‘early career network’ committee representing ECAs in Politics and IR. As paid-up members of a registered charity and learned association, we took on roles in the executive committee: Chair, Treasurer, Secretary, Communications Officer,<sup>2</sup> and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Officer. At the time, we were all doctoral students at English universities. Four of us were studying full-time, one studying part-time and also holding caring responsibilities, with all of us engaged in part-time paid work alongside our studies.

The committee oversees a network within the wider association which offers paid membership. For £20, ECAs who are within 3 years of completing their doctoral viva can register as members of both the association and the network. Our mandate was to represent the interests of ECAs within the wider association. We reflected frequently on how we understood our commitment. The committee met at least once monthly to discuss and plan events for our membership. Although we each had defined roles in the committee, we operated flexibly – helping each other out where necessary and taking on responsibilities for additional programming where individuals were particularly passionate about a specific topic, such as media engagement or writing retreats. Our tenure lasted 2 years – and while the committee continues to exist, we no longer have any input.

We considered our general goals to include (1) supporting ECAs to secure publications as we recognised that publications are increasingly important to get jobs. We did this by hosting events that centred the development of necessary skills and collaborating with journals to create publishing opportunities; (2) consolidating the new EDI role and foreground EDI concerns (e.g. genuine inclusion and support for marginalised ECAs, diversifying the discipline); (3) providing opportunities to develop the exchange of knowledge. We wanted to support ECAs to equip themselves with the skills to share their research but also to engage with the wider world as fully as possible; and (4) providing ECAs with opportunities to create solid networks among peers, the wider academic community, and even the public, particularly following the restrictions on community building during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. We also aimed to keep responding to the changing needs of ECAs and, at the same time, increasing the network membership both at home and further afield. This included encouraging members to become more actively involved in the network.

To deliver this, much of our work included organising in-person and online events for ECAs. This included delivering events at the association’s annual conference, putting on our own annual conference, organising training seminars, providing networking spaces, creating opportunities for ECAs to receive feedback from peers and editors of leading journals, as well as administering small grants for member-led projects and event access. We took up this work on a voluntary, unpaid basis.

## The materiality of early career academic-ness

Beyond the recognition that ECAs are individuals ‘at the beginning of their academic career’, there is no definitive consensus on the definition of an ECA (Akram and Pflaeger Young, 2021). As Akram and Pflaeger Young note, there is ‘increasing recognition that

this [ECA] period may be prolonged due to exceptional circumstances and that previous definitions may have been overly rigid' (Akram and Pflaeger Young, 2021: 59). These exceptional circumstances include systematic, cultural, and epistemological exclusions (Abu-Bakare, 2022; Akram, 2024; Briscoe-Palmer and Mattocks, 2021). They are deeply and increasingly material: casual and insecure contracts with limited access to sick and maternity/parental leave (Akram and Pflaeger Young, 2021; Lopes and Dewan, 2015), intensified workloads (Wellcome Trust, 2020), stagnating pay (UCU, 2021), and entrenched inequities across the sector (UCU, 2021). Hence, we forefront the material conditions which shape ECA experiences and subjectivities – and assert that the category of ECA includes but also surpasses the mere career stage marker that it might, at first glance, appear to represent.

This all takes place in the context of HE changing rapidly over the past six decades, shifting from State to privatised models (Troiani and Dutson, 2021). These trends are not unique to academia and make themselves visible in 'virtually all other sectors of life' (Troiani and Dutson, 2021: 7). Such are the ideological legacies of figures Thatcher and Reagan, whose pushes for austerity and privatisation have left an imprint on Britain and beyond (Farnsworth, 2021), and crucial in the formation of ECA-ness today. We are not suggesting that ECAs did not exist before now. But we affirm that the 'ECA' category should be taken within the unignorable material conditions of austerity, precarity, and marketisation. These conditions shape what it means to embody – and therefore respond to the needs of – ECA-ness today. The discussions in this article are framed by the materiality of what it means to be an ECA in such a context.

