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Title: Equity, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in UK Academic-Policy Engagement: Lived Experience of University Based Knowledge Brokers & Marginalised Academics

Laura Bea, University of Southampton, UPEN, United Kingdom

Dr Alejandra Recio-Saucedo, University of Southampton, United Kingdom

Abstract:

Background

Discourse surrounding Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) has received significant attention within the UK Academy and Knowledge Brokerage spaces, and more recently within academic policy engagement spaces (Morris et al, 2021; Fawcett, 2021; Walker et al, 2019; Gov, 2021). Key players in this space identify the need for diversifying academic participation, as well as diversifying knowledges (UK Gov, 2021; UK Parliament, 2021, UKRI, 2022). However, conceptual and practical insight on embedding EDI principles (and what they mean in this context) to academic-policy engagement processes is missing.

Aims and objectives

Underpinned by feminist and decolonial epistemological concepts, this paper addresses this gap by outlining strategies, and surfacing ways in which EDI within academic-policy engagement is experienced, conceptualised, understood, and considered.

Methods

Two parallel qualitative studies, with a total of 20 semi-structured narrative and realist interviews conducted with marginalised researchers (n=10, Study A) and university based knowledge brokers (n=10, Study B), and a rapid literature review. Analysis used narrative and thematic framework.

Findings and Discussion

We found a want for EDI to go beyond just diversity of people and representation, towards fostering foundational principles of epistemic justice, equitable access, value-driven engagement, and plurality. Academics and knowledge brokers reported both negative and positive experiences within this space that related to known EDI issues. We conclude that EDI cannot be standardised across higher education contexts, and emphasising the need for holistic, relational and plural

approaches to EDI across academic-policy engagement systems through a value-led, equitable and ethical lens.

Keywords: EDI, Academic-Policy Engagement, Knowledge Brokerage, Public Policy

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Introduction

In a recent study from Oliver et al, which mapped nearly 2000 policy engagement initiatives across a range of sectors, evidence informed policy was understood as a space in which there is a 'busy but rudderless mass of activity', and needs to be informed by 'existing evidence and theory' (2022; 691; Simis et al, 2016; McNeil, 2013; Davis, 2000). They note that many policy engagement mechanisms and processes are not currently evaluated well, and lack strategic direction that 'may lead to significant harms', including a waste of resources and 'increased inequalities in terms of participation in evidence production and use' (970; 704; Sarewitz, 2018; Suldovsky, 2016; 2017).

Whilst some evidence-policy literature still follows a deficit model of knowledge, and emphasises neutrality and objectivity as key foundations, others have argued these assertions are insufficient and instead need a better understanding of political and power structures that situate them (Jagannathan et al, 2023; Doucet, 2019; Reed & Rudman, 2023; Canfield et al, 2020). However, only a handful of academic and grey literature on evidence-informed policy explicitly discuss Equity/Equality, Diversity or Inclusion (EDI) principles within this. Some discuss the need for diversity of knowledges (Oliver et al, 2022; Kharisma et al, 2023; Oliver & Boaz, 2019) and there is a wider body of literature discussing the need for decolonising knowledge hierarchies and how it is used to govern as a whole (Nugroho et al, 2023; Quijano, 2000; Ramani, 2011; Spivak in Brunner, 2021). However, whilst there is a general consensus on the value of EDI in terms of people and knowledges in research and higher education spaces, there has been a clear and a strong disfavour from the Conservative government (e.g., Donegan, 2023). In addition, it has rarely been applied to academic-policy engagement activities specifically, and much current work have been attempts to replicate EDI strategies from related contexts with hopes it will work in this one (Addelaine, 2020; AdvanceHE, Grewal, 2021, WonkHE, 2023). To address this gap, we aimed to build on the Universities Policy Engagement Network report, '*Surfacing Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Academic-Policy Engagement*' (Morris et al, 2021) by delving deeper into the lived experiences of two core groups: marginalised academics, and knowledge brokers. Merging two parallel studies that differed only in sample, our research questions were:

1. What, if any, EDI strategies are or have been used within academic-policy engagement activities? (13)
2. What is the lived experience of marginalised academics within academic-policy engagement processes?
3. What is the role and lived experience of knowledge brokers considering EDI principles within academic policy processes/activities?

Current academic and grey literature on this topic focus primarily on collecting demographic data in relation to participation within specific mechanisms, such as Walker et al (2019a), or making broad statements related to 'diversity of knowledges' as an idea without fully discussing what this means (Oliver et al, 2022; Oliver & Boaz, 2019). Whilst these are important pieces of discourse that need to continue, this study contributes to the ever growing thought space of evidence-informed policy in *practice* by surfacing and understanding those living it. A hope of this contribution is to avoid continued homogenisation of what EDI means in Higher Education (equality over equity, representation versus recognition, etc), and support a more equitable, power aware and diverse (multiple meanings) ecosystem of academic-policy engagement and thus, evidence informed policy. As the findings discuss, how we apply EDI in the academic-policy space needs to be a considered and intentional reflexive endeavour, and not simply copied and pasted from the HEI context or the policy context. This paper does not go into detail about the different contexts *within* academic policy engagement (e.g the devolved, regional, geographic, institution based, etc), and this is an area the authors call for further study.

To do this, this research offers introductory insight, not answers, on what EDI practices and experiences may tell us about these questions, and support further integration of EDI within academic-policy engagement. To our knowledge, there is no academic work that currently outlines or explores the lived experiences of knowledge brokers, an under-researched sector as is, specifically in relation to Equity/Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in academic-policy engagement. In surfacing some experiences and elaborating on the current but limited grey literature in this space, our hope is to inspire further person-centred, relational research into a still very much evolving profession, and support centring equity, diversity and inclusion within further research and discourse around academic-policy engagement practices.

