# Title

Equality and Diversity in the Workplace; Implications for Designing Digital Educative Tools.

# Project Synopsis

This project will explore the experiences of equality and diversity of academic staff, support staff, professional service workers and students within the academic workplace, Newcastle University. The research team intends to do this by engaging employees recruited through previously distributed surveys and academic service unions to firstly participate in a number of focus groups to recount and discuss their lived experience of fairness within the workplace. Secondly, bespoke digital tools with an educatory angle will be designed as a result of the analysis of the data from the focus groups and participants will be asked to interact with these at evaluatory design workshops. This aims to further their discussion of their experiences and reflect on the impact of other colleague’s perceptions of diversity and equality in the workplace. The project will be carried out via 6 – 8 focus groups, in-depth interviews and 2 - 4 design workshops with employees exploring their interactions with these digital tools.

# Collaborating Organisations

Unison,

UUK,

NUSU,

UCU.

External collaborators are to be used for data provision and recruitment purposes

# Project Outline

Launched by the British Equality Challenge Unit, the Athena SWAN (Scientific Women’s Academic Network) charter seeks to recognise the advancement of gender equality, representation and progression of employees within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and as of May 2015. The experiences of existing equality and diversity within non-STEM subjects in relation to the scheme however remains relatively under researched despite the enthusiasm for various discipline’s commitment to attain awards for good practise and support for career advancement for employees. In discussions of social inequality, the recourse is made to statistics and numbers to demonstrate the reality that women face systematic and social discrimination. However, it is dangerous to measure progress in (gender, racial, class) equality or balance on the basis of numbers alone as this fails to represent the realities of individual accounts and experiences of discrimination.

This project aims to explore how participant voice can be supported through the discussion of equality and diversity in the workplace in order to gain a richer understanding of the experiences of social inequalities in this environment. This is done under the intention of informing future design work for technologies for use in both workplace and education on topics of workplace fairness with the potential of impacting on future policy design.

Our objectives are as follows:

1. Ensure ethical approve is granted and begin recruitment of interested participants/union groups.
2. Carry out 6 – 8 focus groups with participants to probe interactions and experiences with workplace (in)equalities and (lack of) diversity.
3. Design digital tools tailored from the data gathered from each focus group.
4. Host a series of design workshops (2 – 4) and deployments using the designed digital tools to both explore employees experience of fairness and evaluate the effectiveness of the technologies in addressing issues discussed for future research.

There are no anticipated risks inherent to taking part in this research, however the lead researcher will be working directly with employees whom may contribute accounts of members in superior positions and the risk of data being breached is present. As a result, risk mitigation strategies and data anonymization techniques will be installed to ensure the employee is not at risk of potential disciplinary measures as a result of their account. The lead researcher has previous experience in researching sensitive topics before and handling sensitive and potentially distressing individual personal accounts.

The benefits of this study are to perform essential qualitative research scoping the topic of the realities of workplace (in)equality and (a lack of) diversity that can be hard to judge through quantitative data alone, with the potential to shape future educatory practises and tools addressing this issue. It has been acknowledged creating spaces where employees feel confident and comfortable that their employee voice will be listened to and concerns dealt with can lead to a more sustainable working environment for all involved.

# Proposed Research Methods (Experimental Design)

The primary data collection method of this project will be 6 – 8 one to two-hour focus groups carried out in various offices spanning across Newcastle University campus. These focus groups will involve employees whom have been separated into categories depending on intersectional characteristics (eg. working parents, black women, students etc.) determined from previous survey data, collected prior to this study. These focus groups will be semi-structured discussions with open-ended questions around employee experience of equality and diversity in their working environment. Data will be recorded through the use of audio recorders and transcribed for use by the researcher team.

Digital tools and probes will then be designed as a result of the analysed data from these sessions before being reintroduced with the same participant groups through evaluative design workshops. Participants will be invited to interact with the bespoke digital tools and will be asked their thoughts and feelings towards how this technology could be incorporated or challenge

Observational methods and recording devices will be used and unintrusive photography to document the process of interaction with the digital probes and any activity materials used to elicit responses from participants.

# From which source and, by what means do you plan to recruit your participants?

Professional service staff, academic staff and students will be recruited through calls for participation distributed via email, paper posters and word of mouth throughout the school of SACS under the reassurance that any information shared will be kept strictly confidential from employers. Based on previous research projects within the university, it has been noted that support staff may be harder to reach through these methods alone.

As Open Lab holds strong relationships with UCU and Unison where the majority of service support staff such as cleaners and maintenance workers are members of, gatekeepers of that organisation will be approached before being asked to distribute calls for participation through their mailing lists. The research team also intends to make the focus group as open to as many people as possible who wish to express to participate.

# Participant Consent

The lead researcher is experienced in gaining the consent and trust of people on sensitive topics from past projects involving charities, community organisations and within a student environment.

For each focus group and design workshop, the lead researchers intend to introduce themselves to participants, wearing our university ID badges will be on show at all times. We will describe in full the Athena Swan project that all researchers are working on, and how it is imagined it will improve working conditions and identification of (in)equalities and (a lack of) diversity in the workplace. We will introduce the digital tools that have been designed with full demonstrations as to their use where appropriate. For each focus group, permission will be asked for participants to be observed and their voice recorded, describing how this data will be used in the future but providing assurances of anonymization and data minimisation techniques at the same time. Data anonymization and minimisation techniques will be employed to ensure that no visible identifiers or quasi-identifiers could identify participants or their accounts, with special care taken towards published material.

All participants shall be reimbursed for their contribution of time and effort through the provision of £10 shopping vouchers or equivalent. Due to the stable economic background of individuals taking part and the small financial incentive, this is unlikely to influence participant opinion.

# Participant Consent II

As described in the field above, researchers will be completely transparent about the aims and objectives of the research engagement. We will ensure informed consent via the following methods:

1. Informed consent will be sought from all participants who are deemed capable
2. Verbal consent will be sought from participants at the start of each focus group and design workshop before the introduction of audio devices.
3. We will enact a process of process consent with participant, checking in at various stages during each meeting to ensure participants understand their participation in the study.

# Participant Debriefing

We will build into each focus group and design workshop a 10-minute debriefing session at the end of each research engagement where participants will be encouraged to approach the research team with any further questions or concerns in an informal fashion. This will also be done at the start of each focus group as a sensitising activity for both researchers and participants to ensure good relations between both parties. Participants may experience mild distress and discomfort when sharing potentially upsetting accounts of workplace inequality, if this is too uncomfortable to continue, participants can leave at any time without negative consequences. If participants are unhappy with their participation, they can communicate with a researcher at any point during the session, and any data pertaining to their participation will be removed.

# Potential risk to participants and risk management procedures

There are a small number of risks involved in this project pertaining to discussing sensitive information, whistleblowing by other participants and the standard risks encountered in an office environment. Staff are to receive a full debriefing on how to deal with any distress caused to participants and shall perform any activity within a quiet, neutral space to ensure there are no disruptions or intrusions on discussions, checking at regular intervals as to the wellbeing of the participant. In respect to whistle blowing, at the start of every session a statement pertaining to the Chatham House Rules will be read out, confirming the importance of confidentiality of an individual’s account and should be respected as such beyond the focus groups and design workshops. Researchers may reiterate the risk in sharing their accounts in respect to other participants and the limit of confidentiality. Finally, the research team has hosted multiple research projects in office environments previously and are well equipped to deal with any tripping, falling or stress hazards found in the standard environment.