Our work on the committee took place within the remit of the wider learned association. This already situated us specifically in terms of the scope and capacity of the work we could (and were expected to) do. This situatedness within the association created some challenges around how our activities and statements could or would be perceived as taking a 'political' stance. While our efforts to build material solidarity were encouraged by some members of the association's governance, choosing solidarity proved to be, in itself, a risk. But it is one we considered worth taking; particularly, when taking such a stance was sometimes framed back to us as unsuited to the broader goals and aims of a learned association. This reflection raises an essential question about the commitments of universities and organisations to our discipline and the ECAs that uphold it. In other words, how can charities, learned associations, and research and teaching institutions reflect on and actualise their commitments to the sustainability and development of our discipline through a materialist lens? What would this look like in relation to ECAs, who are often at the sharp end of challenging material conditions? From our perspective, any advancement is dependent on nourishing the diversity and vibrancy of our profession. As such, the recruitment and retention of early career and minoritised scholars into the discipline is crucial, but is mediated by materiality, and therefore, a political issue.

The cultural and intellectual health of our discipline rests on material foundations. Taking this statement seriously requires that colleagues and institutions with power and resources recognise and actualise material responsibilities towards ECAs.

Our work was always guided by our understanding of materiality as crucial to defining the status of ECA, which we conceptualised as a determinant of the network's nature and scope. Our material conditions are the binding glue which produces ECA-ness as a meaningful frame in which we understand and experience ourselves and relations to the wider discipline and the university more broadly (Butler-Rees and Robinson, 2020; Gill, 2013; Simard-Gagnon, 2016), in particular, our increased exposure to precarious, insecure, and

unsustainable employment. This materialist approach to ECA-ness disrupts assumptions about the category of Being an ECA which is not necessarily about one's age or immediate 'newness' to academia (Bosanquet et al., 2017; Price et al., 2015) – even if these aspects undoubtedly influence our experiences too. We acknowledge and affirm that these material conditions exist under important structural inequities which are organised along local and global lines of racism, heteropatriarchy, ableism, and classism, among other '-isms' (Richter et al., 2020). To this end, we reflect on the concept of solidarity itself, and suggest recommendations to the profession in the latter half of this article. We now set out our concepts of 'differential' and 'resonant' solidarities to further ground contemporary ECA-ness.

## Differential and resonant solidarities

We found that our praxis was pulled in two different directions: to reify a theoretical category for strategic purposes on one hand (the ECA), and to destabilise that category (to avoid assuming equivalence) on the other hand. Drawing from that experience, we propose a theoretical framework that sophisticates the distinction between 'solidarity among' and 'solidarity with' (O'Neill, 1996). We developed the lenses of 'resonant' and 'differential' solidarity to describe and clarify the ways that encouraging different modes of relating to each other as a group entails different strategic considerations.

As we have argued earlier, the materiality of the ECA position through a specific and precarious relationship to career progression, financial security, and workplace power hierarchies entails a range of challenges common to nearly all ECAs. Despite this, there remains a trend to individualise these issues; for example, through 'imposter syndrome' (Mullangi and Jagsi, 2019). To counter this, we aimed to foreground the structural constitution of the ECA subject position and encourage a form of solidarity in which group members could empathise with each other on the basis of perceiving their experiences to be similar. We conceptualised this as 'resonant solidarity' – encouraging empathy with other group members through directly relating to them. We felt that building a group identity as ECAs would allow us to clarify collective aims that were distinct from academia in general, as well as generating a sense of community among members. Mobilising under a particular heading, as imperfect as that category might be, allowed us to foreground the analysis of the power relations between other social groups and our own (McCall, 2005).

Simultaneously, we know that the vulnerability that characterises the ECA stage is unequally distributed (UCU, 2021). Existing literature shows that these challenges are more acute, and compounded with other forms of oppression, within certain marginalised groups (Akram and Pflaeger Young, 2021; Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer, 2016). This drove us to foreground differential vulnerability to avoid the assumption of equivalent experiences within the ECA category. We conceptualised this as 'differential solidarity', encouraging empathy with others who experience other forms of violence, oppression, or marginalisation, that one extends care for. For example, the discursive identification of acting in solidarity with the Palestinian people does not imply a shared experience of violence but a shared struggle, and the explicit extension of empathy regardless of subject position. We wanted to support the participation of our most vulnerable members, which required recognition of the dissimilar pressures in the unequal distribution of marginalisation within the ECA category. Ayoub (2018) describes this recognition of differential vulnerability as the 'intersectional consciousness' of a movement.



