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Improving the Early-Career Experiences of Racially Diverse Project Professionals

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Because when projects
succeed, society benefits

About the authors

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1. Executive summary

1.1 Project overview

This cross-country, cross-sector qualitative study explored the early-career experiences of racially diverse project professionals working in two prominent project management sectors – business and professional services (e.g. finance, banking, consultancy) and construction (e.g. built environment, infrastucture) – in the UK and Australia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 diverse early-career project professionals (both women and men), with 20 participants from each country. Their responses were thematically analysed. The study produced evidence-based recommendations on how project-based organisations can better facilitate diverse project practitioners' transition into the project management profession and meet their early-career needs.

1.2 Key findings

Our findings provide insights into the lived experiences of diverse early-career project professionals:

- Almost three-quarters of the women and half the men working in business and construction projects had experienced some form of identity-based discrimination in their workplace.
- Almost half the participants had experienced racial discrimination at work, more so in the UK.
- A higher proportion of business project professionals had experienced racial discrimination.
- Women working in both project sectors (but more so in construction) reported they had experienced gender-based discrimination.
- Racially diverse early-career women often experienced additional types of identity-based discrimination (known as intersectionality), e.g. age, social class and/or neurodiversity.
- More early-career women than men were considering leaving their industry sector. An exception was the UK construction sector, where the numbers planning to exit were equal (50%).
- Company diversity management practices were often ineffective or not adequately enforced.

1.3 Recommendations

Universities and project management professional bodies are encouraged to:

- identify diversity-friendly project employers
- organise networking events to connect students, graduates and early-career professionals with diversity-friendly companies
- educate project-based organisations about the economic, social and environmental benefits of a diverse project workforce
- promote appropriate measures to support diverse early-career project professionals

Project employers are encouraged to:

- include diversity-friendly endorsements in industry brand and job advertisements
- listen directly to the voices of diverse employees about their specific needs
- audit the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion policies
- implement further diversity and inclusion measures and/or training when indicated
- offer better onboarding, greater managerial and peer support, and more mentoring
- establish communities of practice for diverse employees
- provide more training and career development opportunities for diverse employees

2. Introduction

2.1 Background and significance

Increasing and retaining demographic diversity within the project management profession is of current concern in many Western nations. Projections estimate that, globally, 25 million new project practitioners will be needed by 2030 (PMI, 2021). A more diverse employee base will address current skill shortages (Korn Ferry, 2018), contribute to a more equitable society (United Nations, 2021) and provide commercial benefits and increased competitive advantage for organisations, through fostering more creative thinking, problem solving and innovation, improved customer satisfaction and significant performance gains (Hunt et al., 2015). Companies that have diverse employees have been shown to attain superior triple-bottom-line performance in terms of financial (Hunt et al., 2015), social (Shinbrot et al., 2019) and environmental (Asteria and Herdiansyah, 2020; Nadeem et al., 2020) sustainability.

In the context of project management, where there are high attrition rates among new entrants (Borg and Scott-Young, 2022), it is imperative to ensure that diverse early-career project professionals are well supported so that their unique and valuable perspectives are retained. By shedding light on the lived experiences of early-career project professionals from diverse backgrounds, this research aims to identify practices and behaviours that foster sustainable careers in project management for underrepresented groups (including women and racially diverse individuals) who are critical to achieving project success.

In response to the global 'talent crunch' (Korn Ferry, 2018), companies are finding that increasing their workforce's diversity has become a strategic priority (Creary et al., 2021), with many attempting to recruit from a broader labour pool made more diverse through globalisation and expanding migration (van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2007). Beyond the benefit of addressing pressing skills shortfalls, embracing diversity is also key to redressing social injustices highlighted in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Increasingly, project-based companies are required to demonstrate that they are employing diverse minority groups to meet the social procurement requirements of government-funded projects (Barraket et al., 2015; Loosemore et al., 2023). Greater workforce diversity and inclusion is good for both project-based organisations and the communities they serve.

To attract more diverse and historically underrepresented talent, employers must fully embrace diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) (McKinsey, 2020). Diversity in an organisation refers to 'having a heterogeneous mix of identities e.g. race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, gender identity, veteran status, physical and cognitive ability, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, experience' (Harvard Business Review Analytics Services, 2021, p.1). Equity means 'regardless of identity, all employees are compensated fairly and have the opportunity to succeed and grow in their jobs'. Inclusion refers to workplace conditions where 'the identities of all employees are respected and valued; employees have the opportunity and support to succeed and grow in their jobs' (Harvard Business Review Analytics Services, 2021, p.1).

