

Exploring the Impact of the Covid19 Pandemic on Minoritized Early Career Academics

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Abstract

Beyond the emerging consensus about the precarious nature of early career academics' (ECAs) work and its effects on job security, career aspirations and development, research suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic might have exacerbated this situation. Furthermore, little is known about the lived experiences of ECAs from under-represented groups, including women and ethnic minority academics. This study aims to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences and career progression of ECAs during and since the pandemic, and the extent to which experiences differ between social groups. It builds on BAM's Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Respect (EDIR) project, and existing knowledge gaps regarding the impact of the pandemic on the experiences and career development of ECAs, and especially those from minoritized groups. A co-design mixed methods approach is adopted and will involve carrying out an online survey and semi-structured interviews with ECAs, business school leaders and researcher managers.

Keywords: Covid-19 impact, intersectionality, inequalities, career development, early career academics, minoritized groups, co-design

Track: Gender in Management

Word count: 2,205 words

Introduction

In academia, career development focuses on understanding the process through which scholars create their work-related identity, by managing various behaviours, tasks and experiences across various positions and organisations over time (Zacher et al., 2018). By its nature, academics tend to be highly educated and specialist in their fields; have high intrinsic work motivation; and tend to value working environments that promote independence and flexibility. Thus, the environmental context, which provides opportunities and constraints for individuals in the development of their academic careers is significant to this process. Research focused on Early Career Academics (ECAs) highlights the heterogeneity of this group in terms of career aspirations and progression. A study by Hollywood et al., (2020) exploring the experiences of ECAs found that it is not just situational factors such as departmental environment or job security that impacts ECAs' 'imagined futures', but also intrapersonal dimensions and individual personality. Spina et al., (2022) also found that certain discourses around academic 'pipelines' and 'early careers' obscured the experiences of 'older' ECAs entering academia as a second-career, and those on long-term fixed term contracts. Other studies also suggest that the increased casualization of labour within universities continues to perpetuate inequalities by reinforcing 'citizenship' (those on permanent contracts) and 'non-citizenship' (those on contractual basis) status (O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019).

Within the broader academic context, social inequalities persist within higher education institutions (HEIs) across the UK (Sliwa et al., 2022), despite the progress made through initiatives like Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter. These inequalities significantly impact the career development of women and ethnic minorities, and are persistent in areas of academic experience and practices such as career aspirations, access to secure employment, and career progression (Arday, 2018, 2021; Bhopal and Henderson, 2021). Therefore, pointing to significant structural problems within HEIs that need to be acknowledged and addressed (Sliwa et al., 2022; Spina et al., 2022). For example, a recent report published by British Academy of Management (Sliwa et al., 2022) analysed UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data and found that gender and ethnic diversity decreases with academic progression (26% of professors are women; 2% of professors are ethnic minorities). Additionally, the gender employment gap significantly increases when one considers intersections of gender and ethnicity (32% of academics who self-identified as Black and 35% who self-identified as 'Other' ethnic groups are women).

Career development processes are embedded in complex and dynamic systems that result in non-linear and less predictable career trajectories (Pryor and Bright, 2022). For instance, an individual's personal circumstances and level of agency, which is an important aspect of career development, is not only influenced by family, culture, location, but also wider socioeconomic, political and institutional factors, including unexpected interventions to these broader systems. Whilst much has been written about the potential impact of structural inequalities in HEIs on academic careers, the majority of these studies (some exceptions include Enright and Facer, 2017; Hollywood et al., 2020; O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019; Spina et al., 2022) have primarily focused on the progression of senior academics. Furthermore, little is known (Ivancheva et al., 2019) about the extent to which such inequalities may or may not exacerbate the impact of external interventions and/or major societal disruptions, such as the Covid 19 pandemic, on the career life cycle and development of ECAs.

Our study contributes to this limited knowledge by providing a holistic understanding of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lived experiences and career development of ECAs, with particular focus on minoritized groups. It addresses the following research question: *How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the lived experiences and career life cycle of ECAs from*

minoritized social groups? and focuses on issues related to workload, productivity, mental well-being, job-security, and management support. It responds to recent calls for more comprehensive insights into the gendered and racialized disadvantages and privileges experienced by ECAs (Śliwa et al., 2022) within a specific context. We draw on the Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) and Intersectionality theory to inform our inquiry, which aims to make contributions to the career management literature.

