

# COLLABORATION: EXPLORING THE PGR SUPERPOWER FOR ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES WITHIN ACADEMIA

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## Abstract

Inequalities within academia are rampant. Sexism, racism, classism and discrimination impose huge barriers to those entering academic work or study. These issues are amplified in times of crisis, such as COVID-19. As postgraduate researchers, we can often feel powerless to address these inequalities. We possess little status in academic power structures, and as such it can be difficult to 'rock the boat' or diverge from normalised patterns of discrimination within our fields. In this essay, I argue that while we may lack status, we can adapt and diversify our collaborations with others to effectively address inequality. I outline how collaboration can be a vital tool for elevating underrepresented voices within and outside academia and examine how students with funding in particular can play an important role in this. In diversifying our citations, networks and methods of collaboration, we can ensure increasing opportunities are available for underrepresented groups throughout the academic pipeline. As the next generation of scholars, postgraduate researchers can change the game for underrepresented groups, and ensuring we collaborate diversely is our superpower for doing so.

## I. What can I offer? What can I learn?

Academia as a profession lacks diversity. Many different demographic groups are underrepresented within academic career paths. In longitudinal studies of academic faculty, male academics are consistently paid more than women, and are more likely to be employed on full time contracts (Freund *et al.* 2016). According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, in 2018 only 18% of academics in the UK were from Black or Minority Ethnic Backgrounds (HESA 2020). Black women are grossly underrepresented in academic positions (Stockfelt 2018), and this inequality only increases with role seniority (Moore 2017; Simms 2018). Women who have children are routinely disadvantaged in academic job searches (Bos, Sweet-Cushman, and Schneider 2019). The 'leaky pipeline' theory of academia indicates that even when undergraduate student demographics are diverse, the subsequent academic career pipeline consistently favours those who are predominantly white and male (Blickenstaff 2005). As postgraduate

researchers we shape the future of our profession, but with lower status in our fields it can be difficult for us to alter or question existing power structures and inequalities (Maritz and Prinsloo 2015). While these inequalities are overwhelming, and structural in nature, this article offers some first steps for how postgraduate students may begin to address inequality in their work, by shedding light on broad methods for diversifying collaboration.

A key step for establishing what you can do about inequality in your academic field, is to first recognise your own privileges and disadvantages. Our position and status in the world are intrinsically linked to our research, and for social scientists this notion is particularly prescient. Qualitative approaches to social research have long emphasised "reflexivity": the examination of how our own position affects our research, and why (Clarke and Braun 2013). Scholars argue that no research is truly 'objective', rather our work is shaped by our own 'subjectivities' (Mascolo 2016; Teo 2017). While this is typically applied to

our relationship to a particular topic of study, we can also apply this to the way we conduct our work, and interrogate the way that we engage with research in relation to our peers. Many of us face different skills, and struggles within our work. The first step to fruitful collaboration involves interrogating what parts of our work we find easy, and what aspects we find more difficult. We should question whether our experiences are typical of our cohort, or whether we possess advantages that others don't have access to? Answering these questions can help us identify where we have the capacity to best help others, and recognise where we need to seek help.

We all live in unique circumstances, and the second step to establishing how we might better collaborate with others is to question what resources we have available to us. Ask yourself what you are *rich* in. What do you already have? You might have a wealth of time, social connections, status within your institutions, home-working space, or applied skills such as social networking or community organisation. You might have different resources or skills available to you that can still be of great use to your peers and academic community. Being a postgraduate research student means many of us are juggling multiple hats at once: the statistician; the publicist; the writer; the community organiser; the designer to name but a few. COVID-19 has for many of us limited our time, or mental capacity to juggle all these tasks at once. Most of us are used to carrying our entire research programme on our own shoulders. Where previously this was often disguised within academic institutions, and considered a norm of research work, COVID-19 has made these inequalities in the research process starkly visible. The closure of schools has led to increased caring responsibilities for parents, and decreased workspace

available in shared households. For example, submissions of journal articles including female first authors during the pandemic is down globally by 11% (Pinho-Gomes *et al.* 2020). Many of us are wondering how best we can adapt our work to deal with the stark inequalities of experience that COVID-19 has brought for academic researchers. However, while we may be tempted to carry it all on our own shoulders, we must remember that we are always more powerful together than we are alone. We all have different skills to offer each other, and we all have different things to learn before we graduate. Rather than carrying it all, accepting and offering help to others is a key way for postgraduate researchers to help one another make it through times of crisis and uncertainty. In this article, I outline how collaborating with other researchers and your peers can help address inequities within academia. I provide a number of examples for how postgraduate researchers can start, or diversify collaborations in their work, and explore the impact collaborations can have on underrepresented groups within and outside of academia.