Early-career project professionals constitute an important component of the project management workforce and the demand for them is particularly high (Borg et al., 2023). Not only do new graduates refill the project talent pipeline (Borg and Scott-Young, 2020), but companies also rely on them to transfer their up-to-date knowledge and skills to reinvigorate the more established project workforce (Książek-Nowak et al., 2022). Therefore, with the ever-increasing demand for new project management talent and high turnover rates in younger

professionals (Borg and Scott-Young, 2022), improved retention of this important early-career talent pool is vital for project-based organisations' continued success.

Although the number of racially diverse project professionals has been growing, especially among younger employees (APM, 2023), few studies have examined the experiences of project professionals from diverse backgrounds and demographic profiles. Moreover, the experiences of project professionals during their early-career stage have also received scant research attention (Oo et al., 2020; Borg and Scott-Young, 2021). Hence, project-based organisations are seldom well prepared to support their newest employees by providing structured career development systems (Finn, 2016). The lack of research on how well early-career project professionals are prepared for work is of particular concern, given that individuals with low levels of work readiness are more likely to experience stress and anxiety on the job (Cai et al., 2021; Korte et al., 2019). Furthermore, an individual's work readiness is indicative of their future job performance and career advancement (Caballero and Walker, 2010).

Therefore, a lack of adequate organisational support is likely to negatively impact young project management professionals' career development and encourage them to leave their company or sometimes even their profession. In the context of projects, where there are high attrition rates among specific categories of employees like new entrants (Borg and Scott-Young, 2022), racial minorities (Missa and Ahmed, 2010) and women in the first five years of their careers (Dainty et al., 2001), it is critical to ensure that early-career project professionals from diverse backgrounds are adequately supported to retain their unique perspectives in the profession.

The typical early-career challenges experienced by most new employees are likely to be exacerbated by belonging to an underrepresented identity group, such as being a woman or from an underrepresented racial background. This study seeks to address this research gap by investigating the support that young racially diverse project professionals require to successfully navigate their early-career stage. Support for project professionals from underrepresented groups is particularly important to ensure that the project management discipline is inclusive for all, in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 5, 8 and 10.

2.2 Research aim

To address the current lack of knowledge, this study compares the early-career lived experiences of young project professionals from underrepresented demographic identities (women and men from non-traditional racial/ethnic backgrounds) working in the context of two prominent industry sectors (business and construction) in the UK and Australia. While racial diversity has been well studied in the UK and the US (van Bommel et al., 2023), Australia is a less typical research context (Ayoko and Fujimoto, 2023). By shedding light on the early-career experiences of project professionals from diverse backgrounds, this research aims to identify effective practices and behaviours that can foster successful project careers for underrepresented groups, who are critical to achieving a more sustainable, equitable and diverse project workforce.

2.3 Research questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

- What are the comparative experiences of diverse early-career project professionals (women and men from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds) when searching for work in the UK and Australia?
- What are the comparative early-career experiences of diverse project professionals working in two prominent project-based sectors (business and construction)?
- How can project-based organisations better support diverse early-career project professionals?

3. Literature review

3.1 Importance of diversity in the project profession

Diversity in the workplace refers to the coexistence of workers who embody a wide and multi-faceted variety of demographic, cultural and socioeconomic characteristics (Roberson, 2019). Diversity research focuses on differences due to human attributes. One of the most frequently adopted definitions describes diversity as 'differences between individuals on any attribute that may lead to the perception that another person is different from self' (van Knippenberg et al., 2004, p.1008). This definition draws on social categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987), where people are classified in terms of how others perceive them based on their human attributes (e.g. gender, age, race, social class, intelligence, personality). The diversity literature classifies these human traits into 'observable' and 'surface level' (e.g. gender, race, age, personality) and 'non-observable' or 'deep level' types of diversity (e.g. socioeconomic status, neurodiversity, religion, sexual orientation) (Harrison et al., 2002).

Much of the diversity research draws on social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 2004), which focuses more on the person and their self-construction of their identity in terms of their unique characteristics. SIT involves three processes: categorisation using shared characteristics to divide people into groups; identification associating themselves with a specific group as their 'in-group' where they feel they belong; and comparison of their own in-group favourably with those who are different (the 'out-group') (Islam, 2013).

