

Chapter 7

‘It doesn’t have to be like this’

Keywords: CHANGE; recommendations; data; intersectionality; longitudinal

Key Findings

Definition and Measurement

A working class academic (WCA) identity is nuanced, with elements such as cultural background, financial challenges, and the subjective awareness of one’s class identity within the academic context. Approximately 90% of respondents identified as WCAs, while the remaining 10 percent cited complex tensions around embracing this identity.

Classism

WCAs in higher education faced pervasive classism, manifesting in stereotypes, derogatory comments, and pressure to conform to elite/middle-class norms. Microaggressions, such as mockery of speech and dismissal of ideas, eroded their sense of belonging. Classist attitudes and biased evaluations hindered scholarly achievements and impeded promotion. The impact of these experiences included imposter syndrome, discomfort with differences, isolation, and strained relationships. The pressure to ‘pass’ exacerbated mental health issues, notably in the context of academic precarity.

Intersectionality

Classed intersections unveiled a range of complex themes and experiences:

The Intersections of a Working-Class Academic Identity: A Class Apart, 119–136

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Class and Gender: Gender disparities were evident in non-promotable tasks, with women shouldering more advising, mentoring, and committee work. Male WCAs were more likely to engage in prestigious activities, reflecting classed elements and differing perceptions of student difficulties.

Class and Ethnicity: Respondents emphasised dual disadvantages due to class and ethnicity. Ethnic minority WCAs of colour face potential discrimination and underrepresentation, especially at senior levels, leading to tokenism and microaggressions, revealing systemic racism and bias.

Class and Disability: The intersection of disability and class in academia presents challenges, with disabled individuals often in precarious, low-paid positions. Obtaining reasonable adjustments posed difficulties, as some feared it may impact upon job security. This led to the masking of needs which then contributed to burnout. Economic challenges also arose, hindering access to conferences and networking opportunities.

Class and Institution: At elite institutions, WCAs often concealed their working-class roots, but demonstrated a sense of class pride. In contrast, those at Russell Group institutions experienced tension between their backgrounds and their roles in elite/middle-class academic environments, leading to strained relationships with family and friends. Access to, and their experiences of, mentorship were difficult. Working at post-1992 institutions offered limited opportunities for research funding, which then contributed to disparities in research opportunities.

Class and Subject: Despite a strong sense of belonging, Social Science WCAs encountered difficulties. In Education, interdisciplinary barriers, resource access, and curriculum design challenges were discussed. Geography WCAs faced obstacles like equipment costs. Classical Studies noted accessibility issues and elitism, compounded by learning challenges. Physics WCAs highlighted networking, mentorship, and funding competitiveness impacting career progression.

Community Cultural Wealth

Across three phases, respondents expanded on Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth to demonstrate examples of WCA cultural wealth. In navigating the challenging terrain of academia, respondents demonstrated aspirational capital by maintaining academic ambitions despite facing exclusion. Concerns about mentorship scarcity led to a commitment to pay it forward, inspiring others and advocating positive change. Navigational capital was evident in their dedication to supporting students through various initiatives, though undervalued and met with resistance. Linguistic capital was strategically employed to empower students, utilising academic language and local accents for accessibility. Familial and social capital

played a crucial role, with academics turning to these networks for practical and emotional support. Through their resistance capital, respondents influenced academia through innovative pedagogy, rejecting imposter syndrome, supporting University and College Union (UCU) strikes, and proposing withholding intellectual capital to challenge exploitative models. They also employed perspective capital to provide distinct views and promote inclusion, positioning themselves as change makers.

Fostering Positive Change

Halfway through my interview with Yvonne, a Lecturer in Health and Social Care at a Russell Group institution, she poignantly remarked, *'It doesn't have to be like this, you know'*. I endorse Reyes (2022) plea for 'academic justice' – a system in which all members of the academy can fully participate in academic life, characterised by strong support and acknowledgement of the value and significance of our ideas, research, and backgrounds (p. 158). This chapter outlines the practical strategies and recommendations provided by my respondents in response to the following question:

'In an ideal world, if you were to offer recommendations to make a positive impact on the academic journey of working class academics, what actions would you suggest?'

This chapter makes six recommendations, based around a 'CHANGE' framework (Fig. 4).

