

Advancing support and inclusion in the fellowship application process.

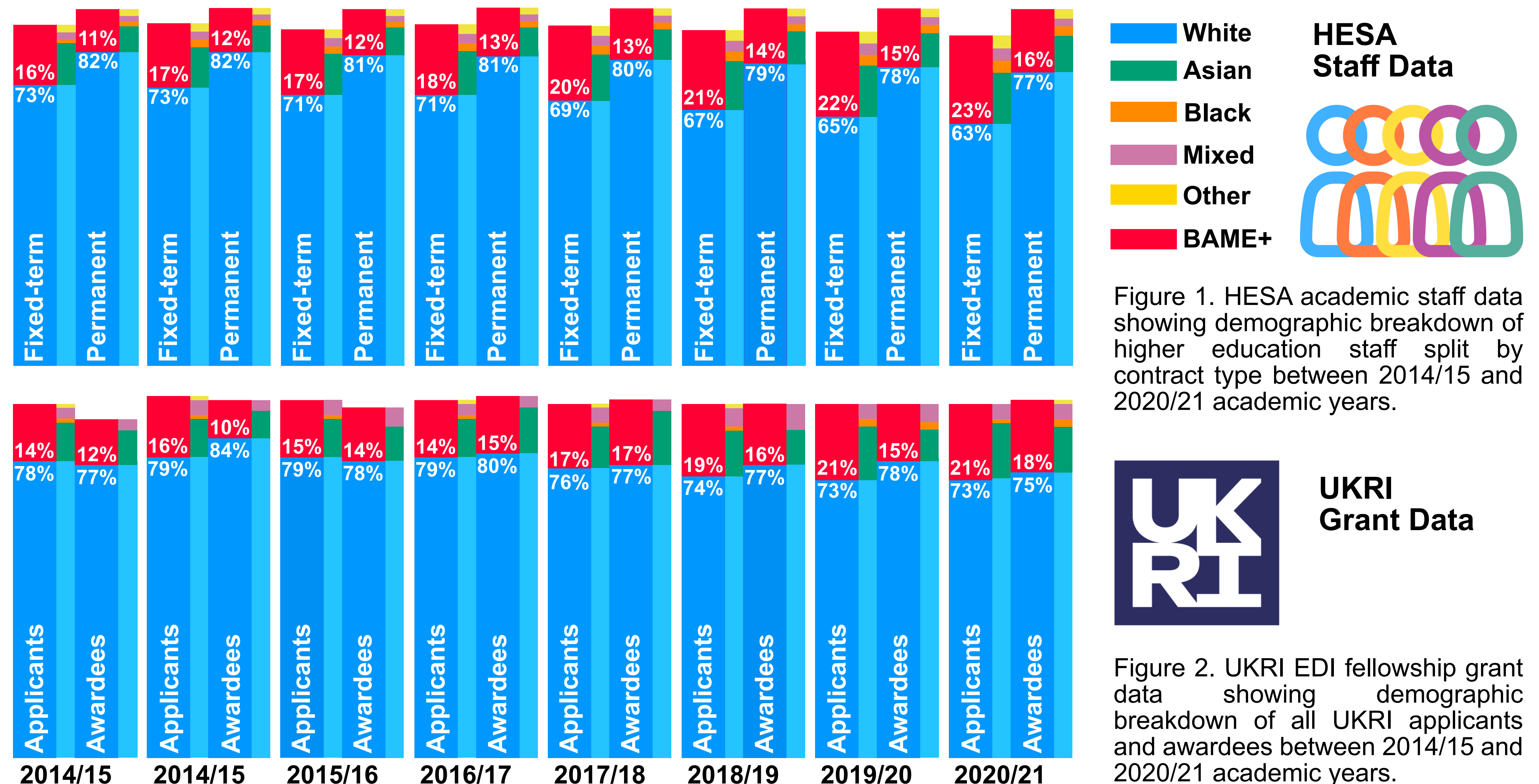
Nathaniel Edward-Inatimi¹ | Joy Singarayer²

Department of Meteorology
1. n.o.edward-inatimi@pgr.reading.ac.uk, 2. j.s.singarayer@reading.ac.uk

OVERVIEW

- Research fellowships can be crucial for achieving a permanent academic career. As such, fellowships are highly competitive with low success rates.
- There have been consistent efforts in recent years to address student disparities in ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status. However, there is limited research on the research and academic staff experience in the UK.
- We combined national statistics with survey and small focus groups at a single university to quantify and understand diversity gaps.
- We observe diversity gaps between fixed-term and permanent staff which align with a gap observed within grant applicant and award rates for UKRI fellowships.
- Surveyed staff shared many common experiences when asked about their perceptions of the application process and ways career support could be improved.
- Application lead-times, inflexible workload models, and broader department culture surrounding temporary staff were all identified as common barriers to applying.
- Staff testimonial echoed how perceived personal biases (e.g. impostor syndrome) may have led to self-exclusion and limited the inclusivity of fellowship applications. BAME+ staff and staff with disability all indicated that perceptions of bias had influenced their decision about applying.
- From our findings we aim to recommend actionable enhancements to support on institutional and personal levels.

BACKGROUND: IS THERE A DIVERSITY GAP?