The presence of out-group people from underrepresented diverse identities often arouses threat or feelings of superiority in the dominant in-group. These feelings can prompt adverse behavioural reactions to diverse individuals, and discrimination which involves the negative social, developmental or financial treatment of the out-group (Triana et al., 2019). Workplace discrimination relates to an employee's perception that they were treated unequally because of some diverse characteristic, e.g. gender (Allport, 1954). Discrimination in the workplace often takes the form of microaggressions, i.e. 'brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative slights and insults to the target person or group' (Sue et al., 2007, p.273). The results of workplace discrimination are negative. For example, women who experienced gender discrimination showed a range of ill-effects including low job satisfaction, poor psychological and physical health and worse job outcomes (Triana et al., 2019).

3.2 Key themes in extant literature

3.2.1 Intersectionality of multiple underrepresented identities

Most studies of diversity have explored only a single aspect of identity (e.g. gender, age or race) (Yadav and Lenka, 2023). The intersectionality of identities has been largely overlooked in the main body of diversity and inclusion research and requires greater attention (Ayoko and Fujimoto, 2023). *Intersectionality* refers to an individual having two or more underrepresented identities (e.g. a young neurodiverse Chinese woman), which compounds the amount of discrimination they experience and their level of disadvantage (Köllen, 2021). It is held that 'more studies are needed in this area to empirically unpack the lived experience of these diverse employees that may be caught up with multiple dimensions of diversity in organisations and how HR practices can assist in promoting their development, growth and sense of belonging while fostering their inclusion at work' (Ayoko and Fujimoto, 2023, p.988).

3.2.2 Inclusion and diversity management practices

Although the bulk of research has centred around the representation of diverse groups in organisations (Golom and Cruz, 2021; Triana et al., 2021), more recently, the focus has begun to turn towards inclusion (van Bommel et al., 2023). Inclusion involves the creation of a collaborative, accepting and respectful workplace that empowers equal participation and fosters belonging (Kaur and Arora, 2020). Inclusion can be created through the adoption of diversity

management practices, i.e. a set of human resource management initiatives that value diverse traits and contributions and that foster acceptance, support, equality and wellbeing for diverse employees (Seliverstova, 2021) and improve organisational performance (Olsen and Martens, 2012). While the study of diversity management is evolving, a notable gap is the current lack of qualitative studies on these practices (Yadav and Lenka, 2023). Furthermore, Cooke et al. (2022) have called for a more human-centric approach to human resource management (HRM) practices by involving the voices and perspectives of affected employees in their design. Their nuanced viewpoints can be readily captured by a qualitative research design.

3.3 Trends and industry practices

3.3.1 Diversity and inclusion in project management

'Diversity and inclusion continue to be a major challenge in contemporary organisations' (Ayoko and Fujimoto, 2023, p.988), requiring a rigorous evidence-based approach to the development of effective and empowering management practices for creating an environment that enables diverse project professionals to flourish. To date, most of the diversity research conducted in the project management context has focused on women, gender discrimination and diversity management practices for greater inclusion (e.g. Baker et al., 2021; Baker and Clegg, 2023). So far, little research attention has been given to the lived experience of other underrepresented identities (McCarthy et al., 2019) such as early-career project professionals from diverse races/ethnicities.

3.3.2 Gender diversity in project management

Women have long been substantially underrepresented (Henderson and Stackman, 2010; Henderson et al., 2013; PMI, 2023) in the project management profession. Despite many countries enacting legislation and policies to attract more women into science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields (Opoku and Williams, 2019), women are still a minority in these male-dominated professions (Hickey and Cui, 2020). Currently, women make up approximately one-third of the project management profession (Hildardóttir, 2021; PMI, 2023). Despite the growing recognition of the importance of workplace gender diversity for achieving social equity and sustainability (Hickey and Cui, 2020; Baker and Clegg, 2023), there is a need for more research on female project professionals (Henderson et al., 2013; de la Torre, 2020) and early-career women in particular (Zhang et al., 2021).

Industry context is also an important factor that has shaped gender diversity research trends. Women represent a minority in the construction industry, comprising only a small 12.5% of the project workforce in the UK (GMB Union, 2019) and 12% in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021), hence they represent a largely untapped talent pool. Construction is the main project-based industry sector that has been the focus of an extensive body of research on gender over the past 30 years (e.g. Dainty and Lingard, 2006; French and Strachan, 2015; Galea et al., 2015; Baker et al., 2021) in an attempt to address systemic injustice and to attract more women to solve the pressing skill shortages (Baker and Clegg, 2023). However, only a few of these construction studies on gender have focused on project management professionals (e.g. French and Strachan, 2015; Baker et al., 2021; Baker and Clegg, 2023). Therefore, to expand project management knowledge, more studies of female project professionals are needed (de la Torre, 2020) and especially research on women in their early-career stage.

