

Advancing Women's Careers in Academia:

From lived experience to action:
Stakeholder-informed roadmap report

September
2025



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Foreword

The Women in Academia (WinA) project has always been about more than research, it is about amplifying women’s voices and turning their lived experiences into meaningful, systemic change. Over the past year, we have undertaken a mixed-methods programme of work across three interconnected strands: a UK-wide survey of 401 participants from 62 institutions; 20 in-depth qualitative interviews; and a series of stakeholder engagement activities involving multiple rounds of discussion with women with lived experience and key decision-makers from across the sector. Together, these have provided both a broad view of sector-wide challenges and a nuanced understanding of the realities women in academia face today.

401
PARTICIPANTS

62
INSTITUTIONS

20
IN-DEPTH
INTERVIEWS

Our findings show that while progress has been made in many areas, systemic barriers remain. Job precarity, unequal workloads, limited recognition for certain types of academic labour, and restricted access to funding and leadership opportunities continue to shape women’s careers. These challenges often intersect and accumulate, making it harder for women to thrive, progress, and remain in academia.

In reflecting on these findings, we were reminded of Mary Ann Sieghart’s The Authority Gap, which resonates strongly with many of the issues explored in this project. Sieghart highlights how women’s contributions are often undervalued and treated differently from men’s, frequently interrupted, doubted, or dismissed. She argues that genuine change requires us to treat women’s expertise and authority with the same credibility and respect afforded to men.

This perspective underscores why this work matters. It is not only about documenting statistics or describing systems, but about recognising and

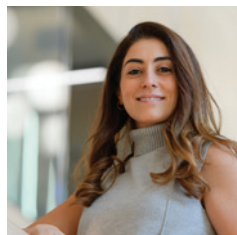
responding to the lived experiences behind them. The women who contributed to this project did so with the hope that their stories and recommendations could help shape a better, fairer academic landscape, for themselves, for future generations, and for the wellbeing of our research culture.

This report marks a transition from research to action. It presents the evidence, the voices, and the recommendations that have emerged from the WinA project, and it calls on higher education institutions, funding bodies, and sector leaders to act. As Sieghart reminds us, awareness alone is not enough: change depends on those in positions of power acknowledging the gap and taking concrete steps to close it. Without action, awareness simply becomes complicity.

Our hope is that the insights and strategies outlined here will not remain on the page, but will form part of a wider, collective push for real and lasting change across the sector. We invite you to read, reflect, and, most importantly, to act.

Introduction

The representation of women in academia has improved in recent years, but the progressive reduction of women's participation at successive career levels remains a critical issue. Indeed, despite representing 49% of all academic staff working in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI), in 2023/24, women only occupied 32% of professorship posts – barely up from 31% the previous year (HESA, 2023).



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Research also shows that women take an average of 8.5 years longer than men to reach associate professorship status, and 15 years longer to obtain full professorships (Harris et al, 2024). In turn, the unequal distribution of female staff and lack of women in top paying bands contributes to the gender-pay gap (Frank, 2020), which currently stands at 13.7% in UK HEIs, with men comprising 64% of academic staff in the highest pay range (Advance HE, 2024).

These disparities not only expose institutional inequalities and unconscious biases in promotion systems but also reflect the high number of women who end up leaving academia in the face of additional challenges that present them with little other choice – a phenomenon known as the “leaky pipeline” (Blickenstaff, 2005). In a review exploring barriers to success for female academics in the UK, Westoby et al., (2021) concluded that an “over-arching narrative of continued biases, barriers, double-standards, and unsupportive work environments” remained prevalent even in the context of policies and initiatives intended to reduce them – e.g., the Equality Act (2010) and the Athena Swan Charter (Barnard, 2017). Common issues included everyday sexism (gendered assumptions that influence perceptions of competence), a lack of mentorship, and the double discrimination of female ethnic minorities who struggle to advance under definitions of merit constructed by White men (Westoby et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, the resulting workplace atmosphere can cause women to question their own abilities and preclude them from applying for promotion, thus perpetuating the problem (Westoby et al., 2021).