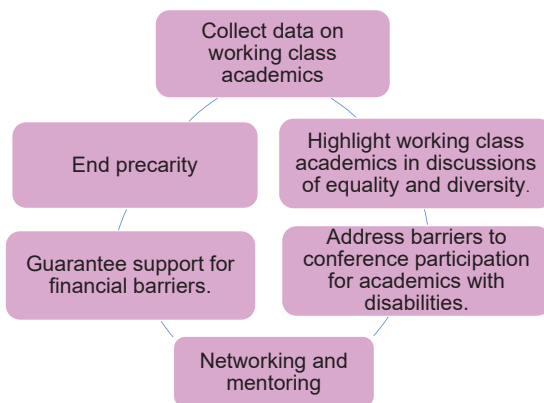


Fig. 4. A CHANGE Framework.

Collect Data on Working-Class Academics

Friedman and Laurison (2019) highlighted that the first step towards meaningful change is accurate measurement. One reason why class statistics have not historically been collected in academia is because class/socioeconomic status is not a protected characteristic. The UK Government has worked together with the Bridge Group¹ to publish directions on how employers could measure class background in their workforce. This measurement included four main areas: type of schooling; free school meal eligibility; parental occupation; and whether parents had a degree qualification. While supportive of the need to collect data, some respondents raised concerns about where definitional 'lines' would be drawn. Determining the exact moment when an individual transitions out of the working class is complex and presents a challenge that could potentially undermine crucial discussions about class in academia.

Despite these concerns, a significant majority of respondents (79%, n. 195) were insistent that universities and other academic organisations, including Research Councils (such as the Economic and Social Research Council; Arts and Humanities Research Council; Innovate UK, etc.) and subject associations (such as the British Sociological Association; The British Psychological Society; Royal Academy of Engineering, etc.), should include a question in membership surveys, or other forms of data collection, regarding the social class of their staff. This would mirror the approach taken with other protected characteristics. Sally, who was currently pursuing her PhD in Social Sciences at a traditional institution, noted the need to map the numbers of WCAs not only within an institution, but also within various departments, and according to their seniority level and contract status. Such data could then serve as a foundation to ensure a greater representation of WCAs. For Sally, these data were vital as without it:

[there is] less impetus for institutions to do anything. Arguments for better class based representation in academia need to be made using evidence. If it was collected, we could then use this data to make these arguments.

Sally argued that this data-driven approach could advocate for better representation, help identify areas of best practice and shape academia to be more inclusive and better aligned with the needs and experiences of working-class individuals.

Highlight Class in Discussions of Equality and Diversity

Over half of respondents felt that class was an equality and diversity issue in academia. For instance, Archie, a Sports Science PhD Student at a post-1992

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/768371/Measuring_Socio-economic_Background_in_your_Workforce_recommended_measures_for_use_by_employers.pdf

institution, called for acknowledging class as a protected characteristic and urged universities to embrace their socioeconomic responsibilities.

Make class/socioeconomic background a protected characteristic in law, so that unis can be measured publicly on their success rates – not just for students – but for staff too. [Archie PhD Student in Sports Science at a post-1992 institution]

This has also been raised in Friedman and Laurison's (2019) *The Class Ceiling* and discussed by Ricketts et al. (2022), who have both argued that the inclusion of social class as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act (2010) would create an immediate and clear legal mandate for initiatives to reduce class-based discrimination. Van Bueren (2021) compellingly argued that making class a protected characteristic, could prohibit class discrimination and help address socioeconomic biases. By formalising these commitments, universities would be held responsible for creating an environment where socioeconomic background is not a barrier to advancement. Institutions would then be expected to proactively tackle the challenges faced by WCAs.

At the time of writing,² England has not enacted the power to put in place a public sector duty regarding socioeconomic inequalities, a power exercised by both Scotland and Wales. Since 2018, Scottish public bodies making strategic decisions have been legally obligated to address inequalities resulting from socioeconomic disadvantage, known as the 'Fairer Scotland Duty' under Part 1 of the Equality Act. Similarly, Wales implemented the socioeconomic duty in 2021. Although not explicitly prohibiting discrimination based on socioeconomic grounds, the introduction of this duty is a potential first step towards addressing class discrimination. Socioeconomic disadvantage is defined as low income, low wealth, material deprivation, and area deprivation – measurable categories that could serve as a foundation for protecting social class under the Equality Act but might not necessarily support the protection of WCAs. Another approach involves measuring class origins based on our parents' occupations during our teenage years. The question arises: Can a WCA also be protected with this metric? Drawing a parallel from *Taylor v Jaguar Land Rover Limited*, where gender reassignment was deemed 'a spectrum', individuals at various points on the socioeconomic spectrum could qualify for protection. This approach broadens the legislation to encompass aspects of class making individuals susceptible to discrimination beyond a direct correlation with financial means (Murphy, 2022).

Alongside this, while universities allocate resources to departments responsible for diversity training, there is a noticeable absence of emphasis on social class:

²October 2023.