3.2.3 Racial/ethnic diversity in project management

As the world becomes increasingly globalised and labour is more mobile (van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2007), workforce diversity is increasing. Given the rising concern in many Western nations, including the UK, about the racial discrimination and inequalities that many underrepresented groups experience (e.g. the British Cabinet Office's (2017) *Race Disparity Audit*), it is timely that the experiences of diverse identity groups are given greater research focus in the project management literature (Keegan, 2021; Heydari et al., 2024).

Employees from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds (considered 'out-groups') experience discrimination from dominant group (white) managers and colleagues (Holloway, 2005). McCarthy et al. (2019) argue that 'in-group' majority employees' attitudes towards DEI and their behaviour are greatly influenced by the structures, support processes and practices of their employer. They assert that organisations play a key role in forming their employees' attitudes and actions to foster the equal treatment and effective inclusion of diverse workers from underrepresented backgrounds.

3.3.4 Organisational resources to support early-career professionals

It has been shown that employers play a crucial role in supporting their early-career employees' adjustment and wellbeing (Cai et al., 2021). It is likely that effective organisational practices known to foster newcomers' adjustment in the workplace (Saks and Gruman, 2011) will also be conducive to fostering the development and wellbeing of diverse and underrepresented early-career project professionals. Such tailored organisational resources assist new employees in learning their new roles and responsibilities, making sense of their work environment (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2020), adjusting to the new workplace culture, organisational norms and systems and beginning to work cooperatively as an efficient and effective organisational member (Mattick et al., 2019).

Effective newcomer socialisation involves a set of organisational practices and resources that facilitate the social learning process that enables new recruits to transition from 'outsiders to integrated and effective insiders' (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2006, p.492), integrating them more fully into the organisation (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). However, according to some research (e.g. Finn, 2016; Borg and Scott-Young, 2022), many organisations are failing to provide the necessary support required by early-career employees in terms of adequate induction, training and structured career development.

Researchers in the early-careers and construction literatures have identified multiple effective newcomer socialisation practices, including supportive supervisor and team member relationships that provide regular formal guidance and one-on-one feedback (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2019; Borg and Scott-Young, 2022); mentoring where more experienced employees provide support and share their local knowledge and experience (Korte et al., 2019; Cai et al., 2021; Borg and Scott-Young, 2022); and training to formally teach new skills and foster career development, which enhances employee knowledge and performance (Ling et al., 2018; Borg and Scott-Young, 2022). It is likely that effective newcomer socialisation practices like these will also be beneficial for supporting diverse early-career project practitioners in business sector projects as in construction projects. These supportive practices may serve a double function as diversity management tools that foster greater inclusion and integration into the project team, producing equality and wellbeing (Seliverstova, 2021) for diverse early-career project professionals.

4. Research design and methodology

4.1 Research approach

Our research methodology is in alignment with the interpretivist view, which is based on the underlying ontological assumption that reality is subjective and socially constructed (Tracy, 2012). In alignment with this belief, this research explores the experiences of ethnically and racially diverse early-career project management professionals from their own perspective, by allowing them to draw on their personal lived experiences. As is common practice for interpretivist research (Andrew et al., 2011), this exploratory study adopted a qualitative research design which entailed 40 interviews. To enable a cross-country and cross-industry comparison, 20 interviews were conducted with early-career project professionals in the UK and 20 with participants in Australia. Half of each country sample worked in the business sector and half were employed in roles in construction projects.

4.2 Data collection methods

Ethics approval (Ethics Reference: 2022-24792-18589) was gained from RMIT University's Human Ethics Advisory Network before the data collection process began.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were the main form of data collection. This method is primarily used to capture each participant's unique voice. This interviewing technique is described as 'a meaning-making partnership between interviewers and their respondents', as in-depth interviews are 'knowledge producing conversations' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006, p.128). Interviews were conducted and recorded online using Microsoft Teams software and lasted approximately one hour. The interviews generated rich data about each participant's lived experiences.

4.2.1 Demographic questions

Information relating to the participants' selected identities and experience in project management was collected on the participant information sheet. Demographic questions included gender identity, nationality, ethnicity, visa/citizenship status, age, work role, industry, company size, employment history, education and country of education, and how long they had lived in their current host country.