CTC is a postmodernist approach to career development theory that seeks to explain reality in terms of complex interactions within dynamic systems. It acknowledges the multiple, embedded, codetermining, emergent, and non-linear structures that constitute real word experiences (Pryor and Bright, 2022). Adopting such a lens would be useful in understanding the ‘messiness’ of career life cycles as experienced by ECAs during periods of societal disruptions. Additionally, an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 2013) allows us to recognize the agentic processes and structural forces that reproduce a given social groups; positioning within society and influences their access to resources, legitimacy and power within given systems.

Prior studies highlight the varying impact of Covid-19 pandemic on academics belonging to different social groups and at different career stages (Pereira, 2021; Vitae, 2021). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic might have worsened existing social inequalities in academia. For instance, despite the flexibility of remote working, the pandemic also led to increased caring and housework burdens, with women experiencing a significantly larger impact than men. Female academics with children reported a disproportionate reduction in research time compared to both childless male and female academics, and male counterparts with children (Deryugina et al., 2021). The additional burden of juggling household and office work not only impacts research productivity, but also academics’ career prospects and overall mental wellbeing (Vitae, 2021).

Studies focused on ECAs in particular, found that poor work environment, limited access to resources, perceptions of pressure, and negative psychological outcomes were the main challenges facing ECA’s and doctoral researchers (Jackman et al., 2022). However, ECAs also identified benefits during the early stages of the pandemic. Similarly, Świgoń et al (2023) highlight the mixed impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on ECAs’ productivity. While some ECAs cite positive effects on their research creativity, the majority felt the overall impact in terms of delayed research activities, inability to network and collaborate, as well as limited social interactions had a negative impact on career prospects and morale (Świgoń et al., 2023).

Given the heterogeneity of ECAs experiences, and the varied impact based on their social identities and/or career stages (Gabster et al., 2020; Lokhitan et al., 2022), it is therefore important to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the Covid-19 pandemic might disproportionately affect the career life cycle and imagined futures of this group of scholars.

Methodology

This study adopts a co-design approach in order to ensure involvement in the design, implementation and dissemination processes by both those who are directly impacted and can share their lived experiences, as well as those who could directly influence policies related to supporting ECA career development. The project will be conducted in three stages:

Stage 1: In order to capture the lived experiences of ECAs across the country, an initial online survey will be conducted. The questionnaire will focus on gaining insights on key themes related to ECAs career life cycle and the impact of the pandemic. The survey will also be used

to identify potential participants for the follow-up interviews to explore these relevant issues in depth.

Stage 2: conduct approximately 30 to 35 semi-structured interviews with ECAs, and explore the differential impact of the pandemic. The interviews will explore issues around work-life balance, productivity, job security, career aspirations and progression, as well as discuss the challenges faced and support received.

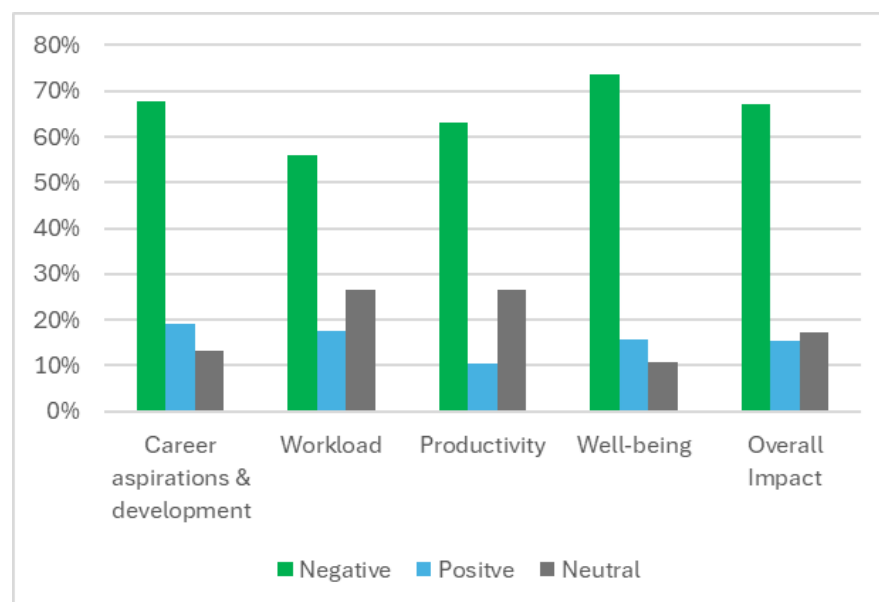
Stage 3: conduct approximately 10 to 15 semi-structured interviews with business school leaders and ECA line managers to explore the aims and intention of support provided to ECAs during the pandemic, and understand how this has evolved since. These interviews will elicit insights about the implementation of the Researcher Development Concordat in creating an inclusive and positive environment for their researchers to thrive.