I would insist that diversity and inclusion training include content relating to the characteristics of people who identify as working class – and make it clear that people...have real or perceived limitations that are not outwardly obvious. [Adrian, a Lecturer in Business Environment and Development at a Russell Group institution]

Ask universities to make public the steps they are taking to include class in diversity initiatives/hiring practices. [Ruby, a Research Associate at a Russell Group institution]

HEI's need to understand that they need to implement equity in the workplace to ensure working class academics can have the same opportunities to progress as upper and middle class ones... When it comes to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives its a case of not just talking the talk but walking the wall today not tomorrow. [Ari, who works in Arabic Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies³ at a Russell Group institution]

Eliminate class pay gaps, more equity. [Demi, an Associate Pro Vice Chancellor (Education)]

Both Adrian and Ruby noted the importance of addressing class-based discrimination and promoting inclusivity in higher education institutions. Adrian talked about incorporating content related to working class characteristics into diversity and inclusion training so there is a better understanding of both the challenges and diversity among WCA. Whereas Ruby's statement emphasised transparency and accountability in combating class discrimination. She suggested that universities should signal a commitment to promote class inclusivity and equality within academia. Ari's quote further implied that there may be a gap between rhetoric and reality within some universities. It reflected an awareness of the need for change to address historical disparities in HE and promote a fair and inclusive environment.

Demi's quote from the previous paragraph referred to her belief that there are pay and promotion disparities linked to social class. Research by the Social Mobility Commission (2017), which used extensive data from the labour force survey (LFS) to examine access to the professions and the impact of socioeconomic background on earnings, found that those from working class backgrounds with professional positions earned, on average, £6,800 (17%) less each year compared to their more affluent colleagues. Even when individuals from working class backgrounds possessed the same educational qualifications, roles, and experience, they were paid an average of £2,242 (7%) less. The most significant class pay gaps were identified in the fields of finance (£13,713), medicine (£10,218), and IT (£4,736).

Individuals from working class backgrounds also encountered difficulties in career progression within professional roles and often did not achieve the same

³The respondent didn't indicate his position in this discipline.

levels of earnings or success. The report, authored by Friedman et al. (2017) also suggests that individuals in professional employment from less privileged backgrounds may be less likely to seek pay raises, have limited access to networks and work opportunities, or, in some instances, refrain from seeking promotions. The 'class pay gap' could also be attributed to conscious or unconscious discrimination or subtle employment practices that result in 'cultural matching' within the workplace. I am not able to expand on these findings with data in relation to class-based pay gaps or hiring disparities in academia as this was a subject that was only raised by a comparatively small number of respondents (n. 12), with promotion being the most frequently mentioned concern (n. 9). Respondents who mentioned issues surrounding low pay and limited promotion in their interviews, also noted it was difficult for them to provide any concrete evidence that their class played a role in receiving lower pay or the obstacles they faced in relation to promotion and career advancement.

I certainly experience a pay gap due to my class background. I also feel I'm less likely to be promoted compared to my socially advantaged colleagues. I'd be a professor by now if I was posh, but how do I prove that? [Eddie, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution]

As all five respondents said similar comments, I intend to conduct research in this area. The focus being to identify if differences in promotion exist and if they result from single or multiple factors, i.e. biased hiring practices, and/or systemic inequalities.

Alongside this, three-quarters of respondents felt that raising awareness of WCAs as an identity was a crucial step towards addressing the often overlooked challenges and contributions they bring to the academic landscape. For instance, Bernard, a Senior Lecturer in Networking at a traditional institution, felt that there needed to be '*less of a taboo in talking about it*', i.e. social class in academia. Others, such as Isla, working in Education⁴ at a post-1992 institution, felt that open conversations about class dynamics within academia were essential to enable WCAs to feel it is appropriate and '*to feel more comfortable to call themselves working class, and to address the challenges we face*'. Respondents also perceived there to be a pressing need to acknowledge that as working class people may have experienced disadvantages in various social and educational contexts, they may also have had varying levels of familiarity with elite forms of capital (Reay et al., 2009), but still possess other forms of cultural wealth (Crew, 2020, 2021, 2022; Jackson-Cole, 2019). This recognition can ensure that pathways to success are equally accessible, regardless of one's background. Embedding this understanding into institutional systems removes assumptions about who can be an academic, eliminates the need for constant explanations and allows individuals

⁴When asked what is your title including the subject do you teach/conduct research in? Isla said 'Education'.

to focus on their scholarly contributions. For instance, Orla, a Tutor of Economic and Social History at a Russell Group institution highlighted the need to ‘*acknowledge that class continues to impact career progression in HE and take steps to challenge unconscious bias*’. To mitigate biases, acknowledging their existence is crucial. Tony, a Lecturer in English Literature at a traditional institution, goes further and points out that universities should take pride in and, celebrate the valuable contributions and diverse perspectives their WCAs bring to the academic community.