In practice, we facilitated resonant solidarity by reifying the ECA subject position as a category of analysis to clarify our material interests and align those interests with other groups. For example, during the wave of industrial action in UK Higher Education (UKHE), we released statements that outlined our position of support for our members who were more likely to be on precarious contracts (UCU, 2021), and union members more broadly who took strike action. We also treated the ECA category as uniquely epistemologically productive through our conference. We insisted that we were necessarily innovative, as PhDs required originality. ECAs' wider set of unique experiences put us on the creative cutting edge as our recent arrival to our respective fields rendered our thought relatively undisciplined. We aimed to respond to the structural needs inherent to, and strengths fostered by, the ECA subject position.

Working at a broader scale comes at the expense of the coherence of the category (McCall, 2005). We differentiated experiences within the ECA category, as we outline here, by attempting to respond to more acute needs and specific forms of marginalisation. As Lorde (2017: 98) cautions, a tendency to over-emphasise similarity could lead to a simplistic primacy of one axis of oppression. Ciccia and Roggeband (2021) reflect on the ways that these types of reductionist analyses can obscure the exploitation of less powerful coalitions within the larger group. Over-reliance on the shared elements of group identity risks obfuscating the power asymmetries at play between members (Einwohner et al., 2021). Differentiation allows a movement to present a united front by attending to the unique needs within it, facilitating broader participation (Davis, 2019: 46–47; Lorde, 2017: 99). This impulse to sophisticate and specify, though, could be discursively constructed as weakening the cohesion of the larger group depending on how it is enacted (Freire, 2017: 18–19; Lorde, 2017: 99) – a characterisation that should be preempted wherever possible (Freire, 2017: 23–24; Lorde, 2017: 104).

During our tenure, we were unable to recognise this tension, let alone unify these two forms into a singular approach. This is not necessarily surprising; as McCall (2005) writes, intersectional methodologies are theoretically and practically complex. In what follows, we attempt a synthesis to inspire strategy moving forward. First, we suggest a few broad principles and potential practical applications, and second, we reflect on how to oscillate between the two frames.

Often, resonant solidarity should take discursive primacy within announcements or publications for political purposes. Allowing as large as possible a faction to interpellate within a category produces a wider base for organising, even if this is a momentary or 'strategic' essentialism (Spivak, 1996 cited in Chakraborty, 2010). Our choice to adopt existing analytical categories to encourage resonant solidarity constitutes what McCall (2005) would classify as an 'intercategorical' approach to the complexity of intersectionality, rather than an 'anticategorical' refusal and deconstruction. Offering a structural analysis and emphasising the material causes of shared experiences of oppression avoids issues of individualisation, further consolidating the group (Butler, 2021: 2). These strategic decisions should be made on an individual basis as insisting on the presence of differential solidarity within external communications can also encourage the participation of subaltern groups (Einwohner et al., 2021).

Resource allocation within the group should be primarily driven by differential solidarity. This refers to the distribution of resources held collectively, but encourages an ethic of lateral mutual aid (Spade, 2020). It goes without saying that the purpose of organising is to fight for concessions for the entirety of the group and beyond; a principle to allocate scarce resources should, hopefully, be fought into obsolescence.

Prioritising both forms leads to increased empathy. Focusing on resonant solidarity avoids divide and conquer tactics, while focusing on differential solidarity safeguards against class or other forms of analytical reductionism. This leads to increased group cohesion and easier alignment of aims, but also dynamism and an ethic of responsibility to a wider range of others. Affirming specific identities leads to a more inclusive movement (Einwohner et al., 2021). The diversity of identities and perspectives that follows can sophisticate its critical potential (Ayoub, 2018).

To take an example from our praxis, we intended our ‘accessibility grants’ to equalise access to our events by supporting those with childcare needs, or without access to the necessary technological equipment. We hoped that intersectionally marginalised ECAs would make use of the grants, and that those who were not in exceptional need would recognise the breadth of experiences within the membership. We trusted the group to self-allocate these resources according to individual need, hoping that we implicitly mobilised a logic of differential solidarity. One way to balance this approach and encourage resonant solidarity is to make clear that the grants are available to any community member. Even though the target might be a particularly marginalised subject position, and thus not necessarily all members, it is perceived as beneficial to the group as a whole. The response to publicising these grants was overwhelmingly positive, and perceived as a form of ‘active’ solidarity (Einwohner et al., 2021). Encouraging self-allocation, however, was not unproblematic, as gender and class often influence self-assessment (Exley and Kessler, 2019) and, presumably, evaluation of need relative to others. More, these grants were not implemented for a sufficient amount of time to assess their outcomes: in the future, these supports should be available over the long-term, with their effects tracked so that socialised patterns governing self-allocation can be mitigated.