This paper is comprised of two studies (Study A, and Study B), which ran parallel to each other. Study A conducted a literature review on knowledge brokerage and EDI, and Study B conducted a rapid review into EDI strategies within academic-policy engagement, and Study B conducted a literature review on knowledge brokerage and EDI (Figure 2). Both studies conducted twenty interviews in total with ten marginalised academics and ten university based knowledge brokers.

Engaging with EDI for a stronger evidence-policy system

Hopkins et al highlighted some commitment from policymakers that EDI was important to them, but were not confident in how to improve practice and embed it, as well as how 'power and inequality function within knowledge production and use' when aligning with expectations of being 'evidence based' or 'coproduced' (Hopkins et al, 2020, 350 ; Rose et al, 2020; Reddel & Ball, 2021; Heidari, 2015; Addelaine, 2020). There was recognition across the wider literature around systems of knowledge production and use, and how they reproduce inequalities both in societies and knowledges, and thus the importance of equitable and inclusive cultures within research to allow for early, collaborative, shared and participatory policy engagement approaches versus competitive, rational, linear 'hero' approaches, but only sometimes applied to the practice context (Oliver, 2022).

There is a clear commitment and need for EDI in the evidence-policy context across the UK from HEI's (Morris et al, 2021, Walker et al, 2019). This was however contradicted from comments made in October 2023 by the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology who criticised UKRI for going 'beyond the legal requirements outlined in the Equality Act 2010...'

making EDI a 'burdensome' and 'bureaucratic' task for Universities (Donelan in WonkHE, 2023). These comments were made in the wider context of targeting two women academics on their comments over the UK media's handling on the conflict in Gaza, (WonkHE, 2023; 2024) Whilst there is little evidence to support these claims, these comments speak to a tense research-policy relationship and the difficulty faced by those on the ground to knowledge brokers and universities to authentically integrate EDI in academic-policy processes with full support from all those involved and hold power in the process, such as UKRI themselves, including having to manage those who actively work against EDI behind a guise of 'anti-wokeism'. Outside of this instance, however, Government and Parliamentary on the ground action across the UK have supported the integration of EDI values and strategies within various contexts and activities relevant to the evidence-policy context. In Westminster, the 2020 Research and Development Roadmap, published by the UK Government, outlined the importance of EDI as a 'critical aspect of research culture, and improving EDI requires a multifaceted response' (2020). Additionally, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) set out their first EDI strategy in 2022, recognising that 'only by...introducing diversity into the way we interact can we enrich our lives as creators of knowledge', and that a 'dynamic, diverse, and inclusive research and innovation system must be an integral part of UK society' (2022). Others have outlined EDI initiatives and challenges across the sector, and provided a number of toolkits and strategies applied to the Higher Education context (Advance HE, 2023). The Welsh Senedd's Diversity and Inclusion Strategy notes the need to be 'evidence [and] action based...' and taking an 'intersectional approach' in everything it does; in Ireland & Northern Ireland, the Royal Irish Academy Higher Education Futures Taskforce published a report emphasising the importance of EDI across Higher Education, bolstered by the 'Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland)'s long term vision of a higher education sector that...recognises and values diversity' (Royal Irish Academy, 2021). The importance of EDI has been clearly flagged in various reports across the HEI sector, supported by a strong foundation of data and the need for taking action (including for REF2029), which only adds excellence and equity, not burdens and bureaucraties, to the space. Additionally, the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology Knowledge Exchange Unit have been staunch advocates for diversifying evidence and people who engage with Parliament.

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Within the wider literature, the framing of evidence that informs policy as needing to be objective and ignoring value laden systems of knowledge production and use was highlighted to be at times, problematic, in its assumption of 'facts' and 'truth' being untouched by the ideological nature of policymaking, 'undermin[ing] evidence informed practices' (Bonel et al, 2018; Head, 2016; 472). As Oliver et al found, 'few [policy engagement] initiatives make their values explicit; indeed, many prefer to see research production as a morally neutral activity', with 'objectivity' remaining a key instrument for trust (2022; Sarewitz, 2018; Cairney & Oliver, 2017, Oliver, 2022). Some papers discussed the ways in which the values of professionals working within political structures and frameworks 'exist alongside those of the institution.....and within wider political frameworks and structures' (Harris, 2002; 319; Packwood, 2002; Williams, 2010). Other papers drew further attention to the power dynamics and practices at play within evidence and knowledge production and how it can influence policy, for ethical social change or for harm (Heidari, 2015; Fafard, 2015; 1129). This discourse has a substantial academic base on its own, but it was rarely related to EDI practice and/or academic-policy engagement contexts (Oliver et al, 2022; Durrant and MacKillop, 2022; MacKillop & Downe, 2023).

Most EDI strategies and examples found within the rapid and literature review focused on diversity of participation in relation to people and representation. Institution-based or partnered public policy functions such as the Scottish Policy and Research Exchange (SPRE), University of Southampton Public Policy Unit (PPS), Middlesex University, University of Oxford Policy Engagement Network (OPEN), and Durham Universities Policy Engagement function have all published varieties of EDI action plans, strategies, or commitments (University of Oxford, 2021; Giles, 2020; Gray, 2021; Blackbell, 2023). However, other public policy units (or usually, individuals) within Higher Education Institutions are still considering and exploring their EDI commitments, with little direction outside of wider institutional strategies. The UPEN *Surfacing Equity, Diversity and Inclusion within Academic-Policy Engagement* Report is one of the first reports to identify this gap and directly respond with focus on knowledge brokers as key individuals in the process, as well as bring together multiple HEIs in a collaborative way. It identifies a need for UPEN and other knowledge brokerage spaces to:

1. Create a space for and facilitate sustained dialogue...[to] enhance EDI in academic-policy engagement (Morris et al, 2021; 13)
2. Take proactive responsibility and create a set of EDI principles...for member institutions to adopt within their local context (13)
3. Share examples of EDI academic-policy engagement best practice...to champion progress in this area (13).