Address Barriers to Conferences for WCAs with Disabilities

While focusing primarily on class, this book also delved into examining intersecting forms of disadvantage, such as disability. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid shift to virtual events, revealing their numerous benefits, including eliminating travel requirements for both attendees and speakers. Respondents provided valuable recommendations for fostering disability-inclusive conferences. Suggestions included:

1. **Comprehensive Accessibility Planning:** Event organisers must prioritise comprehensive accessibility, providing transport allowances for carers, wheelchair access, captioning, microphones, signers, slide copies, dietary considerations, and accessible restrooms. This ensures inclusivity without making individuals with disabilities feel singled out.
2. **Options for Crowds and Streaming:** To accommodate those with anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in crowds, events should consider having separate rooms where participants can choose based on their comfort levels.
3. **Consider accessibility right from the start when planning your event:** Proactively market your event as accessible by securing services like live captioning and sign language interpretation in advance. Include dedicated sections in registration forms for attendees to communicate necessary adjustments and provide contact details for direct discussions. Send accessibility reminders in email confirmations and joining instructions to prioritise participants’ needs.
4. **Consultation and Inclusivity:** Event organisers should consult participants with disabilities on how to improve access and actively involve them in the planning process. This should also include granting carers free attendance if necessary and ensuring accessible venues and facilities.
5. **Accessible Accommodation:** For overnight events or retreats, accommodations should be fully wheelchair accessible and consider various disability needs. Event organisers must proactively seek venues that are disability friendly and inquire about accessibility features.
6. **Financial Support:** Funding applications and bursaries should factor in the additional expenses that participants with disabilities may incur, including those related to accessibility and care.
7. **Variety of Needs:** Recognise that disabilities vary greatly, and a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t suffice. Event organisers should be flexible and adaptable in accommodating a range of disability-related needs.

These recommendations aim to create a more inclusive and accessible environment for academics with disabilities in the literary and writing community, ensuring that their diverse needs are met, and they can participate fully in such events.

Networking and Mentoring Opportunities

Returning to a broad focus on WCAs, they also expressed a strong desire for increased networking opportunities and more visible and accessible institutional support networks specifically designed for WCAs. These institutional networks could provide a space for connecting, sharing experiences, and seeking advice within a community that understands the challenges they face. Respondents referred to a need for these networks to be geographically distributed, ensuring that WCAs from all regions could access and benefit from them.

There was also an urgent call for support with mentoring among most of my WCAs, the suggestion being that this could foster a more supportive academic landscape:

There needs to be knowledge sharing and mentoring among working class academics. [Lily, a Senior Research Associate in Public Health at a traditional institution]

Increased support, awareness, Mentors? Until I was accepted onto a programme I was naive and didn't realise where to go for support etc. I didn't know there were websites to guide someone to write a research proposal. I feel that working class academics need support to navigate the academic system. [Willow, a PhD Student in Applied Social Sciences at a post-1992 institution]

Personally, I have benefitted from good academic mentoring. I would suggest this ought to be more formalised in academia. [Sebastian, in Economics⁵ at a post-1992 institution]

Mentoring was seen as a means to bridge the gap between the academic system and those from working class backgrounds, offering vital support in navigating the complexities of research proposals, program applications, and career progression. The value of mentors who share similar lived experiences is highlighted, reflecting the power of role models in providing guidance and inspiration. While some have personally reaped the benefits of effective academic mentoring, the collective plea was for a more formalised and comprehensive approach to mentoring, not only for WCAs but also for students. Overall, respondents acknowledged the potential of mentorship to propel positive change within the academic community.

⁵When asked what is your title including the subject do you teach/conduct research in, Sebastian said Economics.

Respondents felt that mentorship within academia needed to extend beyond a mere supportive ‘presence’. Useful mentorship hinges upon the need for mentors who possess a profound understanding of the unique challenges faced by WCAs. An example of this is the Network for Working Class Classicists,⁶ a network set up to provide support for working class people engaged in the study, work, or exploration of the Classics. The network’s primary emphasis is on fostering mutual encouragement, offering practical assistance, and advocating for the inclusion of class-related issues within the field of Classics. Returning to my respondent’s, the consensus was that there was the necessity for mentors who comprehended the financial and societal limitations that WCAs frequently experience.