Sharpening a conceptualisation of solidarity that unifies its two facets allows ECAs to interpellate as workers without encouraging class reductionism. This facilitates an ethic of class solidarity; the ability to align with other labour movements that share material interests and ground an even broader front for the pursuit of shared political goals. Moreover, acknowledging and responding to differentiated vulnerability within the group allows for a sustained mobilisation as those with the most pressing needs are attended to, and can contribute long term. An explicitly reflexive stance is necessary to recognise over-reliance on resonant or differential solidarity, and any strategic decision to emphasise one framework over another should be taken clearly, with its downsides in mind. Ayoub’s (2018) framework of intersectional coalition-building offers one way to conceptualise such an approach, organising with a clear structural analysis while remaining responsive to suffering that is both similar to and dissimilar from our own.

The following sections build on our experiences in order to develop the framework of resonant and differential solidarity further and offer tangible recommendations. We contribute to a theoretical and practical toolkit to build ‘transformative’ forms of solidarity (Ciccio and Roggeband, 2021), strong enough for collective action (Shelby, 2005: 68).

## **Do the job to get the job? Unpaid labour in academia**

We recognise the challenge to collectively resist the exploitative labour structure of academic neoliberal capitalism while still existing in this structure (Gill, 2014: 24). While we centre our experiences as ECAs, we note that the structures covered here also affect



senior academics, professional, and administrative staff in academia. As such, these last sections further engage with and develop resonant and differential solidarities.

For many academics, their job provides a sense of meaning; it is a *lifestyle* – you work with what you are passionate about, and you have a sense of flexibility and freedom in developing this passion (Cannizzo, 2018: 97–98). However, the turn to neoliberal managerial governance of the university has increasingly shaken this rose-tinted view of our labour reality. Pressures of academics' time-use and what you are expected to produce affect our experiences of work. These experiences are different depending on one's material position in academia and society. For example, Cannizzo (2018) reports a stark contrast between senior and ECAs' perception of their career development. Senior academics stated that *they* shape their careers, while ECAs reported that *the academic institution* shapes their careers.

Academics' labour experiences are intrinsically linked to the systematic increase of neoliberal capitalist surveillance practices. Gill (2014) notes that 'any individual academic in the UK can now be ranked and measured on more than 100 different scales and indices' wherein failure to reach targets of 'research excellence' or student satisfaction is seen by management as measures that may render someone redundant (Gill, 2014: 22–23). Coincidentally, this accumulates into a pressure to produce more, while not being given more time to do so – a phenomenon Vostal (2015) describes as 'oppressive acceleration'. While some academics try to resist this acceleration, its oppression often results in guilt and anxiety when complying with these expectations, and when resisting them (Vostal, 2015: 88). Labour experiences are thus felt differently across career stages, particularly in systems of surveillance as quantitative measurements of research outputs. This quantification, however, has another implication for ECAs. Through oppressive acceleration, ECAs are fed with the potentiality to 'get ahead' – in the form of producing more papers or 'academic service' – in the hope of improving their curriculum vitae (CV) and thus securing work. This is seen as a 'survival practice' and tempting solution to the precarious ECA (Cannizzo, 2018: 104). Recognising and acting on the material differences between the 'paid and unpaid academics', and in intersection with ECA-ness, needs to be acknowledged to ground sector-wide differential solidarity.

Our service work as the committee included providing workshops and webinars that would help ECAs to cater to these neoliberal capitalist demands. We often depended on the labour of other academics too to partake in these workshops. Our work on the committee may thus be interpreted twofold: First, that we are complicit in this culture of unpaid labour (and that we, as a result of this work, may be better positioned in the academic job market or community); and second, that we seek to intervene in this culture by identifying and reflecting on our complicity. As is continuously demonstrated throughout this article, 'unpaid labour also reflects our ability to navigate ourselves (with different levels of ease) in a classist, sexist, racist, and ableist society' (Gill, 2014: 19). The performance of unpaid labour is, arguably, then further controlled by our access to material resources; the unpaid labour that is valued the most, that which is deemed the most 'excellent' and competitive, also reflects structures of power. Academic 'excellence', however, does not build solidarity.