While progression based on academic merit – i.e., a strong and consistent track record of research publications and grants – may appear to level the playing field at first glance, these definitions have been produced by the majority group, and as a result reinforce existing gender imbalances (Śliwa and Johansson, 2014). ‘Career gaps’ arising from maternity leave, for instance, make it harder for women to progress in universities operating under meritocratic systems where uninterrupted research productivity is highly valued (Westoby et al., 2021). Although some universities have implemented policies to try and mitigate gendered employment and promotion practices, research suggests that women still need more publications and a fuller CV to obtain the same position as their male counterparts (Heilman et al., 2024; Savigny, 2014). Indeed, discrimination of female applicants continues to factor into hiring

decisions, with women often seen as a riskier choice due to the potential for maternity leave and/or childcaring responsibilities, irrespective of family circumstances or intentions (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016).

In addition to ‘career gaps’, women are also more likely to take on a greater number of administrative duties, additional teaching, and pastoral support roles, which often exist outside of the recognition of meritocratic systems and consequently hinder their own career progression while, ironically, facilitating that of others (Ashencaen et al., 2018; Kandiko Howson et al, 2018). Higher education statistics also indicate that women are more likely than men to work part-time, be employed on fixed-term contracts, and/or hold teaching-only positions (HSEA, 2023) – employment factors that make it harder to meet definitions of academic excellence established by male-dominated power structures (Coate and Howson, 2016; Westoby et al., 2021).

Although these challenges exist at all stages of a woman's academic career, they can be particularly critical during the early- to mid-career stage – a time where personal life transitions (e.g., the desire to establish geographical stability, start a family, buy a house etc.,) often intersect with professional ambitions (e.g., the desire to progress academically and establish independence; Ahmad, 2017; Davies et al., 2022; Ledford, 2017; Llorens et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2007; Ysseldky et al., 2019). Research shows that women experience a concentrated period of gender biases during the early- to mid-career stage (Llorens et al., 2021), and are less likely to have secured permanent employment contracts, which further compounds the difficulties they face when attempting to maintain and/or progress in their



academic career (Ahmad, 2017; Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016; Shepherd, 2017; Ysseldky et al., 2019). Indeed, a recent report commissioned by the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology identified the lack of job security afforded by short-term contracts to be a key factor contributing to the attrition of early career researchers and underrepresented groups from academia (DSIT; 2025).

Short-term contracts also make it difficult to establish geographical stability, qualify for a mortgage, access adequate parental leave provisions (which often require a long period of continuous service), and introduce uncertainty when returning-to-work (Ahmad, 2017; Davies et al., 2022). In a recent survey by the University and College Union (2019), 83% of staff felt that fixed-term contracts made it hard to make long-term family plans, while Davies et al., (2022) found the odds of returning to work after maternity leave were 59% lower for those on fixed-term contracts across the 24 Russell Group universities. Interestingly, research has shown that good university parental leave policies enable women to stay and progress in academia, with better policies and pay linked to a higher number of female professors – no such relationship exists with the number of male professors (Epifanio and Troeger, 2020). In light of this, it is worrying that nearly three-quarters of UK universities have no specific return-to-work policies for research active staff (Faulkner and Rogers, 2025), with the absence of institutional support again reflecting the way academia is shaped around masculinist cultures, with the ‘ideal’ academic expected to demonstrate total institutional commitment, free from familial responsibilities that might impact their ability to work (Bleijenbergh et al., 2012).

Participants were drawn from 62 UK HEIs, with the highest representation from the Universities of Edinburgh, Warwick, Imperial College London, Hertfordshire, and York. Most participants were based in natural science departments (50.62%).

Survey data was analysed in line with three research objectives:

Objective 1: Identifying Key Challenges

To identify the key challenges experienced by women in academia, we assessed the extent of agreement with a series of statements relating to eight literature-derived challenge areas, ranked 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Percentage agreement ratings and mean scores for each of the eight challenge areas were calculated.

Objective 2: Examining Intersectional Differences

To examine how women's experiences of academic challenges might vary across demographic (e.g. age) and occupational factors (e.g., academic job role), we conducted mean difference tests. We also examined differences in mental health and wellbeing outcomes across these factors.

Objective 3: Investigating Links Between Academic Challenges and Wellbeing

To investigate whether academic challenges predicted women's mental health and wellbeing, we conducted multiple regression analyses. We also explored whether wellbeing outcomes might, in turn, predict experiences of academic challenge.

