Nottingham Business School
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AHUA

Centre for People, Work & Organizational Practice

Career Barriers and Enablers for Ethnically Minoritised Senior Professional Services Roles in UK Higher Education

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"They referred to me as the diversity hire… and when I challenged poor practice, I became the angry Black woman." — P20

"We recognise there is an issue, but I don't think we really understand what to do about it and a big part of that is because things are so white". — Focus Group participant.

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Foreword

University Registrars, Chief Operating Officers and Secretaries remain, quite frankly, predominantly white. Senior professional leadership teams across UK universities have not diversified in the way other parts of the sector have. We have seen increasing diversity among our governors, students, the specialist staff who report into us, and among the Vice-Chancellors and Chairs of the boards we serve. Yet the colour of our own professional cohort has remained stubbornly uniform. Despite the diversity of talent we support, we have not reflected that same breadth of experience, culture and perspective within our own ranks.

It was for this reason that I strongly supported the proposal for AHUA to commit a proportion of its reserves and time to commissioning research into this issue. I felt genuine frustration and embarrassment as I looked around the AHUA conference, reviewed our membership list and saw shortlists for senior administrative roles. Despite the goodwill and progressive intentions across our institutions, the reality is that people from ethnic minority backgrounds remain significantly underrepresented in senior professional service roles. This imbalance raises challenging but necessary questions about the structures, cultures and recruitment practices that determine who gets to lead within higher education.

Like many AHUA colleagues, I had my own theories about the barriers. Perhaps our recruitment language and models were unintentionally exclusionary; perhaps career pathways in professional services lacked the clarity found in academic or private-sector routes; perhaps our induction and support processes failed to create a genuine sense of belonging. These may each play a part, but I recognised that I could not presume to know the full story. As one of the privileged few who has navigated the pathway into these roles, it was clear that this problem demanded evidence, not assumption — and solutions shaped by those who have been historically excluded.

There is no silver bullet. We cannot do this alone. But it is a cause worth pursuing — one that requires sustained, collective effort across AHUA, recruiters, and sector partners. This research is not an end in itself; it is the beginning of change. Change built on listening, learning, and the shared will to deliver the step change our sector so urgently needs.

Andrew Young

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a Phase 1 research project funded by the Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA), aimed at exploring career barriers and enablers for ethnically minoritised senior professional services staff in UK Higher Education (HE). Recognising the lack of ethnic diversity within professional services leadership, AHUA sought to generate actionable insights to inform sector-wide change.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining desk-based research with qualitative data collection. The desk research included analysis of Race Equality Charter and Athena Swan (which has traditionally focused on gender equity) submissions, ethnicity pay gap reports, and institutional demographic data from six Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). Primary data were gathered through 20 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups, using trauma-informed and ethically sensitive practices. Participants represented a diverse range of roles, ethnicities, and lived experiences.

The research revealed persistent structural and cultural barriers to career progression for ethnically minoritised staff. These barriers included racism, microaggressions, lack of sponsorship, opaque promotion processes, and performative Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) practices. Themes such as authenticity, code-switching, masking, and emotional labour were prevalent across interviews. Institutional cultures often failed to accommodate diverse identities, and representation at senior levels remained limited.

The report outlines a comprehensive set of recommendations across five thematic areas:

1. **Structural Reform and Policy Change** – clarify career pathways, revise contracts, embed accountability, and audit recruitment practices.
2. **Representation and Inclusion** – increase senior-level diversity, avoid tokenism, and promote visible role models.
3. **Development, Support and Research** – invest in mentoring, coaching, and longitudinal research; support staff networks.
4. **Cultural Change and Co-Creation** – promote inclusive cultures through co-creation and challenge dominant norms.
5. **Sector-Level Collaboration and Accountability** – coordinate efforts across professional bodies and ensure transparent reporting.

These recommendations aim to dismantle systemic inequities and promote meaningful, sustained change in the career trajectories of ethnically minoritised professional services staff.

Research Background and Objectives

Background

The Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA) represents senior university managers across the UK and Ireland, including Registrars, Chief Operating Officers, and Heads of Administration. Despite its broad membership, AHUA recognises a significant lack of ethnic diversity within professional service leadership roles in UK HE, a trend reflected in its own predominantly white membership.

While AHUA does not control institutional appointments, it is committed to promoting race equity and supporting the career progression of ethnically minoritised professional service staff. This project builds on AHUA's earlier initiative, a reciprocal mentoring scheme, and responds to a recognised gap in the sector: the absence of high-quality, action-oriented research focused specifically on professional service staff of colour.

Existing literature has largely concentrated on academic staff or mixed cohorts, often exploring intersectionality, with race and ethnicity as the central focus. However, the career progression pathways for professional service staff differ significantly from those in academic roles, necessitating targeted research.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this Phase 1 research project were to:

1. Identify key junctures where career progression for professional service staff of colour tends to stall.
2. Explore and evaluate interventions and institutional practices that have been implemented to support diversity and career progression within professional services.
3. Generate evidence-based insights into actions that have successfully supported career advancement for staff of colour.
4. Develop case studies for dissemination via AdvanceHE's Race Equality database of good practice.
5. Produce a final report to be shared with AHUA members and other professional service bodies (e.g., AHEP, UHR, BUFDG, AUDE), and through sector-wide platforms such as WonkHE.
6. Recommend the scope for a potential Phase 2 project, with a deeper focus on intersectionality and broader sector engagement.

This foundational phase aimed to provide actionable insights and lay the groundwork for sustained, systemic change in the career trajectories of professional service staff of colour in UK HE.

Overview of Approach

This project adopted a mixed-methods research design to explore the career barriers and enablers experienced by professional service staff of colour within HEIs. The approach was guided by the objectives set out by AHUA, with a focus on identifying key junctures where career progression stalls, surfacing effective diversity interventions, and informing future sector-wide initiatives.

Desk-Based Research

The initial phase involved a comprehensive review of existing literature and institutional documentation. This included:

- Analysing Race Equality Charter submissions, Athena Swan submissions and staff demographic data, from a small sample of HEIs.
- Identifying patterns and institutional practices that correlate with career progression challenges or successes for professional service staff of colour.
- Mapping existing interventions specifically targeting professional services, distinguishing them from academic-focused initiatives.

Primary Data Collection

To complement the desk research, qualitative data were gathered through:

- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with professional service staff across various levels of seniority.
- Use of trauma-informed and ethically sensitive research practices to ensure participant wellbeing, particularly when discussing experiences of race and racism.

This phase aimed to capture lived experiences and identify actions, formal and informal, that have supported or hindered career progression. When considering participant agency and interviewer selection, our research team engaged in thoughtful debate about who should conduct the interviews. Acknowledging our diverse ethnic backgrounds and the potential for tensions between academic and professional service participants, we were mindful of the power dynamics at play. To address these concerns, we designed the study to allow participants to choose their interviewer. This decision was informed by tensions in the literature around “matching” interviewer characteristics with those of participants. While shared lived experience can encourage rapport, trust, and cultural understanding, potentially reducing power imbalances, it can also obscure remaining differentials, conflate researcher and participant experiences, and homogenise individual characteristics. To navigate these complexities, we provided detailed biographies and photos of interviewers and integrated the MS Booking system into the data collection process, enabling participants to select an interviewer with whom they felt comfortable.

This approach aimed to empower participants, protect interviewers, and build a more inclusive research environment. By offering choice and control, we created conditions conducive to authentic and rich qualitative data. The system also allowed us to offer a wide range of interview times, maximising participation.

However, implementing this practice came with challenges. Ensuring equal access to and understanding of the booking system required clear instructions and support. Coordinating interviewer availability and scheduling also demanded flexibility and logistical care. We supported interviewers unfamiliar with the system and adapted scheduling to meet their needs. This approach was recognised by Nottingham Trent University with a Special Commendation in their Open Research Awards.