The possibility to choose what labour to undertake reflects hegemonic political structures, thus the individual who 'is often male, White, able-bodied, wealthy and not a primary caregiver' (Briscoe-Palmer and Mattocks, 2021: 44). The type of unpaid labour we 'take on' in academia tends to reproduce, for example, gendered systems of

labour and, in turn, value. Men are strategically taking on more ‘prestigious’ and ‘CV-enhancing’ service work such as editorships and committee chairing (notably, activities that are sometimes paid rather than ‘free’) because women are expected to, and over-represented in, taking on service work that centres pastoral care such as mentoring (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2024: 2). Consequently, what kind of unpaid labour you engage in can also affect your ‘value’ in the academy. It is important that we reflect, and act, on how we reinforce structures of power also within the institution *within* the neoliberal capitalist system.

Academic ‘excellence’ disproportionately affects the marginalised ECA; the competitiveness of the academic (entry-level) job market has inflated recruitment criteria, subsequently reinforcing the system of unpaid labour (Briscoe-Palmer and Mattocks, 2021: 44). Hence, we perform unpaid labour in addition to our precarious or fixed-term contracts. The expectations of having, or needing, to produce relevant research outputs while, at the same time, gathering experience in grant applications and pedagogical rigour have influenced our PhD experience from the start (Bendfeldt et al., 2024: 448–449; Cannizzo, 2018: 98). For many PhD students, unpaid labour needs to be performed in addition to part-time work that generates funds to cover our living costs, such as rent and food. The increasing number of precariously employed academics means that societal ‘health and safety nets’ are seldom guaranteed, such as sick and parental leave, and pensions (Gill, 2014: 14–15, 19). Consequently, candidates who depend on these systems of support are forced out of the academic labour system.

Gill (2014) argues that we must see current structures of capitalist work as exploitation to find ways to collectively resist it. It is important to politicise our experiences to not lose our ability to mobilise around issues of labour exploitation to force change; we need to build both resonant and differential solidarities. Indeed, Gill suggests that ‘exploitation within the contemporary academy operates in and through technologies of selfhood’ meaning that we need to collectively resist the oppression and exploitation rendered by contemporary labouring structures, such as surveillance, oppressive acceleration, and the individualisation of responsibility for education and career development (Gill, 2014: 13). While the network was limited to remaining broadly ‘apolitical’ as part of a registered charity, we found our political position to be inherently and indistinguishably part of our material experiences in and outside the academy. Hence, developing our understanding of solidarity was (and is) necessary.

The material insecurity and the ever-growing pressures of the academic job market are often associated with mental health-related concerns for ECAs too. Hence, there are further systemic barriers that can make ECA experiences more challenging which calls for expanding our ability to be in solidarity. Next, we reflect on these challenges.

## **Visible and invisible barriers to entering the academic community**

We often speak about imposter syndrome (Mullangi and Jagsi, 2019), a feeling that is rooted in precarious working environments and structures of material insecurity. Commonly, imposter syndrome is seen as ‘normal’ and something everyone goes through at all stages of their career, stemming from unattainable ideas of ‘academic excellence’. While such perspectives are certainly not unwarranted, it is important to not lose sight of different lived experiences and identities. For ECAs, imposter syndrome can feel like not belonging in certain spaces or being unqualified, particularly when speaking to a more

senior colleague. This comes at the expense of opportunities, connections, mentorship, or collaborations.

As ECAs, a prime time for imposter syndrome to make itself known to us is our first conference. Despite having been accepted to the conference, clear ‘external evidence of success’ (Mullangi and Jagsi, 2019), many ECAs experience imposter syndrome as they enter. This can materialise in different ways. Presenting work comes with the fear of being judged by colleagues (Evans et al., 2018) and doubting one’s abilities (Mullangi and Jagsi, 2019). But presenting work is not the only challenge at conferences. Entering a new space or new communities comes with questions of belonging. Where is our space in this group? What if we do not have *any* space? During our tenure, we had several network members share these experiences and worries with us. At the same time, we know how important it is to enter existing communities. Academia still features hierarchical power structures which make networking invaluable, particularly for ECAs trying to find their path.