This report was a core piece of work that brought together EDI and knowledge brokerage specifically supported by primary research for the first time; the Royal Society of Edinburgh reflected on this report by noting that 'knowledge mobilisers are in a great position to challenge and frame differently the perception of "expert" at an institutional level...[by] taking an intersectional approach...champion[ing] an ethical, over expedient, approach...[and] challeng[ing] the design of academic-policy engagement' (Rattu et al, 2022). Alongside this report, others such as Fawcetts *Opening up Parliament: Barriers to Engagement and Participatory Potential - What Academics Think* (2021) Walker et al's report on *Understanding and Navigating the Landscape of Evidence-Based Policy* (2019a); Boswell et al's report on *Rethinking Policy Impact* (2022) and various reports and activities by the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology Knowledge Exchange Unit (POST, KEU, 2023) all address an evidence and practice gap within evidence-informed policy systems around equitable processes, diverse knowledges, and diversity of people, recognising the importance and power of knowledge brokers in this process. Walker et al's report on *Understanding and Navigating the Landscape of Evidence-Based Policy* acknowledged that 'less is known about the diversity of people who engage with policy-related processes', but that there were significant gender differences at different stages of submitting and delivering both oral and written evidence, skewed towards men, which was also supported by findings by Fawcett (2019; 17; 2021; 6). Boswell et al make an important distinction between equality and equity in these actions, noting that we should be 'directing resources in a targeted way to support equal outcomes, rather than simply ensuring equal opportunities for all' (2022, 24). Whilst they explicitly discuss EDI in relation to diversity of people, they also highlight the need for ethical systems of evidence use, which includes EDI values of equity, co-creation, disruptive research and challenging the competitive nature of resource allocation (3; Campbell & Childs, 2013; 182; Walker et al, 2019; Weakley & Waite, 2023). Upcoming discussions on REF 2029, which EDI will be built on from 2021 and include a more concentrated focus on research-policy engagement, will need to take the academic-policy context into account. However, there are still questions without clear answers such as: What does diversity of evidence mean? What does

diversity of people mean? What does it mean to 'do good' EDI? What does, or should, EDI stand for? And, what does any of this mean for integrating EDI within the academic-policy context?

This background highlights the complex and challenging nature of conceptualising, actioning, and embedding EDI across HEI and in particular, academic-policy engagement. When it comes to knowledge brokerage in particular, the sector is 'currently under-researched, difficult to define, and not well understood' (Rycroft-Smith 2022; 1). The goal of this research is not to provide a way of homogenising what EDI means in the field of academic-policy engagement, but to provide further insight into the lived realities of those who are trying to make sense of it through practice.

Methods

This project consisted of two connected qualitative study studies, of knowledge brokers (study A), and marginalised academics (study B) (Figure 1). Rapid review of the literature and policy documents were conducted in both studies, followed by 20 semi-structured interviews.

[INSERT FIGURE 1: STUDY MERGING]

For study A (knowledge brokers) interviews were conducted by LB and for study B both researchers (LB, AR) interviewed researchers conducting academic policy engagement activities. Narrative and thematic analysis were undertaken on the transcribed audio recordings of the interviews to uncover currently existing academic policy engagement strategies and how they are navigated from an EDI perspective. Analysis of knowledge brokers interviews was completed within a timeline aligned with the lead author's master's dissertation project. The framework produced was used as *a priori* to analyse the researchers' interviews. Emergent themes were used to refine the framework and reanalyse the knowledge broker recordings, leading to the final thematic framework that reflects both studies. Both studies were designed to complement each other, and the findings were informed by both inductive and deductive analysis of the data from the two studies.

The studies received ethics approval from the Faculty of Medicine Ethics Committee and the Faculty of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Southampton (Study A ERGO: 81413 and Study B ERGO: 72814). Study B received funding from Public Policy Southampton's allocation of the Research England Policy Support Fund to compensate ten participants at £50 per interview, which was offered at the end of each interview. The study with knowledge brokers did not receive this due to the limitations of the study programme it was conducted within. Similar to Study B, Study A consisted of participants from networks already known to both researchers.

Rapid and Literature Review

The aim of the rapid and literature reviews was to collate current knowledge, practice and research within the academic-policy engagement space that explored issues and strategies around equality/equity, diversity, and inclusion for researchers and knowledge brokers. The review was also intended to provide the foundation for the interview questions. A rapid review was

undertaken for Study B and a narrative review was conducted for Study A. Both reviews concluded with the final 14 papers identified ([Appendix A](#))

In the rapid review, Overton, Dimensions, Web of Science, Google scholar, JSTOR were searched using the key terms: *Equality/equity, diversity, inclusion, EDI, public policy, policy engagement, strategies, approaches, values, principles, embedding, higher education institutions, parliament, government*. UPEN and UKRI reports were also reviewed for information related to strategies for academic policy engagement. Figure 2 shows the flowchart diagram of the publications screened and excluded. Fourteen publications provided relevant information in three areas: strategies for engagement with policy; strategies or mechanisms that discuss impact of EDI in policy and marginalised communities engaging with public policy, specifically in academic-policy engagement activities. Overall, the authors reviewed key debates in both academic and grey literature regarding EDI strategies within academic policy engagement, and how this applies to both marginalised researchers and university based knowledge brokers. We used key findings of papers identified in the literature review as prompts for our interview questions as well as to critically evaluate current discourse alongside the lived experience that surfaced in the interviews.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 PRISMA FLOWCHART]