Methodological Limitations

We recognise that the methods employed approached a small sample size, and would require further work to potentially be generalisable, but we do feel that the findings offer rich insights into participant experiences, and form a decent basis for recommendations to flow.

Findings

Insights from the Literature

Higher Education as a Site of Career Formation and Inequality

Historically, universities have been positioned as liberal institutions of self-development and knowledge transfer (Broadley et al., 2022). However, the Western academy has long operated as an exclusive space, shaped by hierarchical classifications of human activity—between “homo faber” (the worker) and “homo ludens” (the innovator) (Rojek, 2005; Gee, 2022). This duality has informed the academy’s privileging of knowledge creation over administration, reinforcing elitist structures.

Since the late 20th century, universities have undergone significant transformation, driven by massification, marketisation, and the demands of post-industrial economies (Jessop, 2017; Collini, 2012). These changes have positioned universities as engines of social mobility, while simultaneously reproducing class power and inequality (Gee, 2016; 2019; 2022b). The expansion of student populations, particularly those from historically excluded groups, has challenged institutions to adapt to a more diverse constituency (Thomas, 2005).

Diversification of Staff and Persistent Inequalities

Alongside student massification, the diversification of university staff, including academic, professional, and administrative roles, has introduced new dynamics.

However, literature on career development continues to highlight enduring patterns of privilege, particularly for white, middle-class men (Roberts, 1977; Friedman & Laurison, 2020). While there is substantial research on student and academic career trajectories, the career development of professional services staff of colour remains underexplored.

This gap is significant given the structural and cultural barriers faced by minoritised staff, including limited progression pathways, lack of sponsorship, and systemic bias. Thus, the rapid evidence assessment (REA) identifies a need for a deeper understanding of how race, class, and gender intersect to shape career experiences in UK HE.

Conceptual Framework: Career as a Social Strand

To critically explore career barriers and enablers, the project adopts a sociological view of career as a “social strand” in a person’s life (Goffman, 1961; Gee, 2017). This approach recognises career as one of many significant activities, alongside housing, caring, leisure, and learning, that are reflexively narrated and negotiated.

For minoritised groups, especially women of colour, these strands often intersect in ways that produce heightened tension and constraint (Oldridge & Greene, 2018).

Duality and the Politics of Career

The REA draws on Gee's (2017, 2019, 2022b) concept of duality to examine paradoxical relationships within career development:

Agency vs. Structure: How macro-level systems shape, constrain, and are reproduced by individual action.

Self vs. Other: How identity is constructed through relational dynamics and institutional positioning.

Being vs. Becoming: How career is experienced as both a present state and a future aspiration.

This framework challenges dominant narratives that privilege agency over structure and individualism over collectivity. It foregrounds the political dimensions of career, including how institutions maintain the status quo and how individuals navigate, resist, or reshape these conditions.

While EDI activity is undertaken to promote inclusion within academic roles, the issues faced by those in professional services throughout the UK remain 'largely unexplored' (Harrison, 2023; Nangia, 2024). Thus, the following points may cross over into professional services while also recognising that professional services encompass a broad range of roles, each with unique challenges.

More specifically, the research team undertook an REA to swiftly review the current literature and establish the evidence base of relevant prior work concerning race equity and inclusion for professional service staff within UK HE. The REA methodology enabled a systematic yet time-efficient synthesis of academic and grey literature, offering a robust overview within a condensed timeframe (Brown et al., 2020; 2022).

Table 1: Emergent Themes

Barriers	Enablers
Macro & micro aggressions (racism, bullying, harassment)	Alliance and network building
Established perceptions	Institutional and intellectual leadership
Unrecognised/unpaid and precarious work	Inclusive policies, culture, and strategic priorities
Isolation, marginalisation and lack of belonging	Monitoring and measuring - evidence building
Lack of development opportunities, glass ceiling and 'knowing' the promotion process	
Informal organisational processes	
Social capital and its utilisation	

Themes from the Rapid Evidence Assessment

Racism

The theme of racism was present in 11% of documents (n=4). Racism remained a persistent and systemic issue in UK HE, particularly affecting Black and minoritised staff. The literature highlighted how institutional racism manifested through exclusion, mental health challenges, and inequitable treatment (Arday, 2021; Mahony & Weiner, 2019; Ishaq & Hussain, 2022; Rodriguez, 2022).

Leadership Barriers

Barriers to leadership and career progression were the most frequently cited challenges appearing in 54% of documents (n=19). These included limited access to mentorship, exclusion from decision-making, and biased promotion practices. Such barriers disproportionately affected Black professional service staff, who remained underrepresented in senior roles (Barnes, 2021; Breeden, 2021; Ishaq & Hussain, 2022; Nangia, 2024; Wyatt & Silvester, 2015).

Microaggressions

Microaggressions, bullying, and harassment were widely reported across the literature, appearing in 37% of documents (n=13). These experiences contributed to feelings of isolation, imposter syndrome, and emotional exhaustion, particularly among Black staff (Mahony & Weiner, 2019; Mirza, 2018; Nwosu, 2024; Queen Mary University of London, 2019; Universities UK, 2020).

Institutional Culture

Institutional culture was present in 31% of documents (n=11). The dominant white institutional culture in academia often marginalised Black staff. The literature critiqued the performative nature of diversity policies and called for structural transformation rather than superficial reform (Arday, 2018; Law, 2018; Mirza, 2018; Rodriguez, 2022).

Intersectionality

The theme of intersectionality was present in 20% of documents (n=7). The intersection of race with gender, class, and other identities compounded the challenges faced by Black professional service staff. These intersecting identities were often overlooked in institutional responses, despite their significant impact on workplace experiences (Barnes, 2021; Breeden, 2021; Chance, 2022; Nangia, 2024).

Underrepresentation

Black staff remained significantly underrepresented in senior roles, particularly within professional services, which was the theme in 8% of documents (n=3). This lack of visibility contributed to a cycle of exclusion and limited progression opportunities (Ishaq & Hussain, 2022; Nangia, 2024).

Invisible and Emotional Labour

This theme (appearing in 17% of documents; n=6) captured the often unacknowledged work undertaken by racialised staff, particularly in EDI roles. It included emotional, interpretive, identity, racialised, and aspirational labour—forms of work that were rarely recognised or compensated (Vong et al., 2023).

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental health challenges appeared in 8% of documents (n=3) and were frequently linked to experiences of racism, isolation, and marginalisation. These issues were particularly acute for Black and minoritised staff navigating predominantly white institutional cultures (Arday, 2021; Universities UK, 2020).

Self, Agency, and Belonging

Themes of self-awareness, agency, and belonging collectively appeared in just under 14% of documents (n=5) and were central to understanding how Black and minoritised staff navigated exclusionary environments. These concepts were often tied to identity, visibility, and the ability to influence institutional change (Rodriguez, 2022; Queen Mary University of London, 2019).

Structural and Institutional Barriers

This theme, appearing in 11% of documents (n=4), included references to systemic inequities, discriminatory policies, and organisational cultures that hindered progression and inclusion. It overlapped with critiques of neoliberalism and performative diversity (Mahony & Weiner, 2019; McGee, 2020).

Storytelling and Lived Experience

Several sources (n=3; 8% of documents) emphasised the importance of capturing and amplifying the lived experiences of Black professional service staff. Storytelling was framed as a tool for advocacy, visibility, and institutional accountability (Nangia, 2024; UCU, 2016).

Policy and Practice Gaps

This theme appeared in 11% of documents (n=4), it included critiques of current EDI policies, the lack of data collection, and the need for more coherent, evidence-based interventions. It also highlighted the gap between policy rhetoric and lived realities (Race Equality Oxford, 2021; City University London, 2025).