Initial Findings & Analyses

Our initial findings are based on 21 responses received to date from early career academics (ECAs) during the period May to June 2024. Initial descriptive results focused on identifying whether ECAs experienced the Covid-19 pandemic as having either a positive, negative or neutral impact in areas such as career aspirations and development, workload, productivity and well-being. Overall, the majority of ECAs (67%) reported a negative impact, while 17% of ECAs indicated no impact. Interestingly, 15% of ECAs reported a positive impact of the pandemic.

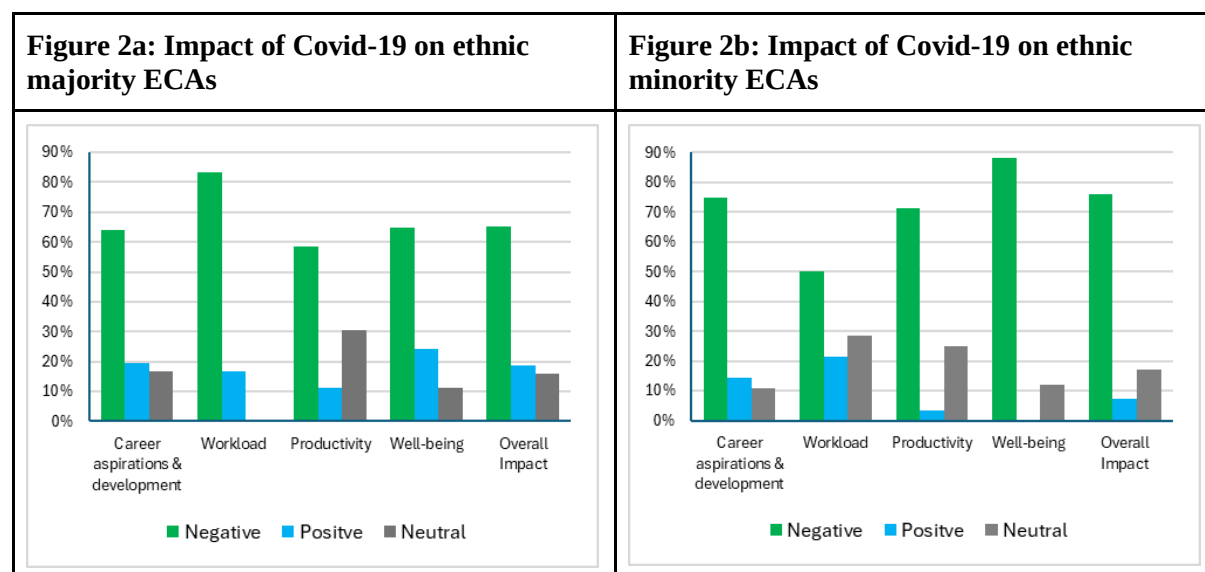
Looking at the various components, the outcomes for career aspirations and development as well as productivity were closely related to the overall impact as shown Figure 1 below. However, when we consider the outcomes for well-being (mental, physical and work-life balance), a relatively higher percentage of ECAs (74%) reported negative impact.