Sampling & Interviews

Purposive sampling, as well as direct invitations, were used as the sampling strategy in Study A and Study B, using professional networks identified by the authors, primarily via the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) and social media platforms, Twitter (X) and LinkedIn. Of the total 20 participants, 17 were already known to the lead author. Additionally, 7 participants were directly invited, and 13 volunteered through advertisements shared via newsletters and social media platforms. Both studies' literature review ran from late 2022 to mid 2023, and data collection ran from June 2023 to September 2023. Participants completed a consent form before the interview which were conducted online for one hour and recorded. Participants were interviewed using realist and narrative interview techniques, drawn from Greenhalgh et al (2017) and Jovchelovitch & Bauer (2007) (Figure 3)

[INSERT FIGURE 3: INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE]

Topics covered in the interview included participants' experiences within academic policy engagement, their thoughts on EDI and specific strategies, and their experiences and reflections on how their identities and positionality relate to their experiences. Interview questions were not pilot tested, however the authors sought feedback from two co-chairs of the UPEN Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Sub-Committee on the interview questions to ensure clarity and relevance to the aims of the project.

Positionality and reflexivity

Demographic data was not collected in either study, and Study A did not have UK wide demographic data to benchmark its sample of knowledge brokers against nationally, and thus representativeness or generalisability was not a goal for this study. As a way of testing our own

assumptions and practices around collecting and using EDI data, we were interested in what would be gained or lost if this was not collected through a systematic demographic form. We found that for these studies and this context, it did not add to or detract from the research aims where intersectionality, reflexivity, and positionality was built into the design, interviews, and analysis. In addition to this, both authors reflected throughout the study on their own marginalised identities and how they resonated with or found the findings challenging, using elements of the autoethnographic method. Within the interviews, we encouraged participants to self-reflect on their positionality and power, and the authors encouraged each other to reflect on our reactions and how it relates to our own identities after the interviews. We felt this provided a richer understanding of participant views and how we were navigating the topic of diversity within our findings. We reflect on this further alongside the participant views on diversity and representation as a strategy for EDI.

[INSERT FIGURE 4: WORDCLOUD]

Figure 4 presents a wordcloud of the different ways 19 out of 20 participants self-described their identities.

Data analysis

Narrative and thematic analysis were undertaken on transcriptions of audio interviews to uncover currently existing EDI strategies that are used within academic policy engagement strategies, and the views of participants around this. Both authors worked on the data analysis of both samples, producing a coded thematic framework (Figure 5).

Theoretical framework

These studies used interpretivist, feminist and decolonial theoretical frameworks which centre power dynamics, intersectionalities and complexities of knowledge production and use, and how they produce and reproduce inequalities (Latour in Hacking, 1992, Harding, 1992; Haraway, 1988; Quijano, 2000; 1993). The methodological framework for this study was a mix of grounded theory, participatory action ethnography, and realist evaluation. These and related lenses are increasingly being applied to evidence-policy systems literature (Cairney, 2016; Boaz et al, 2019; Davies et al, 2000; Durrant & MacKillop 2022, Blackbell & Bea, 2022; Blackbell, 2023). In these studies, EDI is embraced to be something plural, flexible and value led, and uses action research ethnography to explore how it is lived and understood by both academics and knowledge brokers in order to drive further positive impact and change as guided by participants (Bradbury & Divecha, 2020). EDI in this context is 'Equality & Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion' to allow for multiple meanings, as well as for convenience of shared understanding using a well known acronym, with recognition of its limitations. In addition to this, a preliminary poster was presented at the 2023 Knowledge Mobilisation Forum, the feedback of which supported later thinking in the studies ([Appendix B](#)).

In Study B, knowledge brokers were encouraged to reflect on their identities and positionalities through the interview. The sample self-identified as holding multiple and intersecting identities across gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, class, and career stage. Knowledge broker participants also ranged across delivery and operational as well as strategic and leadership positions.

Demographic data was not collected, and Study B did not have UK wide demographic data to benchmark its sample against outside of professional services as a whole (where knowledge brokers are not always situated). As a way of testing our own assumptions around collecting EDI data, we were interested in what would be gained or lost if this was not collected through a demographic form. We found that for these studies and this context, it did not add to or detract from the research aims where intersectionality, reflexivity, and positionality was built into the design, interviews, and analysis already.

Findings summary

This exploratory research sought to uncover and surface ideas, practices, values and understandings of how EDI is considered within academic-policy engagement, with three key findings:

- 1) There is an over-reliance on visible diversity as sole indicators of 'good' EDI practice and understandings of the politics and complexity of representation should not be borrowed from other contexts, it needs to be understood specifically to the politics and power structures of academic-policy engagement as a whole. Whilst Universities and their culture and structures play a larger role in the wider ecosystem (for example, career progression criteria, inclusive working policies, reward and recognition structures), this paper focuses on the interpersonal and relational dynamics within academic-policy engagement, drawing particular attention to the under-researched role and position of university based knowledge brokers and marginalised academics.
- 2) There is not a shared definition or understanding of what EDI means to the academic-policy context; but there wasn't significant evidence to suggest there should be. Rather, the use of networks and support structures was helpful for knowledge brokers to further their own EDI strategies and understandings outside of the dependence on institutional strategies that may or may not apply to the policy engagement context.
- 3) Despite this, there was consensus across the sample as a whole that (small p) politically neutral value-free and objective, unbiased evidence and processes of academic-policy engagement was not only unattainable and misguided, but antithetical to ideas of EDI (as well as other EDI values, such as justice). We are not claiming generalisability or representativeness in this finding, but acknowledge that the authors also resonate with these views.