Summary of the Literature

The literature revealed a consistent pattern of structural exclusion and barriers to progression for Black professional service staff in UK academia. While some interventions exist, the field remains significantly under-researched, particularly regarding professional services, highlighting a pressing need for targeted inquiry (Harrison, 2023; Nangia, 2024). While there was a growing body of work addressing diversity and inclusion in academic roles, the experiences of professional services staff, particularly those from Black and minoritised ethnic backgrounds, remained significantly under-researched (Harrison, 2023; Nangia, 2024). The existing evidence base included valuable insights into student career development (Arday et al., 2021; Kauser et al., 2021; Bradbury & Van Nieuwerburgh, 2022), as well as studies focused on academic staff (Bhopal et al., 2018; Bhopal, 2019). Some literature spanned both academic and professional services roles (Arday, 2021), while other works addressed broader sectoral or disciplinary contexts, such as STEM (Rincón & George-Jackson, 2016; McGee, 2020).

There was also a modest but growing body of research centred on specific occupational groups, such as academic librarians (Brookbank & Haigh, 2021; Ishaq & Hussain, 2022), and some attention had been paid to leadership and governance (Hale, 2023; Nwosu, 2024). However, there remained a clear and concerning gap in literature that explicitly captured the lived experiences and career development of Black and minoritised

professional services staff within the UK higher education context.

This gap prompted recent calls for collaborative action, such as those from the Higher Diversity Coalition (2023), who advocated for:

1) Improved data collection and analysis as a foundation for change.
2) Identifying best practice and examination of barriers in recruitment, progression, and retention.
3) Amplifying lived experience narratives.
4) Developing of coherent, inclusive development programmes to support and grow the talent pipeline.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The REA highlights the need for:

- Targeted research into the career development of professional services staff of colour.
- Policy reform to address structural inequalities in recruitment, progression, and recognition.
- Inclusive career frameworks that reflect diverse lived experiences and challenge dominant norms.
- Sector-wide accountability for embedding equity into the fabric of institutional culture.

This conceptual and contextual review provides a foundation for the empirical findings and recommendations that follow, offering a critical lens through which to understand career development in UK HE.

Insights from the Institutional Data

Initially, ten institutions expressed interest in participating in the study; of those, six submitted final data sets. These data sets included Race Equality Charter, Athena Swan and ethnicity pay gap reporting. When data were requested, no institution could provide professional services staff career progression data. This response is not necessarily through not wishing to share data, but that many institutions lack structure and formal processes in place to track professional service careers in a similar vein to those of academics. HESA's recent consultation on the careers of professional services may prompt a change in this reporting practice. The institutional data collected demonstrated that ethnically and racially minoritised employees remain under-represented in senior levels of professional services and remain the minority in lower grades of professional services.

While consideration should be given to local population representation, for example, in rural and northern institutions,

the figures remain low. In some cases, the ethnicity pay gap was smaller than the gender pay gap, but it is noted that the proportion of staff who have not recorded their ethnicity makes the analysis less reliable. Ethnicity pay gap reports detailed the need to monitor professional services staff grades. Indeed, increased representation is listed as an action in Race Equality Charter submissions. During the course of this project, we were notified of the work of the Ethnic Representation Index (Mba et al., 2024), the results of which reflect our findings. In the work of Mba et al. (2024), the average ethnicity pay gap across all university staff, including both academic and professional services staff, has increased to 6%, from 5.6% in the previous year.

Over the past year, BAM. (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) representation has generally improved across several staff categories. Senior managers saw an increase to 9.1%, and professional services staff on lower grades also rose to 20.2%. Representation among governors increased to by 3.6% to 17.5%. However, there was a decline in BAME representation among executive board members, falling from 7.7% to 7%. Looking specifically at Black staff, representation has increased in several areas: senior managers (1.5%), professional services staff on lower grades (6.7%), and governors (4.8%). Despite these gains, Black representation among executive board members saw a significant decrease, dropping to 0.7%—a 50% reduction compared to the previous Index (Mba et al., 2024).

Insights from Interview Participants

Here, our sample comprised twenty participants, representing diversity in age, gender, race and ethnicity, role and seniority, disability status and caring responsibilities.

The themes that follow, flow directly from the interview data.

Authenticity

The theme of authenticity emerged strongly in relation to how ethnically minoritised professional service staff engage with their roles, often navigating complex expectations and responsibilities that extend beyond formal job descriptions. Participants described a deep sense of role involvement, shaped by both institutional demands and personal values, which often saw them go above and beyond their designated duties.

> ***"I probably had to invest without even realising in my own personal development… going out there and seeking opportunities to network… attend conferences… do public speaking… that hasn't necessarily been supported internally."***
> ***— P20***

Several interviewees highlighted the hidden curriculum of their roles—unwritten expectations that required them to wear multiple hats, intervene in sensitive situations, and act as informal advocates or support systems for students and colleagues. This extended involvement was often driven by a sense of duty and care, but also came with emotional and professional risks.

Others spoke of being assigned additional responsibilities without adequate recognition or support, particularly when stepping into acting or interim roles. These experiences were frequently described as setting individuals up to fail, especially when expectations were misaligned with the actual scope of the role or when support structures were lacking.

> ***"Yes, I wanted the head of [area] role. But this is not it. This is me doing my old role and then some extra stuff… you're setting me up to fail."***
> ***— P02***

Participants also reflected on the emotional labour involved in their roles, especially when navigating cultural differences, institutional politics, or the pressure to conform to dominant workplace norms. For some, this led to feelings of sadness, overwhelm, or the need to suppress aspects of their identity to succeed professionally. However, many also found ways to reclaim authenticity through external communities, networks, and advocacy work.

> ***"The Race Equality Charter piece of work wasn't something that would necessarily have fit within my portfolio… I was asked to lead that because there was nobody else senior enough who was from an ethnically minoritised background."***
> ***— P09***

Importantly, role involvement was not always negative. Some participants described using their positional privilege to amplify underrepresented voices and challenge inequitable practices. Others found meaning and purpose in contributing to institutional change, even when the work was unofficial or unacknowledged.

Overall, the sub-theme of role involvement reveals how authenticity is negotiated in the workplace—not only through personal expression but also through the ways individuals engage with, resist, and reshape their roles in response to systemic challenges.

Discrimination

Discrimination was a pervasive and multi-layered theme across the interviews, with participants describing how their intersecting identities shaped their experiences in UK HE. The narratives revealed how race, religion, gender, disability, age, class, and caring responsibilities interact with institutional cultures and practices, often resulting in exclusion, marginalisation, and unequal treatment. These experiences shaped their sense of belonging, career progression, and ability to be authentic in the workplace. Notably, out of 20 interviews, when coded, there were 98 references to racism.

Participants described how discrimination was often covert, embedded in everyday practices, assumptions, and institutional cultures. While overt racism and sexism were occasionally reported, more commonly, individuals encountered microaggressions, exclusionary norms, and structural inequalities that were difficult to challenge or even name. These experiences were compounded by a lack of meaningful support systems and inconsistent institutional responses.

Many described having to work harder than white colleagues to gain recognition or progression.

> ***"I've had to fight every day to move up in my career… my colleague just walks into the room and commands respect." — P02***

Intersectionality and Emotional Labour

Many participants spoke to the emotional labour of navigating multiple marginalised identities. For example, ethnically minoritised women described being simultaneously undermined due to race and gender, while those with disabilities faced additional scrutiny or inflexibility. The pressure to conform, educate others, or suppress aspects of identity was a recurring theme.

> ***"I was made to feel like a difficult woman, not a difficult person." — P18***

Gender-based discrimination was reported across multiple levels, from casual sexism to structural barriers in promotion and leadership. Women described being overlooked, undermined, and stereotyped.

> ***"You have to prove your worth every time… there is no saying no at any point in your career." — P06***

Disability was another axis of exclusion, with participants describing a lack of reasonable adjustments, empathy, or institutional accountability.