Figure 1: Impact of Covid-19 on all ECA's

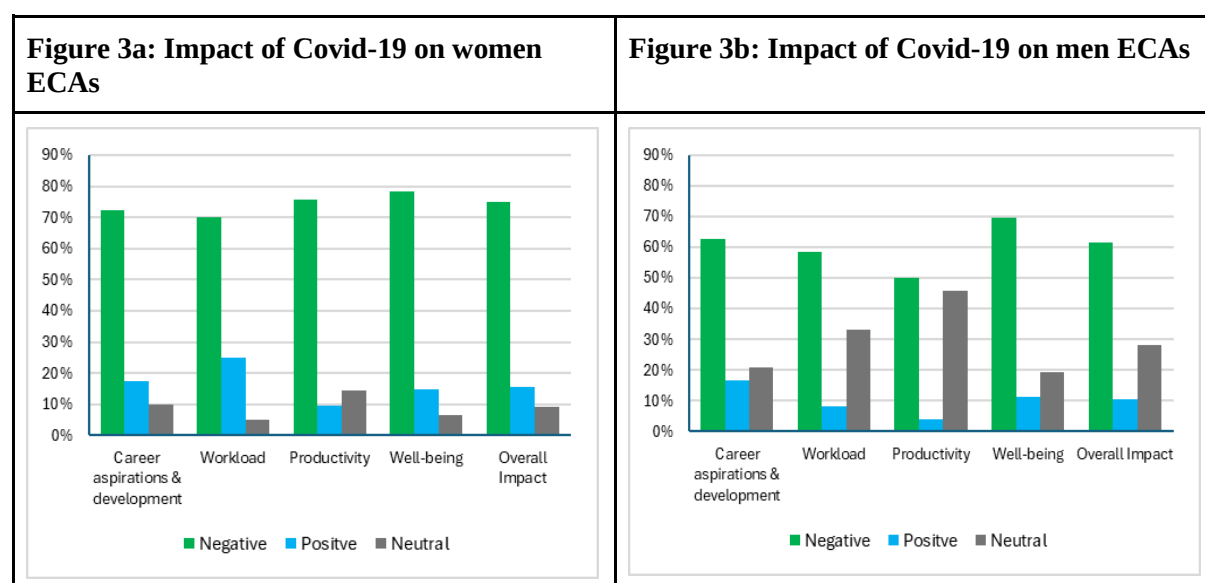


Findings on responses by ethnicity, are grouped into two categories i.e ethnic majority and ethnic minority ECAs (see Figure 2a and 2b below). We generally observe ethnic minority ECAs indicating a relatively higher overall negative impact (76%) compared to ethnic majority ECAs (65%). While ethnic majority ECAs generally report higher negative impact on career aspirations & development, productivity and well-being, it is interesting to note a stark

difference with regard to workload. In this instance, 83% of ethnic majority ECAs report a negative impact compared to 50% of ethnic minority ECAs.

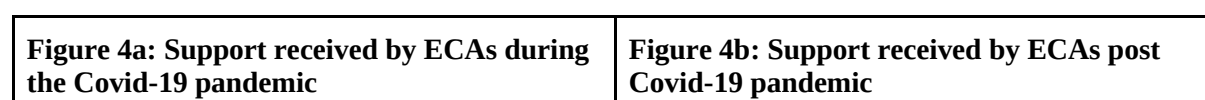


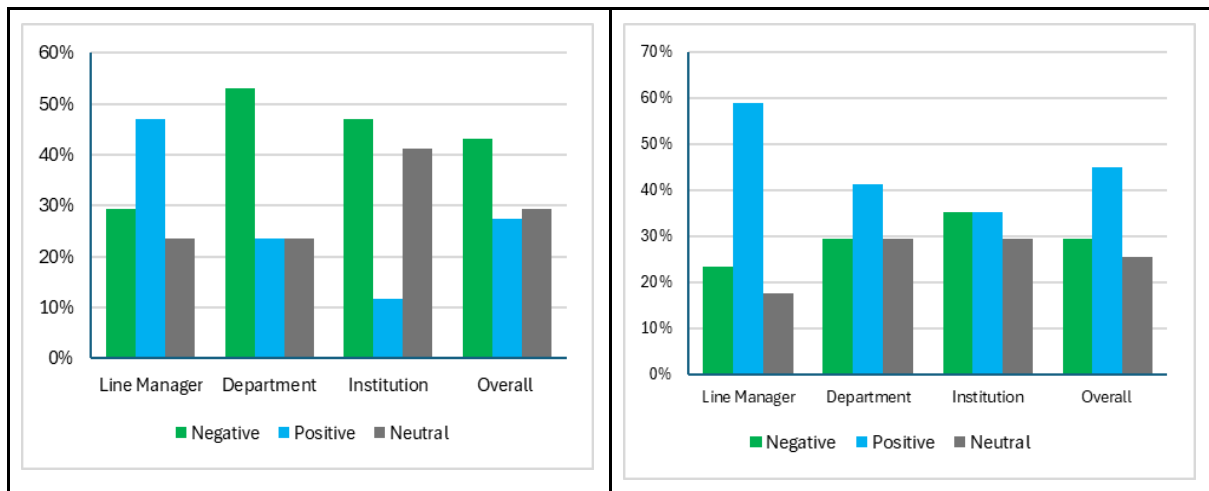
When looking at the findings based on gender, women ECAs indicated a relatively higher negative impact of the pandemic than men ECAs across the different areas. Those who experienced a positive impact are similar across gender (see Figure 3a and b).