## **II. How and where to start? Methods for diversifying your collaborations**

There are a variety of benefits to collaboration. Collaborating may make your workflow more efficient and allow you to focus your energy on your strengths and learn new skills from others. Collaborating on projects will likely force you outside of your comfort zone and could allow you to apply your research to a different domain or discipline. Inter- and transdisciplinary work is vital for addressing societal issues, such as the climate crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic, and experience working across disciplinary boundaries is a particularly desirable skill for early career researchers (Richardson *et*

*al.* 2020). Collaborating outside of your usual programme of research can have huge benefits for your career and transferable skills, as well as for the work of your collaborators. Opening yourself up to cross-domain collaborations opportunities as a PGR can improve your future employability in a variety of areas. You can seek out collaborations in a variety of different research areas, at different career stages. Question whether you know someone who could collaborate with you with analysis or is particularly good at participant recruitment. Recognise what you could offer collaborators in return. A PhD student with increased caring responsibilities might be an ace at analysis but find it difficult to find the time to research and write up an introduction. Combining forces with like-minded, but differentially skilled or privileged others can speed up the research process and help you to develop rewarding social and professional networks in the long term.

So, where can you start? If you're unfamiliar with instigating collaborations it can feel very overwhelming. Networking can be stereotyped as awkward roundtables with people you don't know, and particularly if you lack confidence in your work or face social anxiety, putting yourself out there can be very difficult. But there are a variety of ways to instigate collaborations with others, and you can adapt these methods to suit your own personality, and privileges. I now provide a number of examples for how you can get started in incorporating diverse collaborations into your academic work, as well as an exploration of how these varied pathways are more vital than ever in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Social Media*

Social media can be seen by many as a procrastination tool, but used wisely it can

be invaluable for creating social networks and broadening your collaborations with others. Academic Twitter is used by many researchers, to promote their own work and discover new collaborators and ideas. A recent study found that sharing published work on Twitter led to increased citations and impact of the papers compared to papers that were not tweeted (Luc *et al.* 2020). As our work and study moves online throughout the pandemic, social media can provide important opportunities to connect with your cohort and potential collaborators in the absence of physical events. Hashtags such as [#academicchatter](#) or [#academictwitter](#) can be a great way to engage with other researchers and ask questions about the research process, as well as to improve solidarity with your peers. Following a diverse set of researchers in your subject area, and those outside of your usual research can help to broaden your literature search.

Furthermore, social media can help you reach non-academics with your research, improving public engagement with your work. The democratising space of social media platforms like Twitter, LinkedIn or YouTube don't involve the paywalls that prevent many members of the public from engaging with academic research, and can be a useful tool for broadening the reach and impact of your research (Scanlon 2014; Howell *et al.* 2019). This can also be a key way to reach potential non-academic collaborators and organisations, and can help you develop further opportunities for future collaboration.

Many advertisements for jobs and other opportunities are also advertised on social media, and this can be a good way to make sure you don't miss out on potential opportunities to collaborate.

### *Reaching out Directly*

If you admire the work of another researcher, or are interested in a project they're working on, let them know! If you read an interesting paper that changes your perspective on a topic, email the corresponding author to share your thoughts. Know that there are people behind the names on a paper, and an appreciative email can help to brighten someone's day and connect you. If you're interested in working on a specific project, send an email expressing your interest in collaboration, and stress what skills you can contribute and under what timeframe you could work. For many projects, an extra hand on deck can make the difference between publication, and the file-drawer. This is particularly true in times of crisis such as COVID-19, where many academics might be overstretched in adjusting their lectures to online teaching or may be increasingly focussed on caregiving within their families. If you are a postgraduate who is rich in time right now, but not in experience, reaching out to individual researchers can be a fantastic way to help others out in a way that will also benefit your own academic development.

Even if you're not interested in collaborating directly right now, reaching out can be a good way to let the researcher know you're keen and a potential collaborator for the future. There might be a monthly project meeting you could attend in the meantime and getting involved with the work of others can help broaden your experiences and your perspectives on research. It may be that you're able to apply for a research grant or postdoc together at a later date, so securing those networks early on can have large benefits later in your career.