4.2.2 Interview protocol

Following standard practice (Hennink et al., 2011), a semi-structured in-depth interview guide was developed by the researchers to ensure consistency across the interview process. Participants were asked about their early-career experiences in project management and how these could be improved. Questions focused on how participants had entered the project management profession; enablers and barriers to obtaining or retaining a role and to their subsequent career progression; the percentage of women and minoritised racial group members in their company; the nature of their company's DEI policies and their enactment; the support they received; and how companies can improve the work-related experiences of diverse early-career project professionals. Full details of the interview protocol and questions are provided in the appendix.

4.3 Sampling strategy

We adopted purposive sampling to recruit 40 participants, with 20 each from the UK and Australia. For each country, 10 participants were drawn from the top two industry sectors where projects are executed, i.e., 10 from business and 10 from construction (APM, 2019). Participants were recruited with the assistance of the Association for Project Management (APM), using the incentive of entry into a random lottery draw to win one of ten £50 gift vouchers. To be eligible to participate, all project professionals were to be:

- in their early-career phase (defined as the first 10 years of their project management career)
- from non-Anglo/European ethnic/racial backgrounds
- from different genders
- working in either business or construction, i.e. the top two project management sectors in the UK as identified by recent research conducted by APM (2019)

4.4 Data analysis techniques

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to provide a rich description of the data set. The individual themes were identified, coded and analysed to provide an accurate reflection of the content of the entire data set. This method is particularly useful when investigating an under-researched area, or when the views of a particular category of participants have not been previously studied (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore, the use of thematic analysis was well aligned with the objectives of our research.

5. Research findings and analysis

5.1 Overview of the sample

The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (N=40)

Demographics	UK business N=10	UK construction N=10	Aus business N=10	Aus construction N=10	Total sample N=40
Women	8	6	7	5	26
Men	2	4	3	5	14
Age range	25–39	24–38	24–39	25–32	24–39
Project experience	1–10 years	1–8 years	0.5–10 years	1.5–6 years	0.5–10 years
Company size	L=7 M=3	L=7 M=3	L=7 M=3	L=5 M=3 S=2	L=26 M=12 S=2
Born in host country	5	4	1	0	10
Years in host country	3–23 years; Whole life=5	0.75–5 years; Whole life=5	2–9 years; Whole life=1	0.5–8 years; Whole life=0	0.75–23 years; Whole life=11
Citizen of host country	7	5	1	2	15
Working visa	3	5	6	8	22
Degree: host country	8	7	10	10	35
Degree: home country	2	3	0	0	5
Indian	0	2	5	6	13
Pakistani	5	1	0	1	7
Nepalese	0	0	1	0	1
African	2	3	1	0	6
African-Caribbean	1	2	0	0	3
Latino	1	1	0	0	2
Chinese	1	0	1	2	4
Indonesian	0	0	0	1	1
Vietnamese	0	1	1	0	2
Japanese	0	0	1	0	1

The total sample consisted of 40 racially diverse men and women working as early-career project professionals, with 20 from the UK and 20 from Australia. For many of the work-related demographic variables, the industry sector subsample characteristics were relatively similar across both countries (UK and Australia). More women volunteered to participate in the study,

yielding 26 women project professionals and 14 men in the combined countries sample. It was more difficult to secure early-career men working in business sector projects in both the UK (two men) and Australia (three men). The construction industry samples displayed greater gender balance, with the UK sample containing four men while the Australian sample had an equal number of women and men (five each).

The majority of the combined sample (65%, N=26) worked in large companies with over 1,000 employees, while 30% (N=12) worked in medium-sized companies and 5% (N=2) were employed in small companies in the Australian construction industry. The total sample of 40 early-career project professionals was aged between 24 and 39 years old. The participants' years of experience ranged from six months to 10 years, with those employed in business projects in both countries displaying greater project experience than those working in construction projects.

Almost half (52.5%) of the total sample self-identified as South Asians (Indian = 13, Pakistani = 7, Nepalese = 1). However, the racial/ethnic composition of the two country subsamples differed. In the UK, participants of Pakistani heritage (N=6) made up the largest portion (30%) of the sample, followed by Africans (25%, N=5), Indians (10%, N=2), African-Caribbeans (15%, N=3), Latinos (10%, N=2) and 1 each from China and Vietnam. In contrast, over half the Australian sample was of Indian background (55%, N=11), while 15% (N=3) were from China, with 1 each from Pakistan, Nepal, Africa, Japan, Vietnam and Indonesia.