I just don't know what I'm supposed to know.... someone...understanding of my background...because I feel like just sometimes, it's just ignored. For example, one of my supervisors, she suggested with the PhD, I could even have a reading retreat, like go to Italy for a month, and I thought, oh, my going to Italy for a month on a PhD salary, I don't have the money to just eat often. And I think it's just sometimes even though your supervisors are so lovely and so helpful. In terms of my work, I feel like I could do with someone to just show me the ropes a little bit more. [Leanna, a PhD in Psychology at a Russell Group institution]

Leanne’s quotation demonstrates the importance of having a mentor who understands the realities of the mentee’s circumstances. For instance, while the suggestion may be well-intentioned, the affordability of a WCA, especially for someone in the early stages of their career, engaging in a reading retreat in Italy is not feasible. This illustrates the need for a mentor who is sensitive to the financial constraints faced by those from similar backgrounds. Moreover, the desire for a mentor who can ‘show the ropes’ takes on added significance within the context of academia. Mentoring is especially important to WCA because as Rickett and Morris (2021), alongside my own findings, revealed, WCAs can often undertake admin roles that focus on student support, tasks which tend to be unrewarded via promotions processes. As other respondents mentioned, securing research funding could be particularly challenging for WCAs at post-1992 institutions due to competition and limited institutional support, further guidance would be helpful for these academics, and perhaps even those from other types of institutions.

Guarantee Financial Support

Proposing that universities guarantee financial support for WCAs may seem like a significant request. However, my respondents consistently emphasised that without such support, their academic progression beyond a degree qualification

⁶<https://www.workingclassclassics.uk/>

would have been challenging, if not impossible. Archie, a PhD student in Sports Science at a post-1992 institution felt so disillusioned with academia that he suggested we should be *'knocking it all down and start again: it is built for elite life – it is exclusionary'*. Respondents such as Archie and Evelyn, a PhD candidate in Translation Studies at a traditional institution, advocated for increased financial support for PhD students, particularly for those who also have caregiving responsibilities, as highlighted by Evelyn. Anya, who was pursuing her PhD in Legal Education at a traditional institution, expressed a strong belief in the idea that all PhD students should be recognised as employees of the university. She emphasised that the work carried out by PhD students, including teaching and admin responsibilities, warranted this employment status, aligning with the notion that their contributions are integral to the functioning of the academic institution. In 2020, the UCU adopted a policy to campaign for postgraduate researchers (PGRs) to be recognised as members of staff. The idea is that PhD students should receive legal protection akin to that of employees, encompassing the right to participate in labour actions through a trade union. Acknowledging research as a form of labour would signify a significant cultural transformation within the university sector.

A further financial issue raised by a small number (n. 12) of respondents related to the expectation that students should work without financial compensation. Bev, who was pursuing her PhD in Sociology at a post-1992 institution, discussed the prevalent assumption that academics should write up research papers and books during what Bev described as *'spare moments'*. This prevailing academic cultural norm often overlooked the significant time and effort required for these academic pursuits. It also fails to uphold the principle of fair compensation that is common in other professional domains. Additionally, this expectation does not consider that not all academics have the financial capacity and privilege to work in this manner. I'm reminded of two of my respondents, discussed in Crew (2020), who were on precarious contracts. At the time of our interview, Amy, a Teaching Fellow in English at a Russell Group institution, was concurrently juggling three part-time jobs while pursuing her PhD. This arrangement, aimed at covering her living expenses left her with limited time to dedicate to writing the essential research papers that could enhance her prospects of securing academic employment. Simultaneously, she lacked the financial means to forgo those jobs and, instead, engage in unpaid work to produce journal articles. Clara, a Lecturer in Geography at a red brick institution, had been in a similar situation when she completed her PhD:

My friends chilled out [after completing their PhD], whilst I was like... shit what am I going to do?...I could hold out for another year, two years if I was from another background...I could get my books out, a couple more papers and go for a [prestigious] lectureship, but because I need to have something now, I am calling up [unnamed university], asking if you still have work for me. So, yeah, it changes your opportunities. [added by author]

These examples by Bev, Amy, and Clara, illuminate the financial implications ECRs face when writing research papers. Amy's situation illustrates the financial strain that many early career researchers (ECRs) face, where the ability to do unpaid academic work is both a luxury and a privilege. Clara highlighted the long-term impact of these financial constraints, where WCAs often need to prioritise short-term stability over the pursuit of elite academic positions which may demand unpaid work to attain the necessary credentials.