> ***"There was no consideration of my disabilities". — P18***

Systemic and Cultural Barriers

Discrimination was not limited to interpersonal interactions. Participants highlighted systemic issues, such as unequal access to promotions, lack of representation in leadership, and policies that failed to accommodate diverse needs.

These were often reinforced by cultural norms that privileged whiteness, masculinity and middle-class values.

> ***"They were happy to keep me at that low level because I was good at my job… and that is why 'people like us' aren't promoted." — P20***

Class-based prejudice was described as subtle but persistent, often manifesting in assumptions about cultural capital or professional legitimacy.

> ***"Strong female leaders are often upper-class… there's a certain mould you're expected to fit." — P13***

Silencing and Surveillance

Several participants described feeling watched, judged, or silenced, particularly when expressing dissent or advocating for change. The fear of being labelled "aggressive", "emotional", or "difficult" led many to self-censor or disengage from institutional processes.

> ***"I shouted from the rooftop that this was a great institution… but now I'm not sure everybody accepts me as I am." — P20***
>
> ***"I don't want to be the voice for everyone… I'm really conscious of that." — P19***

Discrimination in Career Progression

Age and caring responsibilities were also cited as barriers to progression. Younger staff were often patronised or overlooked, while older staff felt sidelined. Mothers and carers faced rigid scheduling and limited flexibility, impacting their ability to engage fully in work and development opportunities.

> ***"They sold it as a development opportunity… but they wouldn't have done that if I was in my 50s." — P07***

Age-related bias affected both younger and older staff. Younger professionals described being patronised or overlooked, while older staff noted assumptions about their capacity or relevance.

> ***"I turn up and people treat me like a PA… even though I'm the director." — P10***

Caring responsibilities, particularly motherhood, were described as barriers to progression and inclusion. Participants reported inflexible scheduling, lack of understanding, and assumptions about their commitment.

> ***"I said I couldn't attend a 5 pm meeting because I had to pick up my daughter… and nothing changed." — P02***
>
> ***"I've had to choose roles based on proximity to home… I could have progressed more if I had flexibility." — P11***

Several participants expressed frustration with the lack of meaningful institutional support, particularly in response to discrimination or bias. Staff networks were often described as symbolic rather than strategic.

> ***"I've raised issues, but nothing's been done… it forces me back into my shell." — P20***

There was also concern about the performative nature of EDI initiatives, with some participants noting that diversity efforts lacked depth and accountability.

"We talk about EDI when we're going for awards, but it's not part of our everyday practice." — P20

"Even in the EDI working group, which is supposed to be a safe space, I've experienced microaggressions." — P12

Code Switching

The theme of code switching, the conscious or unconscious adaptation of language, behaviour, appearance, or cultural expression to fit dominant workplace norms, was a recurring and emotionally charged topic across interviews. Participants described how they modified aspects of themselves to navigate professional environments that often felt exclusionary, judgmental, or culturally narrow.

Navigating Identity and Belonging

Many participants shared that they felt pressure to suppress or alter parts of their identity to be accepted or taken seriously. This alteration included changing hairstyles, clothing, accents, and communication styles, and withholding personal or cultural information.

"I wore a very African hairstyle… people were uncomfortable. When I changed the picture, they were more comfortable." — P03

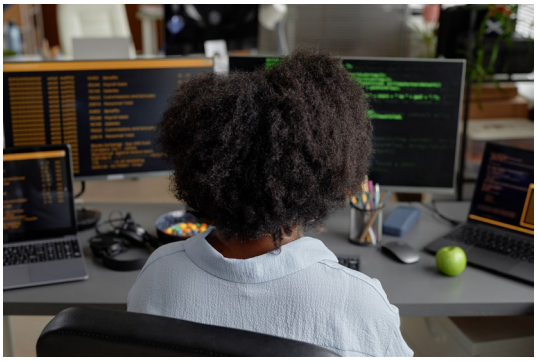
"I don't speak Patwa at work… it's not something I would bring into the office." — P08

"I've had to tone it down… we all have a persona." — P05

For some, code switching was a survival strategy—an effort to avoid being perceived as "too different", "too direct", or "too emotional". Others described it as a form of self-protection, especially in environments where personal information had previously been used against them.

"I don't tend to volunteer information… controlling the flow of information is strategic." — P18

"I've had to learn to be less direct… even when I try to be straightforward, it's misunderstood." — P03



Impact on Authenticity and Mental Health

The emotional toll of code-switching was significant. Participants described feelings of isolation, exhaustion, and sadness, particularly when they felt unable to be their authentic selves. Several noted that being forced to "perform" a version of themselves that aligned with dominant norms affected their confidence and wellbeing.

"I felt I had to disappear… to succeed, I needed to be someone else." — P03

"I used to hide parts of myself… now I've decided I won't dumb down to make others comfortable." — P20

Resistance and Reclamation

Despite these pressures, some participants described a journey toward reclaiming authenticity. This reclamation often came with seniority, confidence, or support from allies. Being visibly different, whether through dress, speech, or cultural expression, became a form of resistance and empowerment.

"I now present very differently… tattoos, piercings, shaved head. I enjoy the jarring effect it has." — P07

"I've started to play to my strengths… it's hard to argue with the work I've produced." — P07

"If I've gone to see a play on Windrush, I'll share that… I won't hide anymore." — P20

Institutional Blind Spots

Several participants highlighted how institutional cultures failed to recognise or accommodate diverse expressions of identity. From scheduling events during Ramadan to assumptions about who "fits" in leadership roles, these blind spots reinforced the need for code switching and contributed to feelings of exclusion.

"They scheduled the away day during Ramadan… we were told there were only three Muslims, but there were eleven." — P04

"There were conversations about whether my face fits the service." — P07

Religious identity was often misunderstood or marginalised. Participants described discomfort with institutional policies and interpersonal interactions that failed to accommodate or respect religious practices.

"We all have different religious days… but the university said it was too complicated to accommodate." — P04

Participants expressed frustration with the lack of meaningful institutional support, particularly in response to discrimination or bias. Staff networks were often described as symbolic rather than strategic.

"The BAME staff network is great for connection, but it doesn't lead to strategic change." — P19

"I had to request an external coach because I didn't feel safe discussing my lived experience within the organisation." — P20

Masking

The theme of masking, the deliberate suppression or alteration of one's identity, emotions, or cultural expression to conform to dominant workplace norms, was a powerful and recurring narrative across interviews. Participants described masking as a survival strategy, a form of emotional labour, and a response to institutional cultures that often failed to accommodate difference.

Masking as Emotional and Cultural Suppression

Many participants shared that they routinely masked aspects of their identity, including cultural behaviours, emotional responses, and personal values, to avoid judgment or exclusion. Masking included modifying speech, dress, emotional expression, and even dietary habits.

"I need to stop being myself. I need to be 'coconut' as my colleague" — P01.

"You can't be your authentic self… even what you eat, you have to do it alone." — P03

"I've got to come into work with a mask… I want to be sad, but I have to pretend like nothing's happened." — P08 (with reference to the death of George Floyd and rise in the Black Lives Matter movement).

"I wouldn't say I'm my full self… I'm reserved at work, even more than I am outside." — P08

"I don't use my full name at work. It helps me because I sound a certain way, I look a certain way, it helps me hide [my nationality]... People start speaking very slowly when they realise 'oh, you're not from around here'. I've been very lucky to be a minority, but to have camouflage in a way I can look and act the part" — P05.

Masking was often described as a learned behaviour, particularly among staff from immigrant backgrounds, who were taught to assimilate, stay quiet, and avoid drawing attention to themselves.

"You assimilate, you adapt, you stay quiet… that's what you have to do to be successful." — P09

Professionalism and the Pressure to Conform

Participants highlighted how institutional definitions of professionalism reinforced masking. Expectations around dress, language, and behaviour were often rigid and exclusionary, particularly for staff of colour, younger staff, and those from working-class backgrounds.