Exploratory Analyses

In addition to our three objectives, we investigated potential mediating factors that could help explain the relationship between academic challenges and wellbeing outcomes. We also conducted a clustering analysis to identify groups who may be more vulnerable to experiencing these challenges and poor wellbeing, and therefore more likely to benefit from targeted support.

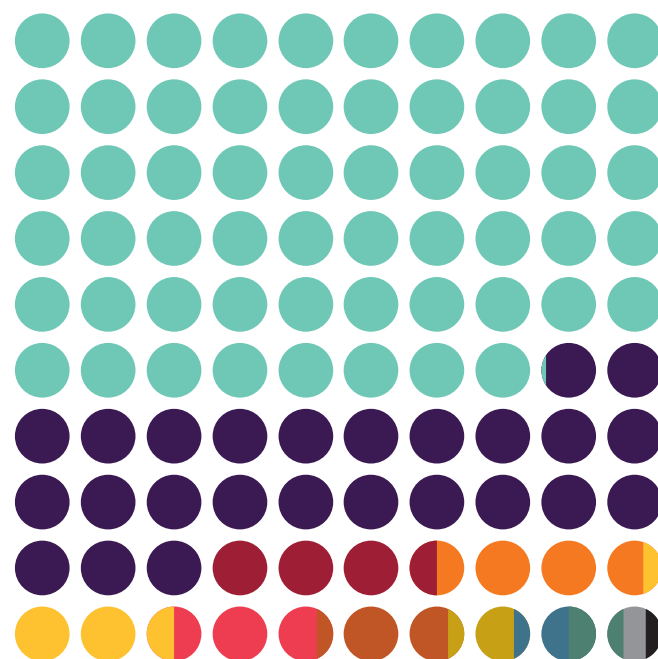
A total of 401 early- to mid-career women from across 62 UK HEIs took part in the survey.

The sample had a mean age of 37.88 years (SD = 7.92)

See subsequent figures for full demographic details

Demographic characteristics of the survey sample (N = 401).

Ethnicity



Demographic Characteristic	N
White (English, British, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller or Roma)	233
Other White Background	100
Other Mixed Background	14
Asian or Asian British	13
Mixed White and Asian	11
Chinese	9
Other Asian Background	8
Arab	4
Black or Black British	3
Mixed White and Black African	3
Prefer not to say	2
Not known	1

Parental Status



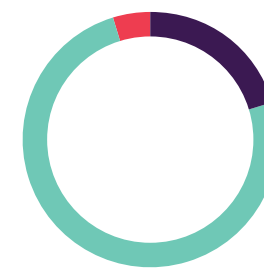
Demographic Characteristic	N
Not a Parent	213
Pregnant and/or expecting/adopting a child	11
Parent (including stepparent and/or adoptive parent)	76
Prefer not to say	1

Relationship Status



Demographic Characteristic	N
Co-habiting or living with a partner	110
Married or in a civil partnership	189
Separated, divorced, or civil partnership dissolved	20
Single (never married)	73
Widowed/Surviving partner from a civil partnership	1
Other	7
Prefer not to say	1

Long-term Physical or Mental Health Condition



Demographic Characteristic	N
Yes	82
No	301
Prefer not to say	18

Contract Function (Academic Job Role)

