NOT-EQUAL

EPSRC NetworkPlus: Social Justice through the Digital Economy

Project Final Review Form

Please submit this form within one month of completing your project to **notequal@ncl.ac.uk**.

GENERAL INFORMATION	
Lead Applicant (PI): Dr Angelika Strohmaer **Email address:** angelika.strohmayer@northumbria.ac.uk **Job Title: Senior Lecturer** **Department: School of Design** **Organisation: Northumbria University**	Co-Investigators (names and organisations): Dr Oliver Bates Supporting Partner(s): International and Broke Project Title: Issues of precarity and interdisciplinarity for Early Career Researchers in Justice-oriented technology spaces Project Reference Number: RES/0550/7461/199

1. SUMMARY

Please outline the research challenge and question your project aimed to address, in less than 100 words.

There is a growing number of ECRs and particularly precariously employed postdoctoral researchers in academia. These researchers, in particular those at an early career, working at various intersections of justice and digital technology are often working across sites and methods, whilst speaking to a broad variety of audiences and stakeholders through their research. Especially when working in niche or taboo topics, on projects that are openly critical of mainstream political economies, or across disciplinary and research council remits, funding is limited. With this project we explore questions around 'how to survive' in academia as such a researcher; navigating a variety of disciplines, research councils, and complex academic systems.

2. APPROACH

Please provide a summary of the approach of your research project, including any deviations from your work plan, the reasons for this and how you addressed any issues.

We take an explicitly inclusionary stance to promote open-mindedness, confidentiality, impartiality, and support to those who suffer adversity in the workplace, particularly for those who are experiencing precarity. At the same time, we also acknowledge that researchers may suffer other forms of oppression in academia which may further exacerbate their needs. We invited interdisciplinary researchers working on topics related to digital social justice to an interview about their experiences of academia. Specifically, we worked with PhD students, precariously employed post-doctoral researchers, international staff in UK HE, and Early Career Researchers who are newly permanently employed; we carried out 10 interviews, in which we collected experiences, building a rounded picture of the ongoing situation.

Due to changes in the not-equal schedule of events and late contracts, we were not able to complete our planned workshop, in which we were hoping to share our findings from interviews with precariously employed researchers with those on permanent contracts in the hopes of developing strategies that places the work back onto those who are safe in their roles rathe than relying on those who are already precarious to do the bulk of the work.

3. ACTIVITIES & OUTPUTS

Please list any outputs from your project to be entered in the Not-Equal Researchfish submission. These include events, publications, workshops, webinars, invited talks, media coverage and tools (please include links to open source, git-hubs if relevant) that have resulted from your project.
Please include the following for each entry:

None as of yet – we hope to publish this work in 2022/23

Title:
Date:
Type of Event:
Number of People Reached: Presentation -
Primary Audience:
Key Outcomes/Impact:
URL:

4. INSIGHTS & IMPACT

Please describe the findings of your project and their significance in relation to potential or actual social impact.
Due to unforeseen delays, we are yet to produce a report of insights and identify avenues for impact. We are currently analyzing the interview data collected and present an initial, unfinished draft of insights below:

- **Financial insecurity**

'Financial insecurity' refers to how many participants referenced concerns about money, either in the past, present or future. Many interviewees specifically pointed to an impact of precarity or insecurity as being financial instability. Interviewees said that they had been unable to pay rent, or worried about unexpected costs because they knew they would not be able to pay them. Participants also referenced the fact that financial insecurity made them feel anxious about their futures in academia.

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- **Issues working between disciplines**

This theme focused on the specific problems of working between disciplines and being interdisciplinary in research. All our participants referred to themselves as belonging to more than one research discipline, although some preferred terms such as 'trans-' or 'multi-' disciplinary. Many participants expressed challenges of working in between disciplines, either as an early career research or as a PhD student, and in translating value between disciplines and research streams. Some participants referred to the difficulties in making different supervisors understand each other and communicate with each other, whereas others discussed the difficulty in making their research marketable and communicable to others in their institution.

- **Benefits of working between disciplines**

On the other hand, we also had several participants who were very happy to be working between disciplines, despite any difficulties. They referred to the benefits of creating their own niche in departments and in their research fields, and several interviews referred to interdisciplinary research as challenging but rewarding.

- **Gaps in key training**

A number of participants noted basic gaps in their PhD training. Many noted that training was crucial for finding a job (a key consideration for all our participants) and that they had missed elementary PhD training, such as 'How to write a PhD' or 'How to network', though they had attended more advanced training sessions. Some participants expressed that even though training had perhaps been offered to them, they still had gaps because they had not had the time to avail themselves of these options, due to the pressures of research.

- **Lack of job security**

The theme 'lack of job security' refers to the ability to keep one's job and to be able to plan ahead for the future based on future location, earnings and stability. None of our participants felt they had 'job security', and while some people still felt optimistic about their future careers, many did not. Participants expressed anxiety and concern over their roles, and when discussing their hopes for their future careers, noted that they wanted more security and stability than they had thus far experienced in academia – even if it meant leaving academia altogether.

- **Positive feelings about current institutions**

Alongside participants who were negative about their current role and the institution they were part of, some participants were also positive about the institutions they were/are at and were enjoying their experiences. This did not preclude having some changes they would make when asked, but we noticed a range of emotions towards the institution the participants were at, from optimism and positivity, to ambivalence, to strong dislike.

- **Personal life affected by roles**

Interviewees discussed the impact their roles as PhD students or ECRs had on their personal lives. For example, many discussed feeling anxiety or uncertainty about the future and mentioned this uncertainty had an impact on their relationship with their partners, who were also drawn into this lifestyle of constant changes, financial insecurity and geographical moves. Some participants also mentioned how their precarious rules impacted decision-making in their personal life, such as the decision to have children or buy a house. Largely, the impact of these roles on participants' personal lives was negative, with many noting the inability to plan for the future.

- **Wellbeing**

Closely related to personal life impact was the impact of these precarious contracts and roles on wellbeing, defined here as physical and mental health. Many participants spoke of the anxiety which these roles had given them, as well as more physical symptoms which they had begun to live with and internalise. Many commented that this type of physical/mental strain was unsustainable and that they were concerned about living with it in their future careers.

- **Social justice values**

Because the call for participants explicitly focused on 'justice', many participants spoke passionately about social justice in their interviews and the importance of 'social justice values'. Broadly defined, this means valuing diversity and inclusion and equity, and working on research that looks into these values in various ways. Many participants were also let down by their departments' lack of equivalent social justice values. Several interviewees remarked that they felt social justice was talked about but rarely executed or committed to in reality.

5. REFLECTIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Please list the key highlights from your project, summarize any lessons learned from this work and outline any future directions or plans to continue activities beyond this project.

We will continue to horizon scan for possible funding opportunities to expand our data collection, and develop new research and the design of materials that can support ECRs working in interdisciplinary, justice oriented digital technology research.

Our current future plans are to: a) try to run the planned workshop in mid-2022 and b) submit a paper or journal article based on our insights.

Further Information
If you have any further questions regarding this form, please contact notequal@ncl.ac.uk