"I was told tattoos aren't appropriate." — P07

"I speak more formally at work… I wouldn't use slang, even in casual chats." — P19

"I was told my hair was too exotic… people touched it without asking." — P14

These norms created a sense of friction between personal identity and professional expectations, leading some to compartmentalise their lives or avoid sharing personal experiences with colleagues.

"There are things I just don't bring to work… even though they affect me deeply." — P15

Masking and Mental Health

The emotional toll of masking was significant. Participants described feelings of isolation, anxiety, and exhaustion from constantly monitoring their behaviour and suppressing their true selves. Some noted that masking contributed to burnout and disengagement.

"I go home thinking about it a lot more… the organisation doesn't share my values." — P07

"I wouldn't say I need to be here today… but I don't say that out loud." — P15

Career Barriers

Career progression within UK HE professional services was widely described as opaque, inconsistent, and shaped by structural, cultural, and interpersonal barriers. Participants shared experiences of being overlooked, unsupported, and excluded from development opportunities, often due to race, gender, age, class, immigration status, or assumptions about personal circumstances.

Lack of Sponsorship and Visibility

Several participants highlighted the absence of active sponsorship and advocacy from line managers or senior leaders. This lack of support was often compounded by assumptions about ambition, capability, or personal priorities.

"My line manager assumed I was happy just getting on because I had kids… he never considered I wanted to progress." — P02

"People don't champion others enough in higher education… my manager should have been my sponsor." — P02

"I wouldn't be in this role today if it wasn't for someone who supported my development." — P09

Bias and Gatekeeping

Overt and covert discriminatory practices were cited as significant barriers. Participants described being excluded from opportunities, judged on appearance or accent, and denied progression based on subjective notions of "fit", "gravitas", or "demeanour".

"I met all the requirements… but I wasn't even considered. They said Council wanted someone with gravitas." — P05

"I was told I didn't get the job because I kept saying 'we' instead of 'I'… they hired someone younger who'd never done the job." — P14

"Articulation is seen as a prerequisite for leadership… if you don't sound the part, you're held back." — P13

Structural and Contractual Limitations

Participants described rigid job structures, unclear pathways, and contractual classifications that limited progression. In some cases, roles were misclassified or lacked recognition for academic-level work.

"I've been in the field for 10 years… but I'm still called an [role]. It's heartbreaking." — P06

"There's no structure for progression in [job area]… it's a new area and the university hasn't built it in." — P07

"I've done horizontal moves to try and progress… but the roles just haven't come up." — P14

Barriers for International and Early-Career Staff

Visa restrictions, lack of UK experience, and age-related bias were cited as barriers for international staff and younger professionals. These factors often intersected with race and class, creating compounded disadvantage.

"I've got experience, but no degree… I've done the work, but I'm still overlooked." — P08

"They hired someone with 28 years of experience… how can I compete with that?" — P15

"I wonder if my age or ethnicity is a barrier… I've applied for roles and been unsuccessful." — P19

Inconsistent Access to Development

Many participants reported limited access to training, leadership programmes, or career development support—especially at higher grades. Some described having to seek external coaching or rely on informal networks.

"There's no strategic development… the staff network is great, but it doesn't lead to change." — P19

"I've never heard of anyone being put on an executive course… maybe it's a funding issue." — P20

That said, participants did point to external programmes, such as Aurora, to assist in their development.

Identities

The theme of identities emerged as a foundational lens through which participants understood their experiences in UK HE professional services. Interviewees spoke about how their racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, and professional identities shaped their sense of belonging, visibility, and value within their institutions. These identities were not static or singular—they were layered, evolving, and often negotiated in response to institutional norms and expectations.

Ethnic and Cultural Identity

Participants described how their ethnic and cultural backgrounds influenced how they were perceived and treated at work. Some felt their identities were invisible or misunderstood, while others experienced stereotyping or tokenism.

"I look a certain way… it helps me hide that I'm [ethnicity]." — P05

"I'm [ethnicity] originally… and there are issues of sect." — P04

For some, identity was a source of pride and resilience, while for others, it was a site of tension—especially when navigating predominantly white, middle-class institutional cultures.

"I'm a BME woman from [country]… I came with a PhD in literature, but still face barriers." — P06

One participant shared a profound experience of discovering a new ethnic identity through a DNA test, which reshaped their understanding of self and belonging.

"… my ethnicity changed overnight." — P18

Professional Identity and Role Recognition

Participants also reflected on their professional identities—how their roles were defined, valued, and recognised within the university. Many described long careers in professional services, often across multiple institutions and sectors, yet felt their contributions were undervalued compared to academic staff.

"I've worked in professional services for 12 years." — P16

"I was in a meeting with academics… and the Dean only spoke about them, not us." — P02

Some described complex, high-responsibility roles that spanned student services, compliance, legal affairs, and strategic leadership, yet noted that professional services were often seen as secondary or invisible.

"I'm responsible for 340 staff across the student journey… but it's not been easy." — P20

"I've worked in a number of professional service areas… but it's not seen as a career." — P13

Intersectionality and Identity Negotiation

The interplay between personal and professional identities was a recurring theme. Participants described how their race, gender, nationality, and role intersected to shape their experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and career progression.

"I was a practising attorney in [country]… relocating to UK academia was a cultural shock." — P05

"I teach international students… helping them navigate UK academic conventions." — P06

Others spoke about the emotional labour of managing multiple identities, being a parent, a migrant, a woman of colour, and a professional, all within systems that often failed to recognise or support those complexities.

"Coming back to the labour market after having a baby was really hard." — P11

Incentives

The theme of incentives, formal and informal mechanisms that motivate, recognise, or reward staff, revealed significant disparities in how professional service staff of colour experience value, progression, and institutional support. Participants described a landscape where recognition was inconsistent, often symbolic, and rarely translated into tangible career advancement or structural change.

Recognition Without Reward

Many participants shared that while they had received awards or positive feedback, these acknowledgements did not lead to promotions, pay increases, or changes in job title. This disconnect between recognition and reward was a source of frustration and demotivation.

"I've got so many awards sitting in my living room… but they don't translate to pay, progression, or even a title." — P06

"It's good to get the award… but how long can you be intrinsically motivated?" — P06

"I've led impactful projects… but my day-to-day role wouldn't have allowed me to access those opportunities." — P17

Implicit Hierarchies and Unequal Value

Participants described how institutional priorities, such as research income and student recruitment, shaped which roles were valued and incentivised. Professional services were often seen as secondary, with limited visibility or strategic investment.

"We could get away with professional services not working well… as long as tuition fees and research income are fine." — P03

"Support services play a vital role in rankings… but they're mostly neglected." — P06

"Marketing brings in the students… but there's no structured promotion path like there is for academics." — P10

Bias in Reward Systems

Several participants noted that informal sponsorship and recognition often favoured those who "fit" dominant norms, typically white, middle-class, and culturally aligned with institutional leadership. This

led to perceptions of bias in who was selected for high-profile projects, awards, or development opportunities.

> ***"They said I got picked for everything because they're trying to diversify… but it didn't feel like a compliment." — P09***
>
> ***"Sponsorship is informal… so it lands on those who are a better fit for the organisation." — P09***

Lack of Strategic Incentives for Inclusion

Participants expressed concern that equity and inclusion efforts were not embedded in performance management or institutional strategy. Where incentives did exist, they were often reactive, short-term, or tied to external pressures (e.g., awards, funding).

> ***"We need to build reward and recognition into KPIs, appraisals, and staff reviews." — P13***
>
> ***"EDI gets attention when we're going for an award… but it's not part of everyday practice." — P20***

> ***"They said the training was good enough… but didn't reward it or approve progression." — P17***

Perceptions of Role and Self

The theme of perceptions, how professional service staff of colour perceive their own roles and how they are perceived by others, revealed a complex interplay between identity, visibility, value, and institutional culture. Participants described how perceptions shaped their sense of belonging, career progression, and emotional wellbeing, often in ways that reinforced structural inequalities.