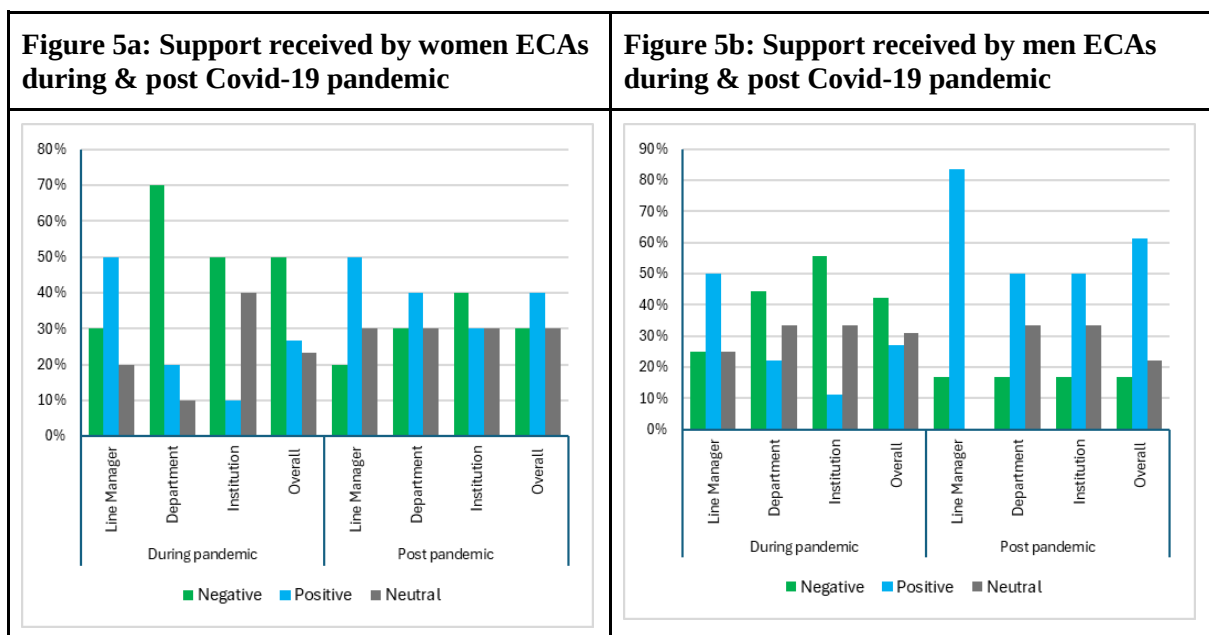
Experiences of support received by ECAs

Regarding experiences of support received by ECAs, we find that overall, ECAs were positive about the level of support received from line managers both during (47%) and post-pandemic (59%). In contrast, ECAs indicate less support received at departmental (53%) and institutional (47%) levels. However, there is a positive trend post-pandemic with ECAs indicating greater levels of support being received at departmental (41%) and institutional (35%) levels.