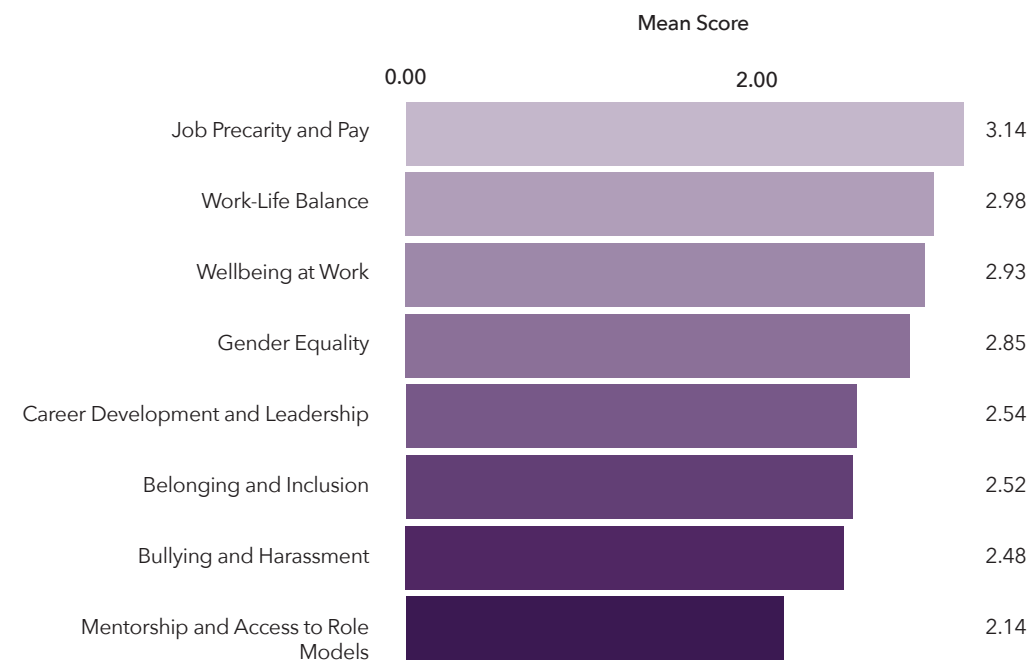


Demographic Characteristic	N
Research Assistant/Associate	48
Postdoctoral Researcher/Teaching Fellow	149
Clinical Fellow	9
Lecturer	69
Clinical Lecturer	8
Assistant Professor	36
Associate Professor/Reader	26
Clinical Associate Professor/Reader	1
Other	52
Prefer	

Objective 1: Identifying Key Challenges

Figure 1 shows mean scores for the eight challenge areas, ranked below from most to least challenging.

Figure 1.
Challenges faced by women in academia (mean scores)



Top 3 Challenge Areas:

Job precarity and pay

50%

disagreed or strongly disagreed that their employment felt secure, while ~50% also disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they were satisfied with opportunities for pay regrading and promotion.

Work-life balance

60%

agreed or strongly agreed that they felt pressured to work beyond their normal hours to advance their careers.

Wellbeing at work

50%

disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would feel comfortable and supported taking time off for work-related stress or mental health issues.

Objective 2: Examining Intersectional Differences in Experience

To examine whether demographic (e.g., age) or occupational factors (e.g., job role) impacted women's experiences of the challenge areas, a series of mean difference tests were conducted. Significant group differences are reported below.

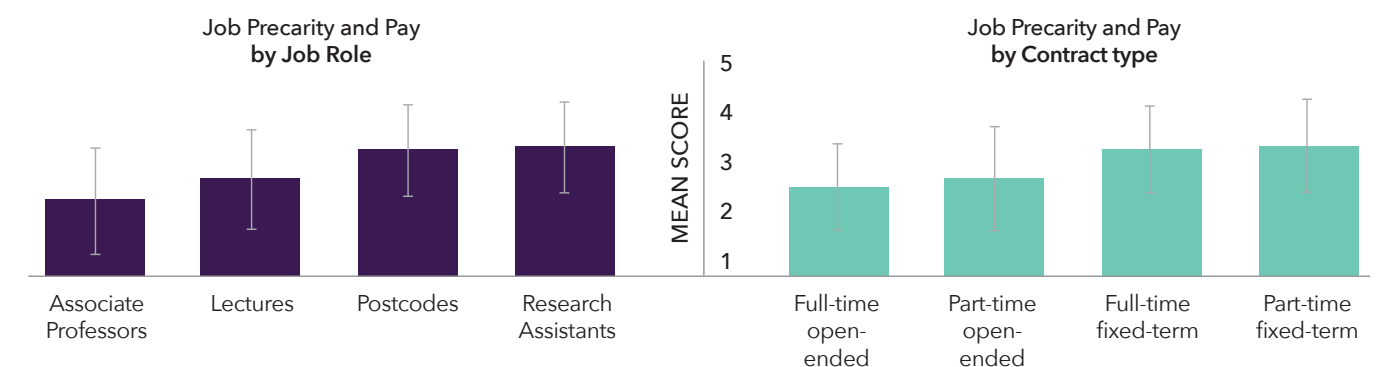
Job Precarity and Pay

Bar charts in Figure 2 illustrate significant differences in mean job precarity and pay-related challenge by academic job role and contract type (error bars show standard deviation).