The next section dives into a blended discussion of the findings and how they conceptualise what 'EDI' means to participants. Ultimately, there was expected consensus across participants on the value of EDI within academic-policy engagement; whilst there was no radical difference from each other in this sense, there are differences between participants in how they practice EDI and the

values they attribute to it. This point further serves to highlight the plurality and complexity of EDI within this context, and the need to hold these nuances with care and consideration.

Figure 5 shows the thematic coding framework that represents what findings of the study as a whole produced. Analysis of the interviews were extracted into this framework which guided the narrative of the findings and discussion.

[INSERT FIGURE 5: THEMATIC CODED FRAMEWORK]

Conceptualisations of EDI & Lived Experience of Participants

One of the aims of this study was to understand how EDI was framed and discussed within academic-policy engagement, not to homogenise or standardise a particular definition, but to surface its fluid, complex and dynamic nature. We found during the interviews that expressions of what EDI meant to participants, or how they experienced it, surfaced in three main spheres: Epistemic, Value-Driven, and Representation focused. Whilst we discuss the lived experience of distinct samples in their discussions, these categories of conceptualisations cut across all participants. These insights are specific to this sample, but did resonate with the researchers own experiences. What we are not discussing explicitly or solely here is the systemic challenges to practicing EDI, though they are core to this work. We want to surface individual experiences and insights primarily.

Representation & Positionality

The narrative around representation has been at the forefront of what people consider to be good 'EDI' in this space. Some participants naturally defaulted to talking about EDI in reference to collection of diversity data, ensuring 'equality of opportunity' for under-represented groups, and focusing on 'equal access to policymakers' (*res-participant-12*). Whilst representation and identity are key, important areas of focus, there is a worry that this becomes conflated with performativity, that having people who are visibly diverse engage with policy means good EDI has been achieved. Not only does this tokenize and reduce those who are marginalised to their outward appearance, it ignores those with invisible identities, and turns marginalisation into a social currency that only those with privilege and power benefit from. One participant (knowledge broker) said that it is 'difficult to get away from the representation piece', it needs to be more focused on 'doing it well and not for the sake of it...you have to think about them quite deeply and make sure that they fit with your evaluation plans' (*res-participant-16*). However, other participants who identified as marginalised highlighted the limitations of this, noting that their identities cannot make them experts on said EDI issues and they don't want to be treated as such (*res-participant-12; res-participant-20*). These views and perspectives are not new, either. In addition to this, in one example, a participant disclosed that their position in their organisation was threatened by a senior policy maker on a particular issue, noting that they did not feel it was due to their own marginalised identity per se, but due to particular politics that have 'very dismissive viewpoints' related to EDI issues, also referencing comments for context made by Kemi Badenoch MP on calling critical race theory a 'dangerous trend' (*res-participant-05; HC Deb 20 October 2020; 1012*). This incidence was very interesting to the study, as we had (perhaps wrongfully) assumed negative experiences would be related to the participants identity or protected characteristic. However, what this reaffirms to us is that representation is not solely the crux of marginalisation

or EDI as a whole, as the participant also reflected on the ways in which EDI related issues cannot be automatically assumed to be championed by those with diverse identities regardless. This incident tells us that politics which reject principles of EDI and discount marginalisation are always at play, regardless of identity of any party involved, and thus, the solution is rarely to just simply or solely 'increase representation', but to also ensure the structures, ethics and systems around that follow as well.

Relationality

When asked about positive experiences, academic participants tended to comment more on the people involved in the processes than the activities themselves for policy-engagement. For example, seven participants would visibly smile and talk about how knowledge brokers or policy partners would make them feel heard, impressed, secure, welcomed, encouraged, supported, and seen (*res-participant-02; res-participant-05, res-participant-07*). In this context, knowledge brokers are both in positions of power and somewhat invisible at the same time, but what was surfaced as important is how they use their power to create a safe environment for those involved. Examples that participants reported included making recruitment and hiring processes feel safer and easier to navigate, in particular around disability, and visa processes. As well as this, participants valued curiosity as a trait, with one participant noting how

'the fact that [a knowledge broker] asked the question of how to be an ally is already...which doesn't mean they get it right all the time, but it means they ask questions' (*res-participant-10*).

The way we interpreted this is not that we recommend people with privilege should automatically ask their marginalised colleagues how to be an ally, which has implications for emotional labour of said marginalised person, but speaks to a more relational lens that links to emotional intelligence, empathy and curiosity that creates supportive conditions for EDI to be a more natural and explicitly communicated part of a working relationship. Despite this positive, it was also raised within some interviews that university processes around discrimination within external partnerships are still not adequate. One participant was asked if they would know what processes exist for any discrimination that may happen within a academic-policymaker relationship, and they did not know (*res-participant-10*); this was echoed by another participant who highlighted this as a key concern, and called for more protection and safeguarding for academics and knowledge brokers from discrimination by policymakers and in order to hold those external to their institutions accountable (*res-participant-11*). Writing this in the context of the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, Michelle Donelan's calling out of two women academics in their letter to UKRI, including on a platform known to be a hostile environment for marginalised people in particular, this issue resonated deeply with the authors as well (Amnesty, 2018).