The financial challenges faced by WCAs, particularly those who are ECRs, become more pronounced when it comes to participating in academic conferences. These events incur substantial expenses, necessitating academics to have access to significant economic resources. Many academics have access to institutional funding that covers the financial cost of conferences, however, many others do not. The financial burden associated with multi-day conferences, i.e. expenses such as registration, accommodation, travel, and sustenance alone can easily exceed £1000. Eddie, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution, emphasised that certain conferences are held in European or US locations, necessitating air travel. Attendees must also consider factors like currency exchange rates and the potential expenses associated with obtaining visas for these international events. Jade, a Teaching Assistant in Classics at an Elite institution noted that many conferences required that you stay at the specific, often expensive hotel where the conference is being held. While reasonably priced accommodation is available, it is typically situated much further away, adding on more travel time and expense. While some conferences include meals in their registration fees, others don't, which can consequently raise the overall cost. Additionally, Petra, a Lecturer in Human Geography at a traditional institution highlighted that '*if you have specific dietary requirements due to a disability, allergy, or medical condition, these expenses will likely be your own responsibility*'. For those with dependents, such as children, providing for their care during your absence is another financial factor to consider. STEM-related events are often even more expensive. Alongside this, the cumulative costs of attending multiple conferences in a year can be substantial.

The expenses associated with attending conferences can pose a significant challenge for WCAs, who lack institutional funding or stable academic positions, even WCAs with funding may find it difficult. For example, Mary: PhD Student in Economics at a post-1992 institution, and Seb⁷ both emphasised how the upfront costs of conferences can result in financial hardship:

I do get reimbursed but the initial outlay of booking a conference is something that puts me in financial hardship. [Mary]

'Your supervisor says: There's this great thing coming up that you should attend. It's going to be crucial', 'Oh yeah, absolutely'. 'It's going to cost you 250 pounds'. I don't have 250 pounds, I don't have 50 pounds, I don't have rent for this month. [Seb] (both cited in Crew, 2020, p. 61)

⁷Seb did not feel comfortable giving details of his institution or subject area.

There is a stark reality that for many WCAs, conference attendance, which is something that is seen as essential for academic development and their academic CV, is financially unfeasible. Fixed-term contract holders like Emily, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a post-1992 institution, and Jade, a Teaching Assistant in Classics at an Elite institution, experience even greater challenges due to their academic precarity. Free or low-cost one-day conferences become the pragmatic choices, although these events are often scarce or more easily accessible to respondents living in London or major cities, where academic association headquarters are typically concentrated. My respondents in Wales (outside of Cardiff); in Scotland (outside of Edinburgh and Glasgow) and in Republic of Ireland (outside of Dublin) reported having fewer opportunities to attend free conferences.

Conference grants are presented as being the solution, as these offer free or subsidised registration, accommodation, and travel. However, such grants are highly competitive and frequently come with specific requirements, like presenting a paper or being a member of the research association associated with the conference – although the latter, once more, can present challenges for financially constrained individuals. When WCAs do meet these criteria, applicants applying for conference grants need to demonstrate their value for money, which again is often particularly challenging for financially disadvantaged ECRs with limited academic experience. One in five respondents highlighted the difficulties they encountered when trying to obtain conference grants. Each respondent expressed the challenge of *'marketing myself'*, as noted by Lucas, a Senior Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution, in their grant applications – a skill that elite/middle-class groups often find less problematic. Research conducted by Towers (2008) revealed a gender bias in certain conferences, indicating that women were less likely to be chosen as presenters compared to their male counterparts. Towers attributed this inequity to unconscious gender bias, as the selection of conference presenters took place in closed-door meetings. While my own respondents acknowledged the presence of gendered biases, over half of them believed that the class-based composition of selection committees, along with the influence of unconscious bias, might unintentionally favour candidates from more privileged backgrounds.

Other respondents referred to the smaller academic groups set up within professional societies, noting that while they provided useful networking opportunities, they also demanded unpaid labour from ECRs, thereby further disadvantaging my WCAs without economic capital. Additionally, my respondents on precarious contracts talked of having to juggle multiple contracts to supplement their income, which meant they were unable to facilitate conferences unpaid. This disparity in access to networking opportunities underscores the need for financial support to level the playing field for WCA seeking to engage with the academic community.

There was an urgent plea from many of my respondents, including Orla, that there needed to be a reform of the cumbersome reimbursement and expense systems. The demand is that all funding should be readily accessible in advance, rather than requiring individuals to bear these costs for professional obligations.

Get rid of reimbursement/lengthy expenses systems! All funding should be available in advance. Staff should not have to pay out of pocket for professional lunches (that they are required to take guests to) and should not have to wait an excessive amount of time to be reimbursed. [Orla, a Tutor of Economic and Social History at a Russell Group institution]

These reflections demonstrate the deeply rooted financial challenges faced by WCAs, revealing a stark gap between institutional rhetoric and the practical support available.