Compared to associate professors ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.02$), research assistants ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .87$) reported more challenge with job precarity and pay (mean difference = 1.02, 95%CI[.41, 1.64]; $p < .001$). Postdocs ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .87$) also reported more challenge in this area compared to associate professors (mean difference = .96, 95%CI[.43, 1.50]; $p < .001$) and lecturers ($M = 2.86$; $SD = .95$; mean difference = .56, 95%CI[.20, .90]; $p < .001$).

In terms of contract type, compared to women employed on full-time open-ended contracts ($M = 2.70$, $SD = .83$), those employed on full-time fixed-term contracts ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .83$; mean difference = .72, 95%CI[.46, .98]; $p < .001$) or part-time fixed-term contracts ($M = 3.49$, $SD = .90$; mean difference = .79, 95%CI[.36, 1.22]; $p < .001$) reported significantly more challenge relating to job precarity and pay.

Figure 2.



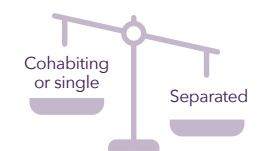
Future Uncertainty

After correcting for multiple comparisons, levels of future uncertainty were found to differ by age (Welch's $F(3, 100.78) = 13.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$), **relationship status** ($F(3, 344) = 10.96, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$), **academic job role** ($F(4, 301) = 22.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$), and **contract type** ($F(3, 339) = 32.47, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$).



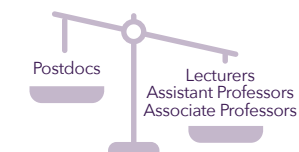
Age

Women aged 20-29 ($M = 4.30, SD = .91$) experienced higher levels of future uncertainty compared to women aged 40-49 ($M = 3.29, SD = 1.10$; mean difference = 1.00, 95%CI[.55, 1.45]; $p < .001$).



Relationship Status

Compared to women who were separated ($M = 2.68, SD = .89$), women who were unmarried but co-habiting/living with a partner ($M = 4.08, SD = 1.05$; mean difference = 1.40, 95%CI[.68, 2.12], $p < .001$) or single ($M = 3.95, SD = 1.12$; mean difference = 1.27, 95%CI[.52, 2.02], $p < .001$) reported higher levels of future uncertainty.

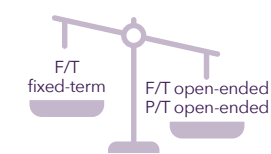


Academic Job Role

Postdocs ($M = 4.30, SD = .93$) reported significantly higher levels of future uncertainty compared to lecturers ($M = 3.23, SD = 1.02$; mean difference = 1.08, 95%CI[.66, 1.05], $p < .001$), assistant professors ($M = 2.84, SD = 1.07$; mean difference = 1.47, 95%CI[.91, 2.03], $p < .001$), and associate professors ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.11$; mean difference = .95, 95%CI[.33, 1.56], $p < .001$).



Research assistants ($M = 3.84, SD = 1.09$) also reported more future uncertainty compared to assistant professors (mean difference = 1.00, 95%CI[.33, 1.67], $p < .001$).



Contract Type

Those on full-time fixed-term contracts ($M = 4.21, SD = .98$) also experienced higher levels of future uncertainty compared to those on full-time open-ended contracts ($M = 3.17, SD = 1.04$; mean difference = 1.04, 95%CI[.72, 1.36]; $p < .001$) and those on part-time open-ended contracts ($M = 4.13, SD = .94$; mean difference = 1.29, 95%CI[.73, 1.85], $p < .001$).