Role of Networks

Knowledge brokers found networks and relationships to be the most valuable tool for thinking through EDI considerations, in particular other knowledge brokerage professionals and centralised networks that bring new relationships together, such as UPEN. Alongside this, participants also reflected on their own identities and positionality, with some participants noting that they found it difficult or conflicting when feeling the need to separate their own marginalisations and intersecting characteristics from their work for the sake of neutrality and objectivity, and the power dynamics that contextualise that. The central role of knowledge brokers in embedding EDI

is underscored by strategies that promote targeted promotion, strengthen personal networks, and encourage institutional and UK wide collaboration. The interviews and the strategies highlighted the importance of personal qualities in knowledge brokers, namely empathy, emotional intelligence, curiosity, and kindness above all. These strategies emphasize the importance of evaluation and reflexivity as an overall holistic and critical approach to navigating these processes the best we can (Blackbell et al, 2023).

Plural

Grewal (2021) highlighted known issues with EDI action in Higher Education, one being that EDI is 'this nebulous term...forces together three distinct ideas ...treating EDI as a complete package, rather than as separate entities that interact with each other'. This paper does not delve into the wide ranging and complex discourse surrounding the language and definition of EDI. Rather, it aims to understand ways it has been understood and conceptualised. Concepts of EDI as a plural space for many meanings to hold was evident in both how the participants made sense of EDI and their experiences of others' sense-making.

The Tick-Box Narrative

The 'tick-box' narrative is a major discourse within EDI spaces, and tends to relate to the bureaucratic action of doing the bare minimum to say EDI has been addressed, but usually makes little actual difference. It is fair to respond to this narrative by introducing further training on unconscious bias and putting these disingenuous practices down to non-wilful ignorance, shaping EDI as a learning process in and of itself that just needs to be understood *enough* to be effective in practice. However, one participant vented on how EDI is not always critically understood and just used, noting how

'You know people who drop names a lot means that...they don't really know anyone, sometimes the indication that there is twice EDI mentioned means that you know you have to have it there, but you actually don't know what it means...and you don't actually know what it does' (res-participant-20).

This participant went on to say that while they would 'prefer it if people believe in what they're doing...but if someone does it for the glory, sure, do it for the glory, but in the meantime, [do] something really positive, really good' (res-participant- 20).

Additionally, participants in this study found some technical mechanisms for implementing EDI difficult, feeling that because they are 'trained to look for the answer, not to find a fix...[and] the answer may be more than one thing' (res-participant-12), such as relying on diversity data. However, there was recognition that they are also helpful at times to disrupt 'usual suspect syndrome' in particular around funding calls (one example given was an ESRC IAA EDI requirements) (res-participant-20). However, some participants felt they still had to 'sell' EDI to senior leadership in particular, noting that there is still a lack of authenticity rather than curiosity, and feeling like people continue to pay 'lip service' to EDI. Echoing some experiences from academics, one knowledge broker (res-participant-17) was asked whether they felt if there was any appetite from the Government to embed EDI within the academic-policy relationship, they simply said 'no', noting it may be either ideological in nature or due to competing priorities.

Despite this, work done by the UK Parliament was recognised frequently as a supportive, active space that seeks to embed EDI within its knowledge exchange activities. Participants also highlighted feeling a sense of insecurity, frustration, feeling unseen, unheard and/or unsupported; one participant said they felt 'exhausted' after 'trying to fight those battles' and keeping momentum to do so the older they got, perhaps speaking again to the possibly gendered unequal emotional labour experienced by different communities in knowledge brokerage. It is worth noting, overall, that many participants also felt the interview itself was valuable as a space to reflect deeply without judgement. This highlights the importance of a supportive, reflective space for practicing EDI principles in this context, and the lack of spaces there currently are for this.

Whilst this discourse is not new by any means, it shows that within academic-policy engagement, these conversations are still being wrestled with as we all try to make sense of 'doing' the practice and process evidence-informed policy *well*. What was clear in this sample, however, is that EDI was rarely framed as being at odds with providing the right or best evidence to policymakers, but as necessary to add strength to the system, not detract from it.

Epistemic

For some participants, epistemic justice was the key conceptualisation of EDI in the context of academic-policy engagement, where it primarily referred to diversity of knowledges and evidence disrupting echo chambers and group think. This was particularly from the place of being either interdisciplinary, or valuing and using evidence in and of itself that falls outside of traditional disciplines and embracing others, such as the Arts and Humanities. However, it was recognised by one participant that diversity of knowledges isn't well understood within academic and policy circles in the context of evidence-use, noting that...

'there are calls from policy settings asking for voices from the margins...why are they asking for that? It means what you want it to mean' (res-participant-12)

...highlighting the ideological and value laden factors surrounding knowledge at play even within this call for 'evidence from the margins'. The focus on diversity of knowledges is twofold. Firstly, it relates to epistemic injustice discourse that understands how certain situated knowledges from people (knowledges from those in socially situated positions, i.e marginalised) are often ignored, excluded and erased due to marginalisation and unequal social power hierarchies (Haraway, 1989). This discourse explores systems of knowledge production, where it comes from, how it is created, and the androcentric, eurocentric and colonial roots with power at its centre (Quijano, 2002; Latour, 1987). Secondly, diversity of knowledge relates to using multiple forms of research from multiple disciplines to inform well rounded policy, and speaks more to the information deficit approach that assumes the correct action for strengthening research-policy engagement is just more research from either different disciplines or the same (e.g we just need more statistical data...) informing policy. Of course, these are not the only interpretations of diversity of knowledges, but they speak to different angles of how participants and current literature conceptualise this 'diversity' within academic policy engagement.