Bev, a Sociology PhD Student at a post-1992 institution, provided a compelling account of the meticulous scrutiny she underwent regarding her personal expenses when applying for financial support from the university:

I think for me and other early career researchers who I've spoken to who are also really hard up and not from backgrounds where they've got any parental financial support. That is the biggest thing. Universities come out with all those wellbeing things, come and do yoga with us come and do mindfulness with us. Or, if you're struggling come and talk to financial services, they can help you. In reality, they don't, because I've tried, and they don't give you any money. They tell you that you shouldn't have spent your money. That's basically the gist of it. They endlessly ask you what you spend your money on, and you have to take bank statements in and if you redact any of it, they shout at you, and you think OK, this is not OK.

Bev went on to give the comparative example of one research foundation's provisions for researchers in the Netherlands, which emphasised the potential for tailored financial support based on personal circumstances. This demonstrates that there is a more compassionate and adaptable approach to financial aid. The overarching theme that emerged from my conversations with my WCA respondents is the compelling need for comprehensive and proactive financial support mechanisms that recognise and address the unique challenges and financial constraints faced by WCAs.

Anya, a PhD student in Legal Education at a traditional institution, emphasised that PhD students should be recognised as employees of the university, especially given their vast contributions to research and publications. She also underlined the importance of adequate financial support, fair stipends, and benefits for researchers, stressing that financial constraints hinder equal participation and networking opportunities. Whereas Ivy, a Research Fellow in Health Services at a traditional institution, talked about the allocation of university resources and reported that volunteer initiatives needed to be more inclusive, which would allow all staff members to contribute without financial setbacks. In addition, Ivy touched on the visibility of scientists on platforms like Instagram and Twitter, cautioning that while these platforms seem diverse, it's essential to address the actual representation within academic settings.

My WCA respondents noted the importance of addressing the financial barriers that hinder the entry of working-class individuals into academia. As Adam, a Senior Lecturer in Sociology said:

I funded both my masters and PhD myself through working in retail, then later teaching, but with the increase in fees and more general increase in the cost of living, I don't think that is as possible. Indeed, if I were starting my PGT studies now could I afford it? Maybe my masters, but not my PhD. I wouldn't be an academic now due to my class background.

This experience of self-funding, through retail work and teaching, reveals the uphill battle that many WCAs face. The rising costs of education and living expenses further exacerbate this challenge, potentially deterring talented individuals from pursuing advanced academic paths. The prospect of starting postgraduate studies now is met with uncertainty regarding affordability. Respondents advocated for the expansion of funding opportunities that are specifically tailored to individuals from working-class backgrounds. This includes a call for funded PhD positions and grants, aimed not only at ensuring accessibility but also at dismantling the 'leaky pipeline' that results in many working-class individuals leaving academia due to financial barriers. Listening to the experiences of my WCAs from post-1992 institutions, such as Emily, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a post-1992 institution, as they discussed the challenges they faced when seeking funding from various research councils, it became evident that immediate action is required to dismantle the implicit biases that put post-1992 academics at a disadvantage during the funding application process. Emily's statement, *'I'm ignored because of my class and where I do my research'* echoes the sentiments of numerous others at such institutions. These changes are essential to foster a more equitable academic landscape, one that nurtures the talents of all aspiring scholars, regardless of their class and institutional background.

End Precarity

All but two respondents on precarious contracts, and a small number of respondents who were not, at the time of the interview or when completing the survey, experiencing casualisation felt that addressing academic precarity was imperative for creating a more equitable and stable environment within academia. Raven, a Research Associate in Palliative Care at a Russel Group institution, voiced the concerns of many WCAs who were employed in a precarious manner:

Precarious employment is endemic to all academics..., however, I feel that the stress and anxieties of precarious employment are heightened for working class academics. Whereas others have the financial capital and often family support that can help tide them over in between contracts, these do not exist for me. If I do not have a job, I cannot pay the bills or rent. This puts me...in a constant and

circular state of anxiety where time and energy is spent on worrying and trying to find the next source of funding and/or employment, completely stifling creativity and morale.

Molly, a Lecturer in Health Psychology at a Russell Group institution also noted that *'not all of us have family money/mortgage free properties/other sources of wealth we can draw on if we're not working!'* My WCA respondents also felt that we should abolish precarious employment as these insecure contracts meant that we were losing talented researchers and academics. Elijah, a Postdoctoral Research Associate in Historical Geography at a traditional institution talked of making *'the active choice not to pursue any further academic opportunities in advance of my current contract expiring in June'*. This is not unusual as a growing number of my respondents were not sure *'how they would keep going'*.