External Perceptions: Visibility and Misrecognition

Participants frequently described being misperceived or underestimated by colleagues, managers, or institutional systems. These misperceptions were often shaped by race, gender, age, or job title, and reinforced by hierarchical structures.

> ***"People assumed I worked for him… but I'm actually more senior." — P02***
>
> ***"They think I'm a student or that I don't have an important role." — P08***

Such perceptions had real consequences, affecting confidence, trust, and access to opportunities. Some participants described needing to prove themselves repeatedly, while others felt excluded from decision-making or strategic conversations.

> ***"I've become more selective about who I trust… I listen first before I speak." — P18***
>
> ***"They started the redundancy process with professional services… are we not valued as much?" — P19***

Perceptions of Professional Services

There was a shared sense that professional services were seen as secondary to academic work—operational, supportive, and less prestigious. This perception was reflected in institutional decisions, such as budget cuts, promotion pathways, and visibility in strategic planning.

> ***"Professional services are seen as a must… but not as a unique skill set." — P18***
>
> ***"We're perceived as more supporting than leading… not really academics." — P15***

> ***"We talk about academics, they talk about professional services and it's always this idea we're two completely different species…. It creates a culture of exclusion" — P05***

Some participants challenged these perceptions by building portfolios of impact through staff networks, external projects, or leadership roles.

> ***"I led comms for the staff network… it helped me build a portfolio of impact." — P17***

External, Institutional and Interpersonal Politics

Institutional and interpersonal politics were deeply embedded in participants' reflections on their experiences in UK HE professional services. Politics was described not only in terms of formal governance and decision-making, but also as a pervasive undercurrent shaping relationships, visibility, career progression, and emotional safety.

Institutional Politics and Power Dynamics

Participants described universities as highly political environments, where decisions were often driven by reputation management, hierarchy, and risk aversion. This created barriers to innovation, transparency, and inclusion.

> ***"Universities are innovative in research… but not in how they treat staff…you've got to be political about it… people are protecting their own reputation." — P07***
>
> ***"Higher education is highly political… controlling the flow of information about yourself is strategic." — P18***

Several participants noted that leadership decisions were often made without consultation, reinforcing power imbalances and undermining collaborative working.

> ***"They created a process that gave work to my team… without involving us…I was expected to fix everything… but without support or foundation." — P20***

Politics of Identity and Assumptions

Participants described how their perceived identities, particularly race, ethnicity, and political beliefs, were politicised in the workplace. Assumptions about their values or affiliations led to uncomfortable interactions and professional risks.

> ***"They assumed I wouldn't want to contact certain employers… because of my beliefs…People hear things about you… and assume you're already political." — P12***
>
> ***"I saw white people suddenly open to hearing experiences… after Black Lives Matter." — P07***

These assumptions often led to masking, self-censorship, or withdrawal from institutional initiatives, especially when leadership lacked lived experience or cultural competence.

> ***"I've stepped back from Race Equality Charter work… it's not going anywhere." — P20***

Covert Politics and Systemic Inequality

Participants highlighted how institutional politics often operated covertly, through policy, recruitment, and informal networks, rather than through overt exclusion. This subtlety made it difficult to challenge or even name discriminatory practices.

> ***"Racism, homophobia, misogyny… it's embedded in policy and recruitment…it's subtle and indirect… it makes you feel like you're the problem." — P12***
>
> ***"I had to dig to find ethnicity pay gap data… it wasn't pushed to me." — P20***

Global and Sector-Level Politics

Some participants reflected on broader political contexts, such as visa policies, global protests, and sector-wide initiatives, and how these shaped their experiences and opportunities.

"The government raised the visa threshold… I wouldn't qualify for my own job now." — P15

"We weren't prepared to say anything about global events… it was seen as too political." — P17

"I want to see conferences for people like me… but 18 months on, nothing." — P20

Furthermore, participants referred to the university setting mirroring society.

"We're just dealing with a microcosmic expression of a societal problem… I still genuinely believe that our sector is better off than the vast majority of other sectors… [but] there's something rotten in the state of Britain… All the privileged people like the former Prime Minister, they're great tokens to see that there's no racism or there's no discrimination in the UK". — P05

Underrepresentation and Isolation

The theme of underrepresentation and isolation, who is seen, heard, and valued within UK HE professional services, was central to participants' reflections on identity, belonging, and progression. Representation was discussed not only in terms of race and ethnicity, but also gender, class, disability, and professional status. Participants described a sector where diversity was often superficial, tokenistic, or absent at senior levels, and where visibility did not always equate to influence or inclusion.

Many participants described being one of very few, or the only, person of colour in their team, building, or department. This lack of representation contributed to feelings of isolation, invisibility, and emotional fatigue.

"There are no Afro-Caribbean people in my building… and only one or two in [department], at lower levels." — P02

"I'm the only Black person in a team of 50." — P03

"In the [role] network of 90, I've only seen three other Black people." — P08

"I'm the only director who's a woman of colour in central professional services." — P09

Bias and Stereotyping

Participants described how underrepresentation often led to stereotyping, assumptions about competence, and unequal treatment. These experiences were compounded by race, accent, cultural background, and perceived difference.

"They see the Blackness, not the person… they doubt your competence…she was shocked I gave £10… like I only shop at Primark." — P03 (referring to a staff collection).

"People assume I'm there to make up the numbers… am I here because I'm good, or because I'm brown?" — P09

Some described being hyper-visible in diversity initiatives, but invisible in decision-making or career development.

"I was very visible… almost too visible." — P17

"Of course they'll put you forward… you're the poster girl for diversity." — P09

Tokenism and Tick-Box Inclusion

Several participants expressed frustration with institutional diversity efforts that felt performative or disconnected from lived experience. Charter marks, EDI roles, and

diversity panels were often seen as symbolic rather than transformative.

> ***"We've got a Race Equality Charter… but nothing has changed for me…EDI is a hot topic… it helps people's CVs." — P07***
>
> ***"They appointed an EDI lead… but still hired three white men as finance managers." — P02***
>
> ***"I've stepped back from leading on Athena Swan… it's not going anywhere." — P20***

Intersectionality and Structural Gaps

Participants highlighted how representation gaps intersected with gender, disability, and immigration status. Women of colour, non-British staff, and those in lower grades were particularly underrepresented in leadership and strategic roles. While gender is important, this report prioritises the experiences of ethnically minoritised staff.

> ***"Most people of colour are in graduate intern or lower-level roles." — P15***
>
> ***"I'm the only non-British lead in professional services." — P05***
>
> ***"There's no equivalent support network for Black professional services staff." — P20***

Regional and institutional contexts also shaped representation, with less diversity in rural or less urbanised areas.

Support

While the above themes point to a variety of barriers, it is important to note that participants spoke of accessing support in various forms. This support included line managers, trade unions, employee assistance programmes and external development, such as Aurora.

> ***"I think my line manager was very helpful. She understood being able to manage a multicultural team" — P03.***

Positive Experiences and Success Stories

While much of the report highlights the structural and cultural barriers faced by ethnically minoritised professional services staff, it is equally important to acknowledge the moments of support, connection, and success that participants shared. These experiences offer valuable insights into what works and what brings joy, fulfilment, and progress in the workplace.

Supportive Line Management and Team Relationships

Several participants described positive relationships with line managers and colleagues that promoted trust, openness, and mutual respect. These informal networks often provided emotional support and professional encouragement, even in the absence of formal institutional mechanisms.

> ***"I think my line manager was very helpful. She understood being able to manage a multicultural team." — P03***
>
> ***"Me and my [colleague] get on very well… I'm quite honest with her. She even put a very lovely comment in her [review] about our relationship." — P02***

These examples highlight the importance of culturally competent leadership and the

value of interpersonal relationships in creating psychologically safe environments.