5.2 Job search experiences

Participants were asked about their experiences when searching for their first role in the project management profession. Table 2 presents the number of participants who reported positive and negative experiences by country, industry sector and gender identity.

Table 2. Job search experiences of diverse early-career project professionals

	Participants	Gender	
		Women	Men
Positive experiences 35% (N=14/40)	UK business	50% (4/8)	0% (0/2)
	UK construction	33% (2/6)	25% (1/4)
	Aus business	43% (3/7)	67% (2/3)
	Aus construction	20% (1/5)	20% (1/5)
Negative experiences 27.5% (N=11/40)	UK business	25% (2/8)	100% (2/2)
	UK construction	0% (0/6)	25% (1/4)
	Aus business	43% (3/7)	33% (1/3)
	Aus construction	0% (0/5)	40% (2/5)

The results showed mixed job search experiences. Over a third of the total sample of diverse participants (37.5%) had neutral experiences (neither good nor bad) while searching for a role in the project management profession in both the business or construction sectors in the UK and Australia. More of the diverse early-career project professionals reported positive experiences (35%) than those who had negative experiences (27.5%) during their entry into the profession.

5.2.1 Job search experiences in business sector projects

In the UK, half the women working in the business projects sector reported positive experiences regarding their job-seeking endeavours, while a quarter reported a negative experience. In the business sector in Australia, the same proportion of women reported positive as negative experiences (43%). All the men in UK business projects reported negative instances when seeking work, whereas in Australia in this sector, only one-third found it difficult, with the remaining two-thirds having positive experiences. Having family support helped people with diverse identities:

"I had quite a few friends and family over here, so it was smooth. In terms of racial stuff, I didn't face any." (M, Nepalese, Business/IT, Australia)

5.2.2 Job search experiences in construction sector projects

Positive experiences were comparatively fewer in the construction sector within both countries, with women reporting slightly better experiences than men. Women in both countries did not report any negative experiences, whereas 25% of men in the UK and 40% of those in Australia did. While positive job search experiences were rarer for women in construction than in business, there was an absence of the unpleasant experiences that women in the business sector reported.

5.2.3 Negative experiences in recruitment

In both countries, job seekers experienced intense competition for project management roles, with many diverse early-career project professionals needing to apply for a large number of positions before finally securing one: "Honestly, competition is quite up there" (M, Spanish Mexican, UK, business/finance). Diverse applicants often felt disadvantaged compared with locally born early-career project professionals who were part of the dominant white Anglo race and had grown up in the employing country and understood its culture:

"It was very challenging as I was competing with local candidates who are native English speakers with more confidence and knowing how to showcase themselves." (F, Japanese, IT, Australia)

Some of the women attributed their unpleasant job search experiences to a combination of gender bias and racial discrimination (intersectionality):

"You go to apply for a job. You know you're qualified. And you've got all the skills that are required for it, but somehow you get bypassed and it goes to someone who either doesn't have any experience or because they fit with the team. I think this is a mix of gender and racial discrimination." (F, African, Construction, UK)

On the other hand, racially diverse men considered that they experienced discrimination based solely on their race or ethnicity:

"I'll say generally in the UK there's a lot of discrimination based on race when it comes to getting jobs. I've experienced it because once people know that you studied your degree overseas, then the whole conversation stops just like that." (M, African, Construction, UK)

5.3 Early-career experiences

In both the UK and Australia, diverse early-career project professionals reported that they experienced discrimination, i.e. they were treated differently from their white Anglo counterparts based on their underrepresented identities. Table 3 presents the frequency and percentages of participants who reported experiencing some form of discrimination based on their minority identities. The majority of the total sample (65%, N=26/40) reported experiencing at least one form of identity-based discrimination (e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, age, neurodiversity or social class), of which the surface-level, observable identities of gender and race/ethnicity were the most common.

Table 3. Participants who experienced some form of identity-based discrimination

Country/project sector	Women	Men	Both
UK business N=10	75% (6/8)	50% (1/2)	70% (7/10)
UK construction N=10	100% (6/6)	75% (3/4)	90% (9/10)
Total UK N=20	86% (12/14)	67% (4/6)	80% (16/20)
Aus business N=10	71% (5/7)	33% (1/3)	60% (6/10)
Aus construction N=10	40% (2/5)	40% (2/5)	40% (4/10)
Total Australia N=20	58% (7/12)	37.5% (3/8)	50% (10/20)
Total business N=20	73% (11/15)	40% (2/5)	65% (13/20)
Total construction N=20	72% (8/11)	56% (5/9)	65% (13/20)
Total sample N=40	73% (19/26)	50% (7/14)	65% (26/40)

More women experienced some form of identity-based discrimination (73%, N=19/26) than men (50%, N=7/14). In terms of country context, many more of the British subsample (80%, N=16/20) were subject to some form of discrimination than those working in Australian projects of either type (50%, N=10/20). In the total sample (N=40), similar proportions (65%) of diverse early-career project professionals in both the business and construction sectors experienced some type of discrimination. Further examination of the data to identify the type of discrimination participants experienced revealed dominant themes that are discussed in the Sections 5.3.1 to 5.3.3.

