

## **EVENT REPORT**

### **BSA Early Career Regional Event: 'Caring for Ourselves and Others as Early Career Academics'**

University of Glasgow

Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2017

Early career academics from the University of Glasgow and the University of Stirling collaborated to successfully hold the BSA Early Career Regional Event on 'Caring for Ourselves and Others as ECAs' at the University of Glasgow on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June, 2017. A full programme of the event can be found [here](#).

The event was motivated by an awareness of the heightened pressures of the neoliberal academy and the way in which such working cultures can produce and reinforce inequality in and across a range of measures. The aim of the event was to identify and explore the challenges of contemporary academic labour specifically on Early Career Academics (ECAs) through the lens of care. Care was defined broadly to encompass both self-care and caring responsibilities for others. As well as identifying key issues and challenges experienced by ECAs, the event also aimed to begin thinking about potential steps for building change in the sector, moving beyond individualised notions of 'resilience' to explore possibilities for structural change.

Delegates attended from different disciplines and parts of the UK, including Glasgow, Edinburgh, Stirling, Manchester, Newcastle, Durham and London. We were happy to welcome delegates from different stages and positions in their academic career, including Masters students, doctoral candidates, those trying to make the transition into postdoc positions, graduate teaching assistants on hourly paid contracts, Research Assistants and Associates, those who had recently begun permanent lectureships and those with more senior roles in the university sector. Delegates also represented a range of different life stages, which enabled the concept of 'care' to be explored in a number of different ways. These different levels and roles allowed for a deeper understanding of the specificities of challenges at certain career stages as well as some surprising commonalities between them. It should be noted that while the delegates represented a wide range of career and life stages, the event was attended predominantly by women, despite the issues raised arguably being applicable to all ECAs.

Dr Barbara Read, a Reader in the School of Education at the University of Glasgow, delivered the keynote address following registration and informal initial chats over coffee. Her paper was entitled 'Early Career Academics: Caring for the Present and the Future' and addressed issues of temporality in academic careers, drawing on findings from interviews with academic staff at different career stages. Her keynote stimulated immediate energetic debate about issues including the role of the UCU in fighting casualisation; examples of effective activism against precarity; and the importance of more senior members of the staff on (relatively) secure contracts supporting ECAs.

The conference was then divided into two thematic panels featuring 7 papers in total. The first panel was entitled 'Managing Productivity, Precarity and Talent: Exploring the challenges of working conditions in the contemporary HE sector'. This panel explored the importance of self-care and support networks for ECAs in the face of intensifying academic demands. Papers examined a wide range of issues, including links between creative labour

and early career academic labour and the prevalence of burnout in both sectors; imposter syndrome in the academy at all levels of academic careers; the urgent need for love and care of others in a neoliberal climate that privileges heightened competition; and the (gendered) kinds of knowledge exchange that are valued by the academy. The second panel, 'Caring for Ourselves and Others', took place after lunch and interrogated further issues around care, including the theme of self-care in relation to traumatic fieldwork; the limitations and inadequacies of university (and private) counselling services and the difficulties of combining early career academic labour with caring responsibilities for others, including young children, infirmed family members and elderly parents.

Each of the panels generated lively and productive discussions about the realities of being an ECA/ECR in the contemporary moment. From the feedback gathered after the event (n=9), all described it as useful. In particular, the event was praised for offering a much needed space to discuss challenges facing ECAs, providing thought-provoking discussions, and encouraging the sharing of personal experiences. One delegate described feeling 'reassured that other women are in the same boat as me', while another stated it 'made me realise the importance of work/life balance when working in academia'. The panel sessions were also praised for being 'relevant' and 'aligned to my experiences' as an ECA.

Discussions throughout the day were rich and productive in terms of identifying specific challenges experienced by ECAs – including the financial barriers to participating in UCU votes when unemployed or on low-paid contracts; the need for institutions to support ECAs for brief periods of time following the completion of their PhDs and their transition to academic positions; the vital role of support networks in challenging isolation and notions of personal failure and the lack of adequate maternity pay. These discussions were also rich in suggestions of steps (even small steps) that could be made to improve these challenges felt by ECAs, such as institutions providing library access to PhD students for a short time after completion; practicing 'academic kindness' including reading peers' work-in-progress and peer reviewing each others' job applications; and challenging the normalisation of intense working cultures through email calming policies. Most importantly, these discussions provided a much needed sense of solidarity and support that can often be missing from the solitary nature of early careers, and from a climate in which these challenges are often silenced and thus, internalised.

The BSA held mentoring cafes over lunch where delegates could sign up to receive guidance, advice and support from more senior academics. Three delegates took part in these sessions. From feedback gathered, the mentoring cafes were a success, with all three delegates viewing them as useful. Specifically they felt it was 'useful to have one-to-one feedback', and the mentors themselves were praised for being 'attentive and empathetic', 'giving lots of ideas on how to work smarter and think of priorities'. One delegate initially hoped to talk to their mentor about family planning as an ECA, but felt their mentor was not well matched in this area. However, the session was instead spent discussing how to secure a permanent contract and, therefore, it became useful in another way. In the general feedback section of the form, one delegate commented that BSA events should 'definitely sustain the mentoring café series as it provides much needed support especially to non-affiliated researchers'.

The event ended with a more informal roundtable discussion, thinking about potential steps for making change. Dr Susan Batchelor, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Glasgow, shared her personal and highly positive account of choosing to transition to a part time position. Her argument that there is not one way to be an academic was powerful in challenging the notion of the 'ideal researcher' – someone who is wholly devoted to their

academic career at the expense of all else. This 'ideal academic' had been evoked by many of the delegates when voicing feelings of guilt, inadequacy and/or being an imposter and, thus, Batchelor's statement felt particularly important. She was joined by Dr Peter Matthews, Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Stirling, who shared his insights into institutional approaches towards addressing issues of inequality in the academy, looking at Athena SWAN and how this charter seeks to address the (often gendered) challenges experienced by ECAs.

The event was possible due to generous funding from the BSA. The event was organised by Dr Joanne Neary (University of Glasgow), Dr Susan Berridge (University of Stirling) and Dr Lisa Bradley (University of Glasgow). The organisers would also like to thank Rachel Allan of the University of Glasgow for her administrative support.