Peer Networks and Safe Spaces

External networks such as Aurora and White Rose were cited as particularly impactful, offering confidential spaces for reflection, solidarity, and shared learning. These spaces enabled participants to speak openly, feel validated, and realise they were not alone in their experiences.

> ***"The Aurora network… we've had some lean-in sessions where you can be quite honest. It's a confidential space… I quite like where you meet up with people and you can share…the White Rose was brilliant… I linked in with lots of people and realised it wasn't me. When you hear all the stories… we met three times, we're hugging every time. A really good network of people." — P02***

These networks provided emotional support and professional development opportunities, reinforcing the importance of sector-wide initiatives that centre lived experience.

Accessing Formal Support

Although formal institutional support was not widely used, some participants did access services such as the Employee Assistance Programme, particularly for mental health support. This utilisation demonstrates the potential value of such services when they are trusted and accessible.

> ***"I've used mental health support… I've only used it once but it is there and I'm aware of it." — P05***

While unions were mentioned, their role was more complex due to participants' positions within institutions. Nonetheless, their presence was acknowledged as part of the broader support landscape.

Building Cross-Functional Connections

Participants also described the benefits of building relationships across departments, such as with HR colleagues, which helped foster collaboration and mutual understanding.

> ***"I've got a colleague who works in HR… we've started linking up." — P02***

These cross-functional relationships can serve as informal mentoring and support systems, helping staff navigate institutional politics and build social capital.

Insights from the Focus Groups

Perceptions of Professional Services

During the summer of 2025, three focus groups were scheduled. Due to annual leave and other commitments by senior professional services, two went ahead. Those in attendance worked in different university types (e.g., Russell Group, post-92), representing different seniorities and ethnicities. The purpose for this was to share interview participant experiences and discuss possible actions in response.

Echoing the feelings of interview participants, it was felt by those attending the focus groups that there was still a discrepancy between academic and professional services staff, although this might be experienced differently in different departments/schools/functions. A senior member of professional services relatively new to their organisation reported:

> ***"I feel like I'm coming into an organisation that has done a lot of work to kind of heal the division that there is between academic and PS ... But I can feel the legacy of it, if you see what I mean. Like I know that you can feel that there's been a historical inequality between those two groups... someone told me that I should think of academics as ministers and of PS as a of the civil service".***

Similarly,

> ***"... I think as far as diversity and inclusion is concerned, there's just been a lack of thinking that professional services is something that should be thought about".***

Meanwhile, there was discussion that professional services staff are more 'compliant' in observing organisational requirements – such as diversity in recruitment practices.

Intersectionality (and a lack of understanding of it)

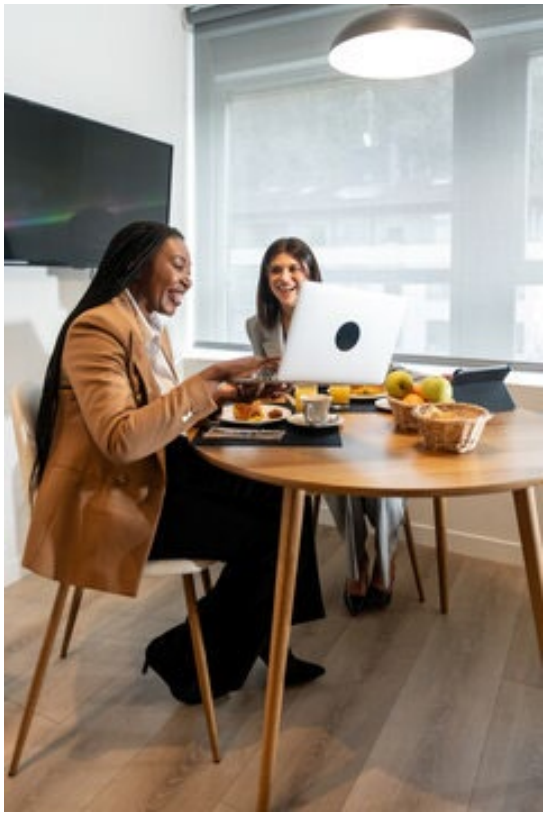
Intersectionality was an important point to examine during the focus groups. For example, there was an awareness that perhaps professional services staff tend to come from the local area to the institution, compared with perhaps academics who move internationally for roles. This perception is also linked to the visa issue, as mentioned by an interview participant.

Furthermore, beyond skin colour, class and privilege were raised as issues, in perceptions of being able to "trump" barriers or move "more smoothly" through them.

Addressing the Issue(s)

There was open discussion in the focus groups regarding what we could do in response to interview participant experiences. One focus group participant noted,

> ***"It feels like that is changing, at least in some places, and there's a recognition that a more diverse workforce would be very helpful for us. But I think there is a real lack of understanding how to go about it... A lot of the focus of universities... has been around gender, Athena Swan and the academic sides of things. [It's] not really looked at unless there's been somebody pretty senior in a professional services role who said this isn't helpful having this lack of diversity in in our in our organisation".***



Notably, they ended their point by saying,

> ***"We recognise there is an issue, but I don't think we really understand what to do about it and a big part of that is because things are so white".***

There was discussion regarding charters driving previous EDI action, such as Athena Swan, which previously had little focus on professional services staff.

There was also recognition of the operating environment of UK HEIs. Specifically, one participant said,

> ***"But until society accepts us as we are, I don't know how institutions... And higher education specifically, as we are talking about, that are going to accept us as well because we don't want to be seen as a as a Black female, but we're just ticking the box".***

Lengthy discussions were held on recommendations to improve the representation of ethnically minoritised staff in senior professional services roles. Participants moved beyond the semantics of EDI, acknowledging that mistakes may happen, but that learning must be continuous. One voice captured this sentiment poignantly:

> ***"I'm worried about saying the wrong thing. But if we just sit there and worry about saying the wrong thing, nothing will have a change, right?"***

Creating psychologically safe spaces emerged as a foundational priority, spaces where staff feel heard and their experiences validated, not undermined. The honesty of staff, especially when recounting prior experiences, must be met with respect and action, not defensiveness.

Discussions around role modelling and career pipelines revealed tensions between current constraints and future possibilities. While some questioned the extent of movement possible within the sector, others urged a broader view, asking whether experience in HEIs should remain a rigid requirement. There was a strong belief in nurturing internal talent, even amid budgetary pressures.

The conversation also turned to the limitations of formulaic targets. Participants expressed concern that such metrics risk diluting the EDI agenda into compliance rather than values-driven change. The ethnicity pay gap, for example, was discussed with sensitivity, acknowledging the fear of individual identification while stressing the importance of real-time data to inform meaningful action.

Reverse mentoring was highlighted as a powerful tool, though not without its challenges. A concern was raised about the emotional labour placed on those most affected, who are often expected to educate others without recognition or support.

Representation was another key theme, moving beyond tokenistic involvement in interview panels to meaningful inclusion. Yet, the reality of capacity constraints for ethnically minoritised senior professional services staff was acknowledged. One participant asked a question that emphasised the urgency of systemic change,

"How do we find people at the senior level when they're already navigating a hostile environment?".

Informal processes and opaque systems were described as barriers to equity. One participant, pointing to a culture that enables favouritism and undermines transparency, noted,

"We have absolutely bizarre processes and systems... the majority of people see aren't actually how things work if you occupy [a certain space]".

Action plans, delivery groups, and staff networks were seen as vital mechanisms for change, but with a cautionary note. The prominence of 'loud' voices, often those most affected or confident in speaking out, must be balanced with efforts to hear quieter, less visible perspectives.

In the current climate, participants stressed the importance of ***"holding firm and being vocal about holding firm"*** not in a politicised way, but rooted in values. EDI must be woven through all employee relations processes, not relegated to one-off training days or charter commitments that have historically focused on gender. As one participant warned,

"Training can be dangerous in a regulated environment because you can measure whether people have done it, but not whether it's made a difference."