Respondents suggested a multifaceted approach to address precarity. Kerry, a Research Associate in modern Languages and Linguistics at a Russell Group institution proposed that universities should provide permanent, full-time research contracts that offered flexibility between different projects as a potential solution to the ever-fluctuating landscape of academic employment. This approach could alleviate the burden of juggling multiple short-term contracts and create a more predictable career trajectory. This was suggested by one in eight respondents. However, Sir Anton Muscatelli, the vice Chancellor at Glasgow University observed that *'there is no way any university could guarantee a completely open-ended contract without having funding that is more than 12 or 24 months, it just can't work. We would have to paradoxically shrink the size of our research base which would not be helpful either. Instead, he pointed to the role of public funding bodies to extend their funding horizons beyond the short term (Times Higher Education, 2022). The UCU supports stable work arrangements in universities, and as such has advocated that research funding agencies should make secure employment a grant condition. This is a potential strategy to tackle academic precarity as research funders hold significant influence in academia, and by tying funding to secure work arrangements, they incentivise universities to take action. This can have a direct and substantial impact on reducing casualisation. However, its effectiveness could be enhanced if universities also consider another UCU recommendation that awarding bodies like Athena Swan and Investors in people should assess how casualisation impacts upon institutions' goals and objectives. This is a valuable proposal as it encourages institutions to consider the broader consequences of casualisation. The effectiveness will depend on whether these evaluations lead to concrete actions to reduce precarity.*

A further recommendation from the UCU is that the Office for Students should mandate universities to disclose the proportion of classroom teaching hours delivered by hourly paid staff, encompassing lectures, seminars, demonstrations, tutorials, and fieldwork. Mandating universities to disclose the number of teaching hours delivered by hourly paid staff could be a positive step as it encourages transparency and accountability regarding casualisation in academia. However, the effectiveness depends on how strictly this mandate is enforced and whether it leads to meaningful changes in employment practices.

Recommendations for Further Research

There are three important research gaps that need to be addressed:

1. **Lack of data:** Many studies are based on small, localised samples, and there remains limited information on the experiences of WCAs in different countries and regions. There is also a significant lack of quantitative data on the representation of WCAs across institutions, disciplines, and intersecting characteristics.
2. **Intersectionality:** Future research should adopt an intersectional lens to delve into the complex interplay of identities in shaping the experiences of WCAs.
3. **Longitudinal studies:** Prioritising longitudinal research will provide invaluable insights into the nature of challenges faced by WCAs at various career stages.

Concluding Thoughts

In academia, a striking paradox endures. While efforts have been made to confront and address barriers associated with gender, ethnicity, and disability, there remains a disturbing 'structured silence' (Skeggs, 1997) surrounding class-based privilege. More evidence is needed on the ability of dominant classes to control the narrative. The 'hostile ignorance' of some, more privileged peers (Ferguson & Lareau, 2021, p. 1) has perpetuated the marginalisation of WCAs and the important perspectives that they bring to the academy. However, with academic precarity becoming increasingly common, academia risks losing working-class voices in the near future unless proactive measures are taken to address this issue (Clare, 2020).

I speak directly here to my peers who benefit from class-based privileges within academia and remind them that your working class colleagues have supported you in confronting sexism, racism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination. I urge you to actively support your WCA colleagues in dismantling classism within our universities. Ways forward include:

- **Educate yourself** about the issue. Read about the experiences of disadvantaged students and their academic colleagues and familiarise yourself with the various forms of class-based discrimination they may encounter.
- **Listen** to the experiences of disadvantaged students and academics. Provide platforms for them to share their stories and perspectives and listen without interruption or judgement.
- **Believe** the experiences of disadvantaged students and academics. When they tell you about the discrimination they have faced, don't dismiss their experiences, or try to explain them away.
- **Build relationships** with disadvantaged students and academics. Get to know them as people, and build relationships based on mutual respect and understanding.
- **Advocate for change.** Use your privilege to speak out against class-based discrimination and to centre the voices of WCAs. Advocate for policies and practices that will create a more equitable university environment.

To my fellow WCAs, this book has served to illuminate the imperative for informed strategies and robust support systems that can lead to a more inclusive and equitable higher education landscape. Your voices, often drowned out by the echoes of privilege, can resonate as pivotal agents of change. After all, ‘what’s the point of being an academic if you’re not critical?’ (Bhopal, 2023). I’ve been so very fortunate to have ‘found’ the scholarship of WCAs as your words and actions have kept me warm when academia has been icy. My call for transformation is not a mere suggestion; it is an impassioned plea to dismantle barriers, dissolve silences, and to take control of our own narrative. *‘It doesn’t have to be like this...’*.