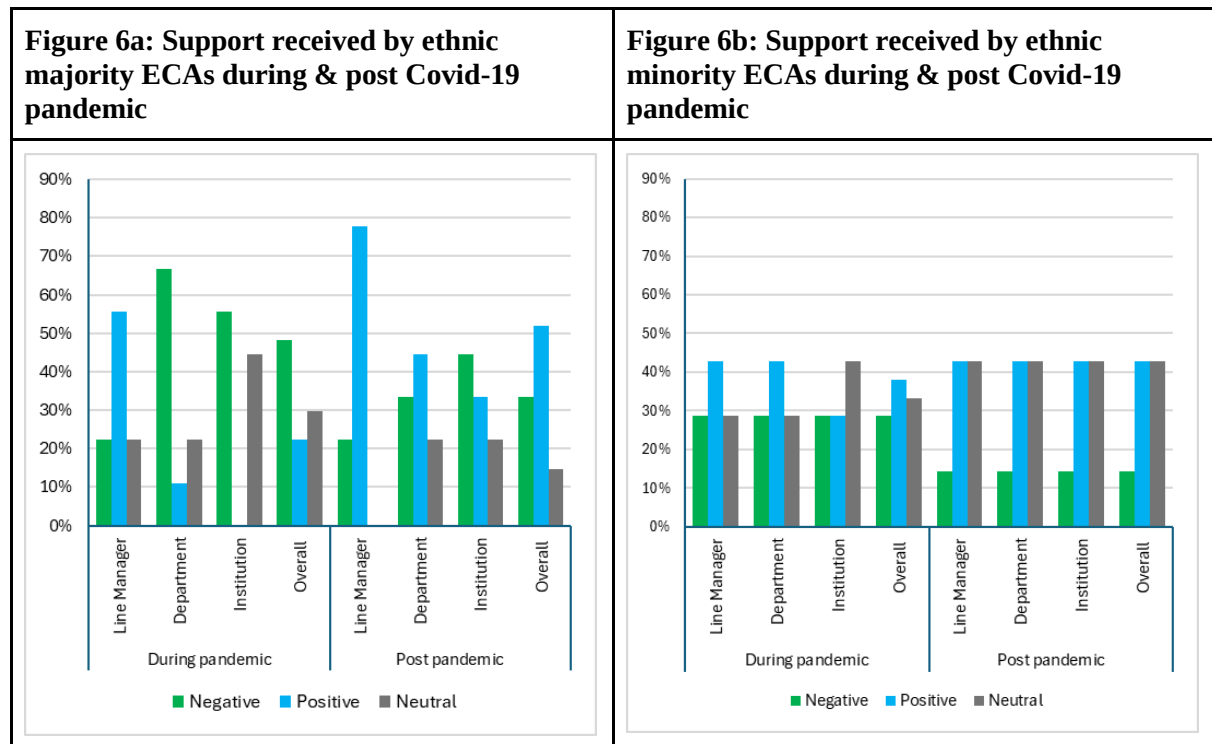
Looking at ECAs experiences of support by gender (see Figure 5a and 5b), indicates that both women and men ECAs had similar experiences to the overall group during the pandemic. The only notable differences are with regard to support received post-pandemic where women ECAs still indicate receiving insufficient support at institutional level (40%). In contrast, men ECAs indicate overall positive support received across the three levels post-pandemic.



In terms of ethnicity, the overall results indicate that ethnic majority ECAs felt they received less support during the pandemic, as compared to responses from ethnic minority ECAs (see Figure 6a and 6b below). When we consider the sources of support, we observe that while both ethnic majority and ethnic minority ECAs indicate positive support received from their line managers during the pandemic, this was slightly higher for ethnic majority ECAs at 56% (compared to 43% for ethnic minority ECAs). Additionally, ethnic minority ECAs also indicate positive support received at the departmental level (43%), while ethnic majority ECAs indicate less support being received at this level (11%).

The post pandemic experiences of ECA support shows that both categories indicate relatively higher levels of support across all levels (except at the institutional level where 44% of ethnic

majority ECAs indicate inadequate support). For ethnic minority ECAs most of the participants feel they either adequately supported or were neutral.



A more detailed analysis of the findings will be possible once additional responses are collected during the rest of the survey period. Furthermore, the survey findings will be complemented by the qualitative data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with ECAs, ECA line managers and business school leaders. The triangulation of data collection is viewed as important for providing a holistic understanding of the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on ECAs' career trajectories and imagined futures.

Expected Contributions

Our study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the varied impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on ECAs (Lokhtina et. al, 2022; Świgoń et al., 2023), and specifically those from minoritized social groups. It will also develop recommendations on best practices to create a more inclusive research and innovation environment that supports ECAs career progression. This will include providing a better understanding of how institutional leaders and researcher managers can better support ECAs career aspirations and progression. By adopting an intersectional perspective that recognizes the diversity of ECAs both in terms of their social identities and career stages, our study will build on the limited existing knowledge regarding the persistent social inequalities in academic institutions (Arday, 2021; Ivancheva et al., 2019; Śliwa et al., 2022). Furthermore, the involvement of researcher managers and business school leaders during the core-design process will facilitate the adoption of the study's recommendations and contribute to creating an inclusive and positive environment for all academics to thrive.

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