Anxiety

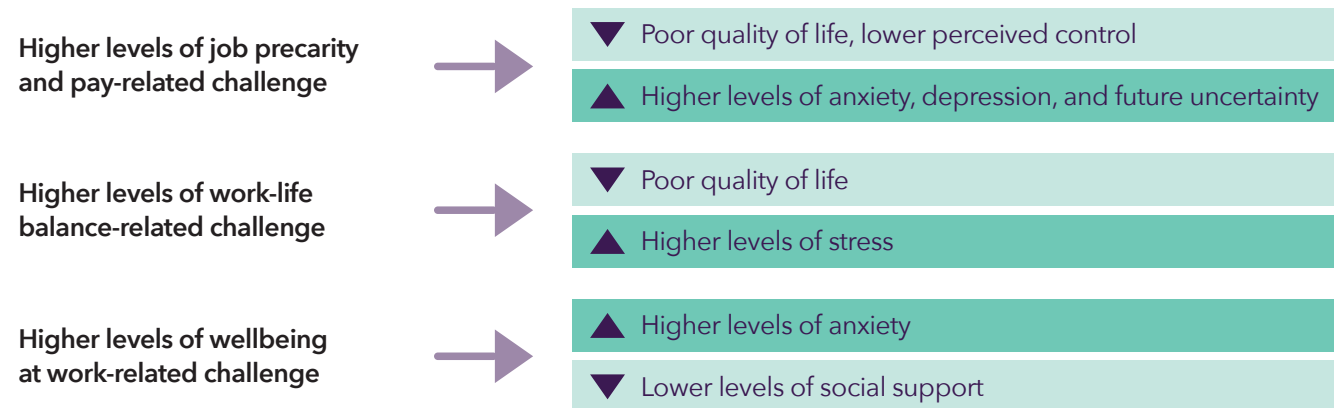
There were intersectional differences in anxiety based on ethnicity and disability status. Participants who identified as Other White ($M = 1.35, SD = .92$) reported significantly higher levels of anxiety compared to those who identified as White ($M = .94, SD = .82$; mean difference = .42, 95%CI[.15, .67]; $p < .001$).

Women with a self-reported physical and/or mental health condition also reported more anxiety compared to those without one (with: $M = 1.48, SD = .98$; without: $M = .91, SD = .78$; Welch's $t(93.62) = 4.48, p < .001, d = .69$).

Depression, Stress and Quality of Life

Differences were also found for disability status when it came to depression, anxiety, and stress. Compared to those without any self-reported physical and/or mental health condition, women with a condition showed higher levels of depression (with, $M = 1.06, SD = .93$; without, $M = .62, SD = .72$; Welch's $t(91.55) = 3.68, p < .001, d = .58$), higher levels of stress (with, $M = 1.98, SD = .72$; without, $M = 1.53, SD = .75$; $t(333) = 4.42, p < .001, d = .59$), and poorer self-rated quality of life (with, $M = 6.17, SD = 1.65$; without, $M = 7.07, SD = 1.59$; $t(333) = -4.18, p < .001, d = -.56$).

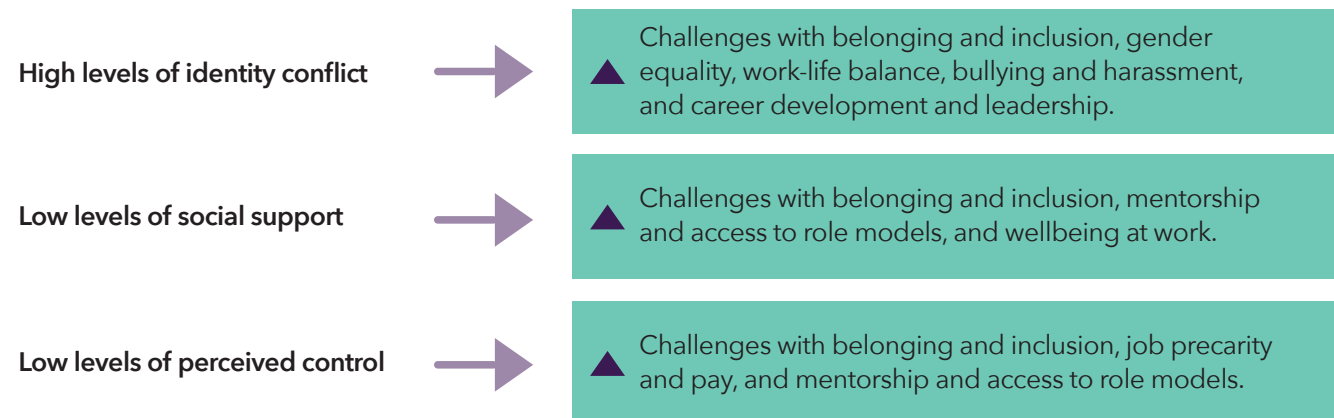
Overall, **job precarity and pay**, **work-life balance**, and **wellbeing at work** were the most robust linear predictors of mental health and wellbeing-related outcomes:



Predicting Wellbeing from Challenges

When exploring the opposite effect – that is, when exploring whether mental health and wellbeing outcomes collectively explained a significant proportion of variance across the challenge areas – they were found to account for 20–34% of the variance.