Senior leaders were called upon to educate themselves, reverse mentoring was again suggested as a route. ***"If it's important enough, you make time for it,"*** one participant said, challenging leaders to prioritise learning and reflection.

For AHUA, collaboration with other professional services organisations. such as UHR and the Academic Registrars' Council, was proposed as a way to build collective momentum. The need to create safe spaces for staff to reflect on career challenges was emphasised. Programmes like Aurora and WHEN's 100 Black Women Professors initiative were cited as examples, with a call to extend similar support to professional services staff, including through initiatives like StellarHE.

One focus group member commented:

"Feedback from different corners about not feeling represented and not feeling included. So even though the numbers are quite good, the policies are quite good. It's I think there's a lot of work to do to actually track that through to people's lived experience".

Likewise, another reported:

"You know, we have a responsibility as the university leadership to say this is not where this is not right, this is not where we should be and to do things positively to change that".

As one participant said,

"I'm Black and most, most of my, all my staff are white, apart from one who's biracial. [It's] trying to support people going through what they're going through and having to share that it's just about surviving sometimes, and I suppose some of your participants might have said that it's just about surviving and, knowing that if you say the wrong thing, that it's not just about me, it's about then a whole load of Black women that I'm letting down".

Discussion

Perceptions of Professional Services

Interview participants consistently reported a perceived disparity in how academic and professional services staff are valued, with professional services often seen as secondary despite their critical role in university operations. This sentiment was echoed in focus groups. Interview participants felt that they were undervalued, despite the support that they provide to the University in its functioning. Again, intersectionality is important to consider, as there is a significant overrepresentation of ethnic minority women in precarious and professional service roles (AdvanceHE, 2024). Indeed, Garrett (2025) argues a direct link between value, career progression and the architecture of whiteness.

Authenticity, Masking and Code-Switching in the Workplace

The majority of respondents highlighted that they felt they had to 'code switch' and mask in the workplace to be perceived as belonging. As seen in the previous section, participant quotes included feeling like they needed to look the part, act 'white', silence their voices, change their hair and ultimately assimilate to white Western institutional cultural practices. As noted in the literature (e.g., Mukherjee, 2022), professionalism can be considered a form of discrimination for minoritised ethnic groups, forcing them, particularly Black women, to look and act a certain way to progress within their careers.

Experiences of Discrimination in the Workplace

It is significant to highlight that racism was the most prevalent form of discrimination participants reported experiencing. Acts of discrimination included direct aggressions such as use of racist language and mimicry of accents, but also microaggressions such as being overlooked for promotion (despite being as, or more, qualified than white counterparts), and not being called upon for their perspective in meetings. Nevertheless it has been important throughout the project to use an intersectional lens in examining participant experiences. This lens included characteristics such as age, gender, disability, class, caring responsibilities and religion playing a significant role in their experiences of discrimination in the workplace.

External Factors and Their Influence

The UK HE sector was compared to being a microcosm of society. Important additional factors to consider when exploring participant experiences include external political events, the importance of incentives and representation, causing career barriers. For example, participants referred to the #BlackLivesMatter movement as a key moment in time which shifted their career trajectories. With recent and significant growth in the far-right, it is important to continue examining how external political events influence the university sector.

In terms of incentives, almost all of the participants reported that the sector revolves around incentives such as career progression and performative awards, forcing them to ‘code switch’ and assimilate into white environments. Jones and Okun (2001) refer to this as a specific form of discrimination impacting everyone.

There were mixed responses to the concern of representation. Some participants felt that representation played a key role in supporting them, with support systems including ethnic minority staff groups. While others reported that representation felt performative and did little to shift institutional culture.

Recommendations

Most recommendations which came from interview participants revolved around making institution-wide cultural changes over time, not 'quick fixes' and what Garratt (2025) refers to as the dismantling of the architecture of whiteness. Some participants proffered that there be more awareness given to how important and essential professional services staff are, with more representation, more funded incentives and opportunities for ethnic minorities, and more mentoring opportunities to progress.

Interview and focus group participants offered thoughtful, experience-based suggestions for change at both institutional and sector levels, which have been reviewed and discussed by the research team. Some of these require resource dedication and willingness to address the systematic discrimination experienced. Others are smaller, but what they all require is a willingness to challenge the existing 'status quo'.

These recommendations are grouped into key thematic areas.

Structural Reform and Policy Change

It is important to acknowledge that professional services staff operate under fundamentally different career structures than academic staff. Unlike academics, professional service roles typically lack formal promotion pathways and rely on job changes for progression.

Clear Career Pathways

Clarify career pathways for professional services staff, with transparent progression routes and equitable promotion processes. This clarification could include routes into specific roles, e.g., Chief Operating Officer, or Director of Student Services. Clarification should include realistic career trajectories within professional services, recognising that progression often requires role changes rather than internal promotion

Career Mapping and Transparency

Provide guidance on typical career histories for leadership roles (e.g., Chief Operating Officer, Registrar), explaining why generalists often progress to Chief Operating Officer roles while specialists may become Academic Registrars.

Review and Revise Contracts

Review and Revise Contracts to eliminate discriminatory classifications (e.g., "academic-related" vs. "academic") when roles are equivalent in scope and responsibility.

Embed Accountability

Embed accountability into EDI policies, ensuring that there are real consequences.

Audit Recruitment and Promotion Practices

Audit recruitment and promotion practices to identify and address systemic bias, including the use of blind recruitment and diverse panels with meaningful influence, while being aware of tokenistic approaches.

"We need to stop categorising people into academic or professional services… it sends a cultural message." — P10

"EDI training should be reviewed regularly by the people it's about—not just the people it's serving." — P18

Representation and Inclusion

Increase Representation

Increase representation of ethnically minoritised staff at senior levels through targeted development, sponsorship, and succession planning. Demonstrate that this is not 'tick-box' and the advantages of having diverse leadership teams.

Diversify Leadership

Diversify leadership of EDI initiatives to include those with lived experience, and avoid tokenistic appointments.

Role Model Visibility

Create visible role models and case studies to inspire and guide staff from underrepresented backgrounds.

"If you can see someone in that position, it makes you think it's possible for you too." — P19

"We need more diverse voices leading Race Equality and Athena Swan work." — P20

Development, Support and Research

Mentoring, Coaching and Sponsorship

Invest in mentoring, coaching, and sponsorship programmes tailored to professional services staff, especially those from minoritised backgrounds.

Executive Development

Provide executive development opportunities at all grades, not just for academic staff.

Staff Networks

Support staff networks with resources, visibility, and strategic influence. Is there space for an informal network of colleagues across the sector?

Longitudinal and Quantitative Research

Develop longitudinal research programmes to capture career journeys. Develop further quantitative research to establish generalisability of current results, and which areas need further attention. For example, are we losing ethnic minorities at a greater rate than white counterparts in current restructuring across the sector?

"We do it for our students… but do we do it for our staff?" — P13

"I had to seek out my own development… nothing was offered internally." — P20

Cultural Change and Co-Creation

Inclusive Cultures

Promote inclusive cultures through co-creation with staff, especially in shaping roles, services, and organisational values. Move beyond tick-box EDI to authentic engagement, listening, and action. Challenge assumptions about professionalism, leadership, and cultural norms.

> ***"We need to break the stigma around talking about heritage and identity." — P18***

Sector-Level Collaboration and Accountability

Sector-Wide Collaboration

Coordinate efforts across the sector, including Advance HE, AHUA, UHR, WHEN and other bodies, to avoid duplication and increase impact. Develop sector-wide knowledge exchange, education and standards for leaders, inclusive leadership and recruitment. Ensure transparency and regular updates on EDI initiatives, with clear metrics and outcomes.

> ***"We should be applying our research and evaluation frameworks to staff experience." — P13***
>
> ***"I want to see conferences and speakers that reflect people like me." — P20***

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