What seems like a destitute situation can often be soothed – though not eliminated – with even the smallest act of solidarity. One of the authors had such an experience at their own first conference. Conferences had been cancelled or moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. So, while everyone else was thrilled to see each other again, to catch up in-person after 2 years of online meetings, the author found themselves in a large, busy room where everyone seemed to know each other, and they did not, like many of our members had described to us. They were invited into an existing group (one they would later learn was largely shaped by ‘feminist academic friendship’), introduced to other colleagues, and invited to sit at their tables at lunch and dinner. But this is not the case for everyone.

Ours and our members’ experiences of breaking into invisible or visible communities made it clear that this is one challenge for ECAs that needs to be more clearly addressed. We also believed it was a challenge that *could* be addressed. When we built our strategy, we had two goals associated with this area: (1) making existing communities more accessible for ECAs and (2) creating spaces that would allow ECAs to form their own communities. In pursuit of these goals, we introduced two new events to our programming: A career development day at our annual online conference, including panels and roundtables on navigating academia, and an in-person pre-conference day at the association’s main conference. The latter served both goals: We ran sessions on making the most of conferences and how to network in new spaces, and we created a physical space for ECAs to come together and get a sense of community ahead of the main conference. Our members responded very positively to this initiative, and feedback we received indicated that the pre-conference day had made the main conference less intimidating for them because they had found a group of ‘conference buddies’, making them feel less alone. In addition, we also sought closer collaborations with the association’s specialist groups. This included offering mentoring sessions at other conferences, most often before the official start of the respective main conference, to create spaces for ECAs to find their communities. Hence, these experiences informed how we now seek to understand ECA-ness as solidarity building; in these different (pre-)established or newly created groups we, and our academic colleagues, were able to resonate and acknowledge differences to engage as an empathic academic community.

Based on what we learned from our work on the committee and feedback we received from our members, we offer the following four recommendations on how to be more inclusive of ECAs in the academy with small, meaningful actions.

### *Recommendation 1: Create spaces*

Our online and in-person activities reinforced that one of the most important steps is to create spaces for ECAs to come together with peers and to connect with senior colleagues in more informal spaces. Our work demonstrated that activities such as 1-hour speed mentoring sessions before the start of a conference can significantly improve ECAs' sense of belonging and decrease imposter syndrome.

### *Recommendation 2: Small acts of kindness go a long way*

Whether it is approaching someone who is standing alone during a coffee break, inviting someone to sit at your table, or introducing someone you just met to other colleagues, such small acts of kindness and generosity can be immensely meaningful for ECAs. This is a quotidian way of enacting solidarity in spaces that are structured by material exclusions and inequities.

### *Recommendation 3: Pay it forward*

Once you have found your place, make sure to remain perceptive of people entering after you. Did someone extend a hand to you? Why not pay it forward to the next person who comes along? Offer your time, feedback, and advice. Offer to listen. Invite them to your table. Be the mentor you had or perhaps the mentor you wish you had had.

### *Recommendation 4: Be a friend*

There is power in academic friendships (Taylor and Klein, 2018). Someone who listens, offers perspective, or simply says 'I don't have a solution, but *I get it*'. Someone who celebrates your achievements and commiserates when things are not going well. Find someone who will be that person for you, and make sure to be that person for someone else too.

As established, community is important. To further build solidarity in our communities, we also need to tackle material inequity and the systems that uphold it. Now, we turn to explicit recommendations grounded in our commitment to EDI.

## **Challenging compounded inequities and inequalities as early career academics**

This section of the article should be seen as much as an admission of failure as it is a call to action. As the first EDI Officer on the network's committee, the role was one of the authors' to shape and develop to meet the needs of our membership. Weeks before the start of our tenure, Chris Hanretty (2021) had released an unflinching report on career trajectories in UK departments for Politics and IR. It made for dispiriting reading. EDI measures across Politics and IR, as a discipline, lag behind related disciplines. Those disparities are not hidden, but they had not been rigorously quantified and contextualised until Hanretty's report. To paraphrase Hanretty's conclusion, to make these inequalities known and visible is the first step towards combating them. But how?

Our first priority was to give our membership its voice. The centring of marginalised voices has long underpinned research on equality (Corneille et al., 2019; Donnor et al., 2016; Iverson, 2007), and it felt right to follow this well-established path by asking our membership to share experiences with EDI. The EDI officer designed a short online survey and distributed it to our membership. The responses (and the distinct lack thereof) were immediately clear. Another survey was not wanted. No more diagnosis. Endless attempts at discovery were masking the very real delays in getting to any action. One member wrote, having declined to fill in the survey: It was, they said, deeply frustrating to repeatedly be asked to identify the problems they faced.