Between 2014 and 2021 there was a 7% increase in fixed-term BAME+ staff and 5% increase in permanent BAME+ staff. Likewise, there was a 7% increase in UKRI BAME+ fellowship applicants with a 6% increase in BAME+ awardees. UKRI data reflects an underrepresented pool of permanent staff (i.e. the staff who are likely to secure fellowships reflect the demographic of permanent academic staff).

PERCEPTIONS & EXPECTATIONS

Staff saw fellowships as an important step in career progression.

“[There are expectations of] career development, especially to lift the responsibilities from teaching. So that will be a protected time for you to do research for a number of years. So I think that's very valuable considering most lectureships [are] on research and teaching combined.”

The opaqueness of application process and limited feedback leads to high perceptions of bar. Focus groups shared perceptions of imbalanced experiences which may have led to self-exclusion and a lack of inclusion.

“I was really intimidated by all the things that were there. Do I have this? Do I have this? Do I have this? No. Maybe yes. Maybe no. So there's no scoring based on [an] algebraic criteria put in front of it, in front of you, or in front of anybody.”

BIAS & BARRIERS

Staff indicated barriers occur long before applying for fellowships. 0% of surveyed BAME+ staff had successful outcomes whilst 45% of white respondents who had submitted one or more applications had been successful. Overall, staff didn't feel bias had influenced their decision to apply, although mixed on whether they felt the outcomes were biased.

“I think the things that go against you, say as a woman, or having children, or being part-time, kind of have their effect before you get to the point where you're being evaluated or judged.”

Time was mentioned as a consistent barrier; participants shared experiences about struggling with application lead times and workload models making committing time for applications challenging.

“I'm dyslexic and so I find that I'm slower [at reading and writing]... When I was at school then I would get 25% extra time in exams. But then I feel like in life beyond that you don't get 25% extra time.”

TRANSPARENCY & COMMUNICATION

Lack of transparency leads to variability in support based on unclear expectations of line managers and department cultures which promote high temporary staff turn around.

“I'm working within [two departments], there's a lot of conflicts. So I wouldn't be accepted as a [Dept. 1] member... But kind of when things go around in [Dept. 2], I'm not considered [Dept. 2]. So it's like, if I have a proposal, where do I go?”

Communication was often not very clear or timely, especially for part-time, disabled, teaching-intensive, short-term contracts, and international researchers.

“I have quite a lot of impostor syndrome. So like, am I scientifically excellent? And could I do it?... We have committees and we identify people that we want to promote to the next grade or we think should be applying for fellowship [and] no one's ever come to me and said have you thought about doing that?”

SUPPORT & PAYING-IT-FORWARD

Internal/external workshops and more targeted support received was generally highly positive. However, visibility for these events was very mixed.

“I think if we're not being seen by anyone how can anyone come and say well I think this [opportunity] is good why don't you try this and I think visibility goes both ways.”

Personal recommendations: Openly asking to for/sharing application feedback between colleagues. **Development of informal mentorship networks and word-of-mouth visibility** for available support. Become an advocate!

“I feel like we don't say 'well-done' enough to people in general actually in the department for things like getting funding.”

Institutional recommendations: Tailored support from/for underrepresented staff and/or research teams to navigate fellowships and academic processes equitably. **Improved visibility for the available support through more inclusive mailing lists/clearer information channels.**

DATA COLLECTION & METHODS

HESA academic staff data: we analyse demographic data for academic staff across the UK. Data were split by various personal/employment characteristics to gain insight into increases in diverse staff since 2014.

UKRI EDI funding data: we look at the demographic breakdown of fellowship applicants and awardees since 2014 and relate slow increases in diverse applicants/awardees to broader discussions surrounding barriers and support for diverse staff.

Staff survey: we surveyed 30 members of staff across 9 departments with the goal to identify areas where support could be improved for all, while ensuring we capture and address unique challenges faced by underrepresented groups.

Focus groups: we ran focus groups with 14 academic staff across 10 departments in the university to discuss how effective current support systems are, perceptions of fairness and inclusion, barriers to applying, and workshop ideas for enhancing support mechanisms.

*All quotes from staff have been anonymised.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The experience of staff across departments at the university is highly non-uniform. Department culture has large impacts on the accessibility of targeted support for fellowship applications and wider professional development opportunities despite availability of university wide support.

UKRI fellowship application data are very noisy due to suppressed data (groups <5 are suppressed to 0 to maintain anonymity). This is a symptom of very low application/award rates from underrepresented groups and indicates a deeper diversity problem despite the difficulties with interpreting the data accurately.

The disparity between fixed-term and permanent BAME+ staff has continued to grow. Between 2014 and 2024 we see a 16% increase in fixed-term and only 9% in permanent staff.

From surveyed staff and focus groups it is hard to draw concrete conclusions about the sources of bias. However, the described lived experiences strongly indicate that actionable changes can be made to improve the overall experience of research and academic staff.

ETHICS & DATA ACCESS

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University of Reading Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct by the SMPCS Ethics approver. Full details are available on request.

- HESA staff data available via green QR

- UKRI EDI data available via blue QR

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE

If you wish to contribute to this project we are interested in collecting peoples' experiences and recommendations regarding the fellowship application process, wider access to professional development opportunities, and targeted support. All responses will be anonymous at point of collection. Access form via black QR.