In addition to this, one participant in a non-sciences discipline reported that while attending policy related events, *'95% of the time... they would say 'what are you doing here?'* (res-participant-01).

Within this is the epistemological question around the nature of knowledge - can knowledge ever be neutral? What makes knowledge transition to evidence? How do choices, values, and EDI interplay with these questions? How does this work in practice?

Value-Driven

Values within EDI

Another conceptualisation of EDI within the space of academic-policy engagement was the question of neutrality and figuring out the relationship of EDI *and* academic-policy engagement, framed specifically as something to go alongside the process rather than as integral and foundational to it. Regardless of this explicit relationship, all participants shared values of some kind when expressing thoughts on EDI within academic-policy engagement, ranging from a belief in democratic principles (*res-participant-16*) to placing importance on learning and evolution (*res-participant- 11; res-participant-12*), with emphasis on equality of opportunity and access as a key practice (*res-participant-19; res-participant- 18*), and in some cases, compromise and sacrifice (*res-participant-01*). What came through in the interviews is a general awareness and agreement that values and (small p) politics exists in all knowledge and activities, but that it's about surfacing what those values are and making decisions with them in mind. EDI understood as value driven in this way can be seen as both a threat and a relief, echoing tensions within academia on aforementioned notions of neutrality and objectivity. But in this circumstance, denying the existence of values may lead to worse outcomes for evidence-informed policy, not stronger ones. One participant highlighted that they integrated EDI by embracing values of learning, empathy, and active listening which lead to more representative and applicable evidence-generation and use, noting that they

'[I] had this huge sense, mentally and probably even physically of, it cannot be done wrong,...we can't get this wrong because, you know, we don't want our findings to be wrong' (res-participant-15).

This participant noted that their project was stronger and more implementable as a result of this drive to be inclusive. This also speaks to issues regarding the recognition and upholding of ethical values in research and research impact.

Politics and Neutrality

The Conservative Government's 'war on wokeism' agenda particularly came to a head in October 2023, through the demand to disband the Research England EDI Advisory Group, with a wider aim to 'kick woke ideology out of science' (Coe, 2023, Dickinson, 2023). This politicization and framing of EDI as a threat to science and scientific rigour was concerning to many, and highlighted the place of values in the sphere of knowledge production and use. Are knowledge brokers simply mouth pieces for objective, neutral, and impartial research to reach policymakers? Is the process simply this linear? Durrant & Mackillop's 2020 paper noted how knowledge brokerage is a 'tool or process to achieve knowledge transfer across a variety of settings', whilst recognising the problematic nature of positioning 'evidence/knowledge as homogenous 'facts' and 'truths' to be transferred, exchanged, or ignored by policymakers...often overlooking the idea that knowledge/evidence is constantly re-made, re-interpreted, and contested' (2020; 344). In this sense, EDI can be conceptualised through a framing of choices, particularly from those with different forms or positions of power (policymakers, and knowledge brokers), but also related to

plural understandings of what EDI principles really 'mean', and what values are present, for example, diversity, inclusion, identity, justice, equality, and equity. As one participant said, *'you can never exhaust this topic'* (res-participant-15).

The honest broker?

Knowledge brokers in Study A reflected more on their positionality and power in the policy engagement process, and the values or choices that underpinned that. Our analysis surfaced an unequal gendered experience within knowledge brokerage, and a theme of feeling unsupported by colleagues, policy partners or wider institutions, as well as lost, anxious or 'frustrated' when trying to embed EDI within their activities and support, including when it related to their own identities. For example, three participants highlighted feeling conscious and not taken seriously when being the only woman, or woman of colour, in a room of white/male academics but having the policy engagement expertise, surfacing another evidence gap of the relationship between knowledge brokers/professional services and academia (res-participant-20; res-participant 16; res-participant-14). One participant stated that sometimes they 'simply just play the game to survive in a lot of cases' when facing challenges and barriers within this work. (res-participant-11). However, there was recognition from all participants on the natural and important power relationship between EDI and knowledge brokerage, as one participant put it:

'way more than any other person, I think we should all be committing and upholding strong EDI practices...given that we are essentially trying to be a bridge...there could be an argument to say that we're actually choosing the voices that get heard'. (res-participant-15).

When discussing theories of how EDI may be value led and political in relation to systems of knowledge production and use, participants tended to agree that neutrality and objectivity are problematic expectations within evidence-policy spaces, and may be harmful in practice in reproducing inequalities and excluding diverging research (e.g, Arts and Humanities). University based- knowledge brokers are seen as the 'hidden wiring' in the machine, that need to stay neutral in order to uphold the integrity of the research being communicated as well as the democratic, principled system of policy being evidence-informed (Chaytor, 2021). But, as one participant noted:

'How diversity is represented and the commitment to EDI are so profoundly important for how it's going to shape the rest of the work. But who's leading that work, who decides what capacity, what time frame...what does good look like here?' (res-participant-11).

Echoing another participant, these stories and reflections from knowledge brokers raised an uncomfortable but necessary story to be told that academic-policy engagement cannot be a neutral process, and that EDI is not a threat to strong evidence-informed policy ecosystem but a necessary part of it.

In regard to marginalised academics, compromise featured a large part of one participant's story in chasing more equitable and disciplinarily diverse policy engagement. An academic who had been successful in having their research inform policy felt that due to the lack of support from their institution and in some instances, policy partners, it was at the expense and compromise of their family.