### *Broadening your Citations*

Reading and citing the work of others is a core part of our work as researchers. Even when writing alone, we are working together by incorporating (or critiquing) the work and ideas of other scholars in our field. Though this could be seen as a more 'passive' form of collaboration, citation has massive consequences for the careers of academics. Traditionally under-represented groups in academia are also less likely to be cited by other researchers (Freeman and Huang 2015). This can mean that even when underrepresented groups are able to publish, they are still discriminated against in terms of the impact their work has on the wider academic community. Citation patterns shape our production of future knowledge, and inequalities in citation practices produce inequalities and silences in knowledge also. It can be difficult to assess the diversity of your citations when we explore academic work on a surname basis. Broadening the diversity in our citations forces us to engage with academic work more holistically than we may be used to and interrogate and identify the biases within our own field.

You can broaden your citations through a number of methods. Consider including journals from outside your home country in your RSS feed. Set citation alerts for authors you admire or follow scholars on Twitter. Keeping up to date with papers on preprint servers such as PsyArXiv can be a useful counterbalance for publication bias (Sarabipour *et al.* 2019), and can help introduce you to a diverse set of early career scholars in your area you may be able to collaborate with in future. There may be resources already available online to help you diversify your citations, such as Wojcik's (2020) spreadsheet of psychology papers authored by Black and

Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC), or the website “Women also know stuff” (2020) to search for female scholars in political sciences. In times of crisis, where the academic job market becomes much harder for scholars to navigate, citation metrics might play a large role in who gets a permanent job, and who doesn’t. Ensuring your citations are diverse then not only improves the breath of your research, but gives other scholars credit for their work, which might be the key for them getting a secure position in a turbulent job market.

If you are teaching other students, a way to emphasise the diversity of your citations could be to include pictures of scholars when you cite them in class. Science can too often be seen as a collection of ‘facts’, and it can be difficult for students to consider the people behind the paper. Supplementing lectures with images of scholars could help to reduce biases in undergraduate class groups, and can help make your own biases in teaching clearer so you can make your lecture material more diverse in future. If you feature a scholar’s work in your syllabus, send them an email to let them know! This can be used as evidence in applications for promotions and puts you in touch with someone doing great work.

### *Non-academic partners*

Academia affords us status and access to resources that many organisations do not have. Once within an institution we have access to a variety of ‘funding pots’ that non-academics are not able to access as easily. These pots can be accessed at a university level, a regional level, or may be linked to doctoral training partnerships. For example, the South West Doctoral Training Partnership offers a variety of opportunities for students to undertake work for charities or non-profits, featuring

an extension to the PhD funding period. Many institutions offer public engagement funding, which can be used to communicate your work to non-academics and facilitate further research collaborations.

Many charitable organisations are facing funding cuts in the wake of COVID-19, at a time when many people need support most. The combination of the pandemic with an imminent economic and unemployment crisis, as well as the climate crisis, has made many people in society increasingly vulnerable (Hill 2020). Taking on collaboration opportunities with charities and organisations addressing important societal issues can be an effective way for students to funnel money and resources to those who may be struggling most. If we are rich in time, but not in money - collaborating with charities is an ideal way to have an impact in our communities. Many of us are unable to continue with our research and fieldwork when social distancing guidelines and COVID-19 mitigating policies are strict. For students most affected by the pandemic, this might be a perfect chance to take up placement and internship positions with organisations who need the expertise of researchers. These opportunities can be a good way to funnel additional money and labour into organisations that need it most.

For those of us who work with particular communities, ensuring an open dialogue between researchers and members of the public is important for democratising the research process. Approaches such as “Participatory Action Research” (Kemmis 2006) or “Citizen Science” (Dickinson et al. 2012) can be a fantastic way to collaborate with groups that will be impacted by your research from the beginning of your work. As many

community groups face threats to funding and resources in the wake of COVID-19 (Kappala 2020), co-creation approaches to research can improve the impact of your research, as well as the outcomes for communities and vital causes that may be struggling in the face of economic downturn.

Conducting research outside of an academic environment can thus improve the way we communicate our work to make it accessible to policy-makers and members of the public. Gaining insider knowledge of how organisations work can be invaluable experience for anyone seeking to make an impact on the world with their research. If you're facing a halt to your studies, consider partnering with non-academics to increase the public engagement or impact of your research, and further their mission.

### *Mentoring Undergraduate Students*

Moments of crisis are key in determining who can, and who can't move forward in a career path. The uncertainty that COVID-19 brings means that many who want to do a PhD will now find it much harder to do so (Rainford 2020). Summer internship schemes have been scrapped, and many students have increased caring responsibilities or mental health difficulties that hinder their ability to access career defining opportunities (Isherwood 2020). These inequalities will impact the shape of our fields for years to come and will result in decreased diversity unless we act on these issues now.