And so what could we give to them, and others during the course of our tenure that would count as ‘real action’? There were the day-to-day actions we took to ensure that we exemplified EDI best practice in our own activities: Diverse panels, accessible events, advocating for accessibility grants, childcare support to attend events, widening participation in our network and its events. Those are tangible steps in the right direction, the bare minimum necessary to claim any consideration of EDI in an organisation.

Underpinning the second half of this section is a firm advocacy for equity-focussed approaches, not simply a reliance on equality. Perhaps another way to think about this is a focus on the outcomes as well as the opportunities available to all members of our field: a recognition that the systemic disadvantages faced by marginalised groups require a systemic, active rebalancing to achieve parity of outcomes. We set out recommendations to approaching EDI in our field which in turn facilitate our capabilities to resonant and differential solidarity building. While these recommendations have specific audiences, for example, academic departments, a whole-system approach requires all stakeholders in our field to make a collective commitment to actively advocate for solutions.

### *Transferring power*

In an increasingly competitive and complex research funding environment, and job market, being seen as a safe and experienced research leader carries enormous weight. But you cannot lead without experience, and you cannot get experience if you have not led. ECAs, particularly on highly precarious contracts, are frequently undertaking the bulk of fieldwork and data analysis in research projects. While they rightly are acknowledged in authorship, they rarely get the chance to develop key research leadership skills, such as grant writing, project management, or budget control. These skills are fundamental to progression to Principal Investigator (PI).

*Recommendation 1.* Existing PIs, especially those in Professorial positions must practise generous research leadership and actively elevate ECAs into responsibility for those key aspects of successful research management. Where there are opportunities to name ECAs as PI (such as in applications for internal awards of funding), senior academics should seek to bring more junior staff up to Co-Investigator level, or step back to allow them to take the full PI role.

*Recommendation 2.* Internal strategic committees should feature proportionally representative ECA membership, and not appoint an ECA ‘Representative’. ECAs are a distinct cohort and require targeted support as set out below. But in leadership contexts, identifying them as a subgroup that is allocated one representative serves to isolate and

demote them from the 'established' academic community, reinforcing the impression that they do not have a place in strategic or leadership forums.

### *Changing processes*

Higher education is a deeply process-driven environment. Codification and standardisation are not inherently negative characteristics; they can improve fairness, transparency, and system confidence. But only if they work and are easily navigable. Probation, research income capture, teaching, publishing, and case for promotion are just some of the pulls on ECAs seeking to establish themselves. Compounding these competing priorities are the increasingly complex and laborious processes that govern everyday decision making in HE. And, more pressingly, processes that are designed by senior leaders in the sector or individual institutions, are at risk of baking in unconscious biases before a researcher even gets to complete the process at hand.

*Recommendation 3.* Review application processes for internally awarded funding or roles to reduce the time burden on those who historically have been found to have greater external time pressures (such as caring roles) or receive less structural support from their institutions. Only seek essential information at the application stage. Where possible, partially anonymised applications to disassociate projects from researchers are preferable.

*Recommendation 4.* De-emphasise track record and make evaluation and assessment criteria transparent and accessible to everyone, including metrics, performance indicators, and decision-making processes. The elevation of track record disadvantages those ECAs who may have pursued non-traditional career paths or have had to take time away for family or personal reasons. Criteria should be focused on the merit of the project. Opacity breeds suspicion and demoralisation. Processes and criteria need to be accessible and evidently equally applied.

### *Targeted support*

To their credit, departments and institutions are more routinely embedding training and support programmes to develop critical skills in their staff. These programmes are largely open to all, but their uptake is uneven. One of the authors has observed an uneven diversity in the participants and the thin throughput from knowledge exchange training programmes to successful applications for funding. In selection processes, if a blind application is not possible (e.g. it is often too easy to identify a researcher by their project title) diversity should be a key consideration in the final decision-making.

*Recommendation 5.* Financial and professional support available to all staff should be partially ringfenced to provide targeted support for the whole ECA cohort. Further disaggregation of the cohort should be encouraged, for example, media and communications training for disabled academics.