5.3.1 Gender discrimination experienced by women only

Women were the only early-career project professionals who reported experiencing discrimination in projects based on their gender. Forty-two percent (N=11/26) of the total sample of women experienced gender bias in their workplace. Gender discrimination for women differed according to both the host country and the industry sector. These findings are discussed below.

Host country and gender discrimination

While gender bias against women was reported in both countries in our sample, the incidence of women experiencing it was over twice as high in the UK (57%, N=8/14) than in Australia (25%, N=3/12), indicating the value of comparative diversity research that takes country context into account (Triana et al., 2019) to add nuance to current knowledge on diversity and inclusion. One British woman commented:

"I think the UK is very much built on a class and gender-based system. When you look at powerful positions in most companies, it's just white men." (F, Vietnamese, construction, UK)

Industry and gender discrimination

Across both countries, a far greater proportion of women working in construction industry projects experienced gender bias (73%, N=8/11) than women working in the business sector (20%, N=3/15). Some women recalled experiences where they were not taken as seriously or treated as well as men:

"You notice that you aren't respected the same as a male colleague." (F, Indian, construction, UK)

Although some women felt well accepted in both their project team and company, they still experienced gender bias and differential treatment from client stakeholders who were men:

"Some clients wouldn't want to have a relationship with me at all, not even talk to me, literally just being stand-offish. But with males being way nicer." (F, Peruvian, construction, UK)

5.3.2 Racism was the most common form of discrimination

Some had no experience of racial discrimination

Notably, a little over half the sample (52.5%, N=21) did not experience any racial discrimination in their project workplace. As one participant noted,

"I haven't as yet, because probably I've been lucky working with good people around me" (F, Indian, business/IT, Australia).

In both the UK and Australia, many early-career project professionals could not

"envisage a situation where [race] would be a barrier. I think because I've never experienced it, I don't see it as a barrier." (M, Pakistani, financial services, UK)

Some viewed racial/ethnic background as an advantage

Some participants found that their race was actually an advantage when companies were trying to improve their levels of diversity:

"It opens opportunities in a way. They do it because they are aware that you are competent and to tick their ethnicity box as well." (F, African, business, UK)

"I think I actually benefit by being a woman of colour, because there's so few of us that I really stand out. So it does open some doors for me which have in the past four years actually helped my career." (F, Indian, construction, UK)

Most experienced racial discrimination

Despite the above accounts, racism, however, was still the **most frequently reported form of discrimination** across the sample, with 47.5% (N=19) of the 40 diverse early-career professionals experiencing negative attitudes or behaviours that they attributed to their racial identity. Many participants recounted feeling constantly categorised based on their race and that colleagues and stakeholders questioned why they had their roles: **"I go into meetings and people will not interact with me. Sometimes when I interact, they keep quiet and they say nothing and they go straight to my LinkedIn profile and I can see they're checking me out. Like, who's this person or why is this person talking to me?"** (F, African, business, Australia)

Others experienced isolation and discriminatory behaviours:

"Being from this particular black background puts you at a disadvantage. Here [in the UK] there is rejection and dispiriting complaints." (M, Nigerian, construction, UK)

"Discrimination is not in daily interactions – but for getting better opportunities internally. I believe it's a non-verbal discrimination at work for not getting opportunities due to my race." (F, Japanese, business/IT, Australia)

Some diverse early-career project professionals believed that the discriminatory treatment they received undermined fairness and equality in their organisation.

Host country and racial discrimination

The host country context affected the prevalence of racism experienced by ethnically/racially diverse early-career project professionals regardless of their gender. In the UK sample, 60% (N=12/20) of the participants reported racial discrimination compared with only 35% (N=7/20) in the Australian sample. Racism was also reported by a greater proportion of early-career women in the UK (64%, N=9/14) than women working in Australian projects (42%, N=5/12). Similarly, more British-based early-career male project professionals (50%, N=3/6) experienced racial discrimination than men in Australian projects (37.5%, N=3/8).