Overall, **identity conflict**, **social support**, and **perceived control** emerged as significant linear predictors of challenge areas:



Key Implications

These findings highlight the potential role of these factors as risk or protective influences in shaping how women experience the academic environment.

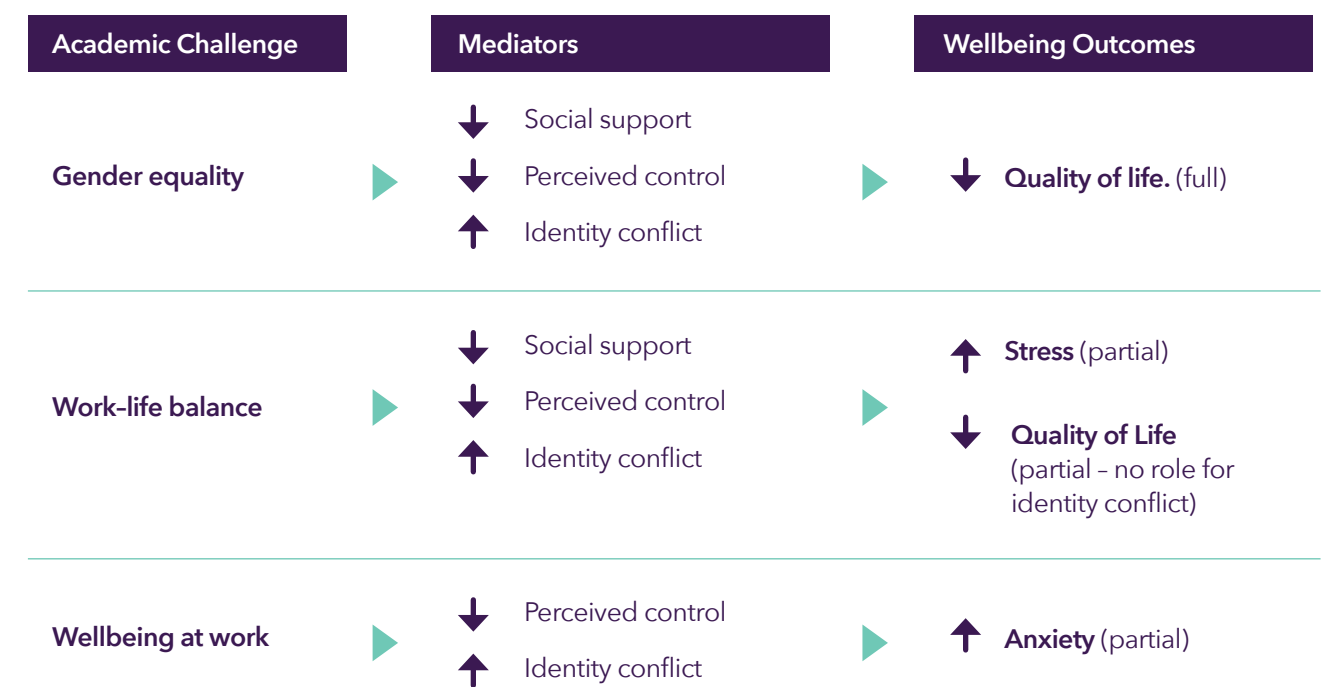
Interestingly, **anxiety, depression, and stress did not predict any of the challenge directly**, which might suggest that these mental health impacts are more often consequences of academic challenges, rather than causes. But futures longitudinal or repeated-measure studies are needed to infer causation.