### *Follow the money*

As a final reflection on the efforts to improve the experience and outcomes of those colleagues in underrepresented groups in our field, it would be naive to omit an acknowledgement



of how difficult the HE funding landscape is at present. In such a competitive environment, in which demands are increasing while resources are dwindling, universities have little incentive to prioritise EDI (and little capacity to, even if they would like to). UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and other research funders have a unique position in the sector to mandate EDI considerations and best practice in a way that would make a material difference to the outcomes of those marginalised academics. If you are not (yet) a member of department or institutional leadership, you can certainly lend your voice to call for funders to implement a funding structure that works to remove detrimental bias and barriers from the career paths of colleagues who face structural hurdles that others do not.

**Recommendation 6.** ECAs should be given mentoring and support to develop the skills and networks needed to successfully sit on funding council review panels. Any further opportunities to engage with awarding bodies should be encouraged to help to embed EDI best practice at funder level.

## Conclusion

In this article, we explored some of the challenges, opportunities, and recommendations that come out of our own encounters with the neoliberal HE landscape. We used a materialist approach to understand the ‘early career academic’ as more than just a temporal career stage – but rather, a site at which scholars are differentially exposed to precarity. Recognising this, we conceptualised our discussion through differential solidarity and resonant solidarity, which we proposed as frames within which to address issues of precarity, unpaid labour, and inequities across the profession. Resonant solidarity encourages empathy *within* the ECA community through directly relating to each other. This serves the purpose of building a group identity which allows ECAs to clarify our collective aims, while generating a sense of community among members. We also know that the vulnerability that characterises ‘the ECA’ is unequally distributed. As we have seen above, research shows that these challenges are more acute, and compounded with other forms of oppression, within certain marginalised groups. Hence, we proposed differential solidarity as a way to encourage empathy with others who experience other forms of violence, oppression, or marginalisation, that one extends care for. Here, we call for a form of solidarity built on the recognition of the unequal distribution of marginalisation *within* the ECA category.

Understanding solidarity in this way demands community and collective resistance and response to the shifting ecologies of UK HE as an increasingly marketised sector. At the same time, we acknowledged some of the tensions and challenges that we face from within our ECA status, as we both experience and have compassion for those of us trying to position ourselves favourably within an increasingly challenging labour market. As we reflect on the places in which power and resources currently lie, we therefore asked, how can charities, learned associations, and research and teaching institutions reflect on and actualise their commitments to the sustainability and development of our discipline through a materialist lens? What would this look like in relation to ECAs, who are often at the sharp end of challenging material conditions? The closing of academic departments in the humanities and social sciences threaten the importance of interdisciplinary and marginalised social justice work in UK HE, such as the recent strike against staff in *Queer and Black Histories* at Goldsmiths University of London (Guinness, 2024). Furthermore, the trend in dividing teaching and research into different career tracks might help those

academics who are interested in one of these tasks. However, in our context where ‘research excellence’ is prioritised, the teaching and research separation also enforces a hierarchy between these tracks (Smith and Walker, 2021). This reinforces inequalities; women tend to take on more teaching than men and marginalised students tend to attend colleges that are teaching-centred which can affect future postgraduate cohorts (Dandridge, 2023: 7). The pressure of publishing in journals while there is a ‘reviewer crisis’ (Allen et al., 2023), and the continuing job precarity ECAs face, further make our futures unknown. No new policies have been announced by the new Labour government to deal with these pressing issues (Vaughan, 2024), we thus call for solidarity to continue to put pressure on institutions of power.

As we began to think through some of the potential responses to these questions, we reflected on the themes of community, materiality, care, knowledge, and labour as the key strands which shaped and continue to shape the interface between ECAs and the academy. We reflected on the structural inequity and power relations within which we undertake research and teaching of Politics and IR today. How our work is undertaken, recognised, and remunerated (or not) are crucial to the wellbeing and flourishing of individual scholars *and* the wider discipline. We have therefore affirmed that it is in the interest of the wider discipline to take up or continue to develop a serious commitment to our sustainability and development through a materialist lens; one which understands and addresses the very real material challenges that ECAs are increasingly exposed to and takes concrete actions to support and elevate ECAs.


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## Notes

1. Including PhD/graduate students.
2. Unlike the other committee members, the Communications Officer was in the role from Spring 2022 until Spring 2024.

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