As postgraduates, we are well situated to make a difference in this area. Do you know talented undergraduates who are struggling? Reach out, and offer advice on application letters, provide references for them, or feedback on their work. You could help them transform their dissertation into

their first experience with publication, for example. Mentorship can be crucial for underrepresented groups in academia, and as Graduate Teaching Assistants many of us can have a huge impact on the career decisions of our cohorts (Jordan and Howe 2018). A key experience in my academic life was discussing doing a PhD over a coffee with my first-year seminar tutor. Her words helped me understand how I could achieve my goals, and what experience I needed to gain first before applying. Postgraduates should not underestimate the impact one discussion with a keen undergraduate could have on their career path and lives.

You could consider whether you could utilise an undergraduate research assistant on a project, and if possible, compensate them so they can remain in academia in times of financial hardship. Throughout my undergraduate degree I worked for over 10 hours a week in retail and service positions. Landing my first paid job as a research assistant was nothing short of life-changing- and meant I could develop skills I needed to advance in my field and my studies without sacrificing earning the money I needed to pay rent and eat. The casual income of many undergraduate students has been cut off or threatened as a result of COVID-19 (Elliot, Inman, and Stewart 2020), so if you can make space for undergraduates, invite their help. There may be initiatives within your department or doctoral college to help fund a student intern, or you may be able to apply for a grant such as the BPS Undergraduate Research Assistantship scheme (BPS 2020). Applying for (and receiving) grants is not only good practice for your future career but can be make or break for up and coming academics. Furthermore, if possible, give individuals credit for their work through authorship allocation or acknowledgement.

Publication is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for PhD funding, and in today's application environment even one publication might be the difference between acceptance and rejection. Consider how you got to where you are, who helped you, and how you can pass that on to the next generation of academics.

### III. Conclusion: What if I get it wrong?

There are a variety of ways to collaborate on academic work, and many means for us to reduce inequality in the way we work. But for many of us, this is just the one way in which we can consider how inequality shapes our world, and there are many more things we can all do. The motivation to be a 'perfect' ally in many different domains can be overwhelming. We can feel ill-equipped to speak out against injustice if we don't feel we know the full background on an issue, or possess power to change things within our institutions. However, there is no such thing as perfect allyship. There is only learning, and action. In the course of writing this essay I learned a lot of things I didn't know before, which have highlighted many areas in my career I could have done better. I cannot change what I have done, and while the best day to start acting against inequality may have been at the beginning of my career, the second-best day is always *today*.

This short essay is written from a postgraduate research student perspective, but there are many things that must be done by, and for, all levels of academia. Undergraduates, consider reaching out and mentoring A Level students, or working with Widening Participation Schemes. Postdocs, consider providing workshops for PhD students to help them maintain a career. Faculty, ensure those working with you gain the tools to succeed independently in a secure

career.

In the wake of COVID-19, academic funding will become increasingly under threat. Students entering university this year might not be as fortunate as those of us already on degree programmes have been. They will suffer from decreased funding and career opportunities. While all of us got our places on postgraduate programmes and PhDs through hard-work, we also got positions through luck. We were working on the right topic, at the right time, and had opportunities available to us that we needed to succeed. As current students, we must ensure that those coming after us following this crisis have the same chance at success and a sustainable career path. If we do not, the inequalities already inherent in research will only continue to multiply. As we move forward from a crisis response into the new normal, postgraduate students should consider and interrogate how we can reject inequality in the work that we do, and consider how we can create opportunities for those less fortunate than us through diverse collaborations.

In conclusion, diversifying our collaborations is a small, but key step for addressing inequality. When scaled up, this approach could have drastic implications for scholars across the world, and the perspectives and stories we hear from as academics. Postgraduate students may have little sway over traditional academic power structures such as hiring committees, but changing the way we work with others in our own research can have vast knock on effects for the quality of research in our fields, and the diversity of those within it, that benefit our own research and our academic and non-academic communities in tandem. Reconsidering how we collaborate with others and questioning how we can be

more inclusive and diverse in our collaborations, is the hidden superpower for postgraduates looking to address inequality in academic career paths moving forward. Just like any superpower, this is needed most in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, more than ever, is a vital time for us all to reconsider how we can better collaborate with others, and ensure inclusivity and diversity in the way we work.

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## Biography

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