Exploratory Analysis

Mediation Findings

In line with our exploratory aims, we examined **potential mediators** of the relationships between challenge areas and wellbeing outcomes. Here, we focused on challenge areas that had already emerged as significant predictors of wellbeing outcomes (job precarity and pay, gender equality, work-life balance, and wellbeing at work).

Given that depression, anxiety, stress, and quality of life were predicted by these challenge areas – but were not themselves robust linear predictors of the challenge areas – they were treated as wellbeing outcomes (provided they had been significantly predicted by the challenge area in question). The remaining variables were explored as mediators if they were correlated with both the challenge area and the wellbeing outcome in question ($p < .001$). Based on these criteria, seven parallel mediation models were explored:



What This Means

Across the identified challenge areas, social support, perceived control, and identity conflict emerged as powerful levers for change. Strengthening these could help buffer the impact of systemic and workplace challenges on mental health and quality of life.

Work Package 2: Interviews

At the end of the survey, participants could opt into a follow-up interview. Those who consented (N = 153) provided contact and demographic information. A stratified random sampling approach was used to select 20 participants, ensuring representation across ethnic groups, with oversampling of marginalised ethnicities.

Selected participants received a Participant Information Leaflet and scheduling link via email. Interviews were conducted one-to-one via Microsoft Teams (45 minutes), audio recorded using OBS Studio, and transcribed by an approved third-party vendor. Consent was obtained both in writing and verbally.

Interviews followed a semi-structured guide, pre-piloted with women meeting inclusion criteria. Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) in NVivo, guided by Braun and Clarke’s six-phase process. Two female researchers with lived experience of academic careers (AT, TM) conducted the analysis. Emphasising reflexivity over inter-coder reliability, they independently coded a shared set of interviews, maintained reflexive memos, and engaged in collaborative theme development. This process combined inductive and deductive approaches to produce a theoretically grounded, data-driven narrative.

Twenty interviews were conducted in March 2025 with early- to mid-career women in academia, aiming to achieve thematic saturation and capture diverse lived experiences. **Participants had a mean age of 37.95 years** (SD = 6.81). Full demographic details are provided in Table 2.

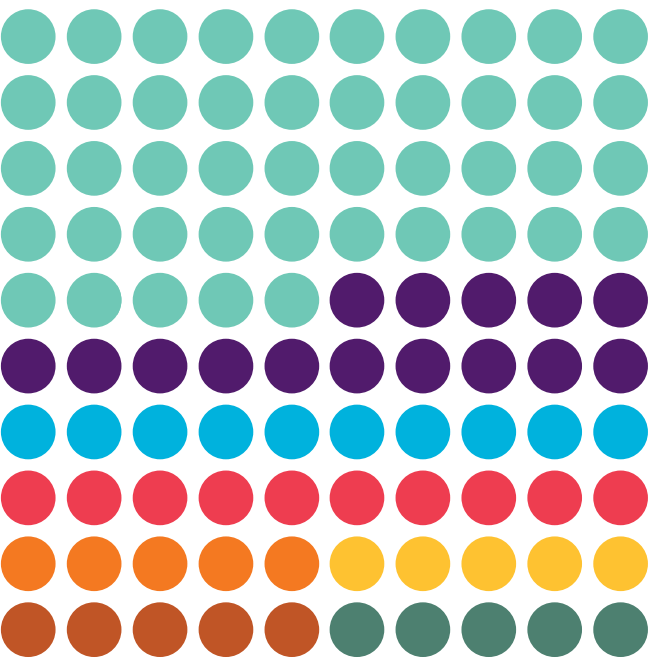


20
PARTICIPANTS

MEAN AGE
37.95
YEARS

Demographic characteristics of the interview sample (N = 20).

Ethnicity



Demographic Characteristic	N
White (English, British, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller or Roma)	9
Other White Background	3
Chinese	2
Mixed White and Black African	2
Arab	1
Mixed White and Asian	1
Other Asian Background	1
Other Mixed Background	1

Parental Status



Demographic Characteristic	N
Not a Parent	11
Parent (including stepparent and/or adoptive parent)	9

Academic Job Role



Demographic Characteristic	N
Postdoctoral Research/Teaching Fellow	9
Lecturer	4
Assistant Professor	3
Research Assistant/Associate	2
Associate Professor/Reader	1
Clinical Lecturer	1