'I felt like a really bad mum...like, serious guilt of like...i'm choosing to prioritise helping civil servants over helping [my child] ride [their] bike'. (res-participant-01).

The literature review told us both that there were not enough EDI principles being used in academic-policy engagement *and* outlined the issues of implementing EDI principles in Higher Education contexts, and this was supported by the interviews across both samples. A key takeaway from this is that EDI concepts, strategies or principles should not be passed across contexts without readapting and reconfiguring, as what might work for one context could mean absence of in another.

The purpose of this study was to highlight a substantial gap within this space, investigating how the *process* itself is experienced, which is a major part of the physical structure and relational foundation of this work in order to be equitable, diverse, inclusive, accessible, and navigate through a lens of complexity and intersectionality that recognises the politics that underpin it.

Limitations

Study A was conducted as part of a MSc dissertation, and was therefore restricted on requirements to complete the work independently and within a specific timeframe. The limitations of this were considered (e.g data sharing, requirements of degree) and mitigated through the ethics process and the lead author's supervisory team to ensure sharing of data after conferring of degree. Whilst Study A was funded as part of the studentship held by the lead author, the studies themselves did not receive funding for staff time or resource, with the exception of a small discretionary budget for compensation of 10 participants (study B) from Public Policy Southampton (PPS). Given time and resource restriction, this meant making decisions in particular about sample sizes and scope of the project. Further to this, another limitation is the use of a specialised sample; whilst it is in line with participatory action research values and beneficial to make use of professional networks of the authors, we accept that the study would have benefited from wider engagement to get a fuller understanding of the academic-policy engagement process, in particular, with policymakers. We intended this project to add richness to the conversation on EDI within academic-policy engagement but specifically hope this can provide a platform and springboard for further research.

Conclusion

This paper intended to set out ways in which EDI is currently discussed within the context of academic-policy engagement, and surface problematic ideas or notions within this, as well as centre the lived experience of marginalised researchers and university based knowledge brokers within the evidence-policy ecosystem. From this, we have presented a literature base that discusses EDI within a specific part of this sector, as well as surfaced the challenges and successes within everyday knowledge brokerage in considering EDI. The initial literature and rapid review showed that there is some strong research in this space, most notably from the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) *Surfacing EDI Report* (2021), UK Parliament activities (2023), Walker et al (2019) and Fawcett et al (2021). There are also general calls to consider and think about EDI more in academic policy engagement from pieces such as Oliver et al (2022), Hopkins et al (2020), and Durrant & MacKillop (2022), but we call upon a deeper exploration of what EDI means, in particular what it means to have diverse evidence production and use. With exception to the UPEN *Surfacing EDI Report* (2021), little evidence or exploration of the lived experience of knowledge brokers has been produced, or of marginalised academics who have engaged with policy, and what this means for EDI within the space. The evidence gaps found within the literature, such as how EDI is understood, conceptualised and lived within

academic-policy engagement specifically has been addressed in this paper. We have also presented the various complex, intersecting, contrasting and collective ways academics and knowledge brokers experience an equally complex system of evidence-informed policy.

These studies only ever intended to be a small insight into this space, with the hope of encouraging additional cross academic-professional research and practice to strengthen the use of EDI, whatever it means, across the sector. There is no one answer to what EDI in academic-policy engagement *should* look like, and we hope we have driven home the point that it is a complex, plural, highly contextual practice when doing well. What doing 'well' looks like is an area of further research that this study cannot cover alone. Instead, we implore readers to think critically about EDI within academic-policy engagement, consider their own values working in this space, what assumptions they are defaulting to, and how they can use their power within the constraints and privileges they may have.

We hope that future research will be interdisciplinary and relational, focus on lived experiences, and aim to in and of itself, critically assess and subvert pre-existing knowledge hierarchies and problematic notions of objectivity and neutrality instead of replicate or uphold them. Further studies in this space could include more qualitative research into the practice of knowledge brokerage and its role as an intermediary within evidence-informed policy, as well as further critical evaluation of EDI activities within academic-policy engagement to expand more on this study.

We have shown that EDI is not just a simple matter of representation, of people or disciplines, but a deeply critical, complex and relational space which strengthens the goals of evidence-informed policy and supports equitable and ethical processes and systems. No other academic study to our knowledge in the space of evidence-informed policy has used the methodology outlined in this paper, platforming and delving deep into the experiences of knowledge brokers in particular in a qualitative way in the EDI context. Where there is a mountain of research related to EDI in higher education institutions, with a focus on marginalised researchers, this paper adds an additional facet and experience to those contexts and expands on what is often missed within EDI thinking. Knowledge brokerage as a sector is still in its infancy, and in order to avoid replication of harms and inequities as it grows, this paper builds on other calls for equitable, diverse, and inclusive policy engagement systems by making visible a largely hidden space.

EDI, however one might relate to it, is central to evidence-informed policy, and it must be embraced and protected in order to disrupt monopolies and hierarchies of knowledges and power, protect diversity of voices, people, knowledges and disciplines, and embrace a plural, ethical, and equitable research-policy system. This paper contributes to this space, building on previous work of other academics and professionals, and hopes that this small insight will support further work and research to move the field forward. Future work will include participatory action roundtables based on these findings with colleagues in the sector, and working with organisations such as UPEN to facilitate a growing conversation across UK Universities.

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Study Merge flowchart

Figure 2: PRISMA Flowchart

Figure 3: Interview Topic Guide

Figure 4: Word Cloud

Figure 5: Thematic Framework

Supplemental data:

Appendices A & B provided by OSF link: <https://osf.io/hcke4>

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