Industry sector and racial discrimination

Industry sector affected the likelihood that an early-career project professional from an underrepresented ethnic group would experience workplace racial discrimination. While racism was a common occurrence in both business and construction projects in both countries, it was more prevalent in business projects. Sixty per cent (N=12/20) of diverse early-career project professionals in the business sector reported they experienced racism in their workplace.

Ethnicity and racial discrimination

We classified our participants into four broad ethnic groups: Southeast Asian (China, Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia), South Asian (Pakistan, India, Nepal), African (Black African, African/Caribbean) and Latino (Spanish Mexican, Peruvian). Then we recorded the proportion of participants in each ethnic group who experienced racial discrimination in each industry sector in each country (see Table 4).

A trend emerged based on the ethnicity of the early-career project professionals in our sample. In both the UK and Australia, more early-career project professionals of African ethnicity (78%, N=7/9) reported experiencing discrimination than any other ethnic group. Although South Asian (38%, N=8/21) and Southeast Asian (37.5%, N=3/8) early-career project professionals experienced proportionaly less discrimination than the African participants, the percentages were still high. The figure for Latino participants is not considered to be reliable due to their relatively small proportion in the sample (N=2).

Table 4. Ethnicity and frequency of racial discrimination

Country and sector	SE Asian	South Asian	African	Latino	Total discrimination	Gender
UK business	0% (0/1)	75% (3/4)	75% (3/4)	100% (1/1)	70% (7/10)	F=75% (6/8) M=50% (1/2)
UK construction	100% (1/1)	25% (1/4)	75% (3/4)	0% (0/1)	50% (5/10)	F=50% (3/6) M=50% (2/4)
Total UK	50% (1/2)	50% (4/8)	75% (6/8)	50% (1/2)	60% (12/20)	F=64% (9/14) M=50% (3/6)
Aus business	67% (2/3)	33% (2/6)	100% (1/1)	None	50% (5/10)	F=57% (4/7) M=67% (1/3)
Aus construction	0% (0/3)	28% (2/7)	None	None	20% (2/10)	F=0% (0/5) M=40% (2/5)
Total Aus	33% (2/6)	30% (4/13)	100% (1/1)	None	35% (7/20)	F=33% (4/12) M=33% (3/8)
Total sample	37.5% (3/8)	38% (8/21)	78% (7/9)	50% (1/2)	47.5% (19/40)	F=50% (13/26) M=43% (6/14)

5.3.3 Intersectionality of multiple identities

Gender and race/ethnicity

Slightly more women (50%, N=13/26) in the full sample (N=40) reported experiencing racism than their male colleagues (43%, N=6/14). Moreover, some women experienced discrimination based on more than one minoritised identity, mainly coupled with their gender: **"I do believe that when both factors – being a female and a different race – combine together, it does play a role much more [negatively] in affecting career development."** (F, Japanese, business/IT, Australia).

Gender and other unrepresented identities

Unlike the men in our sample, some women experienced intersectionality of other types of stigmatised identities as well, including age and gender, or age, race and gender combined.

"It's probably around position and even my age and just the way people talk to you. I've found that in meetings if you're a young black woman, they assume you are the admin [person] rather than you've got quite a senior role. So, it's people not listening when you're speaking and just thinking you're probably the lower member of the team." (F, African, business, UK)

"Age is something that you constantly feel and being a woman in this industry [construction], because it is frowned upon. They don't give you the benefit of the doubt of knowing things even though you might. So, you gotta go that additional step forward to prove yourself – that you know well the responsibilities and can be in that role. I think age is probably the biggest ticket item, more than being from a different race." (F, Indian, construction, UK)

5.4 Diversity management practices

The employer organisations' DEI policies, targets and initiatives, as reported by the early-career project professionals themselves, are presented in Table 5. The most common diversity management practices were gender balance, inclusion policies and diversity communities of practice. Details of the practices are discussed after the table.

Table 5. Employing companies' diversity management practices

DEI practices	Participants	Frequency	Percentage
Company gender balance (N=31, 77.5%)	UK business	7/10	70%
	UK construction	9/10	90%
	Aus business	9/10	90%
	Aus construction	6/10	60%
Inclusion policies (N=29, 72.5%)	UK business	9/10	90%
	UK construction	8/10	80%
	Aus business	9/10	90%
	Aus construction	3/10	30%
Diversity community of practice (N=25, 62.5%)	UK business	6/10	60%
	UK construction	7/10	70%
	Aus business	5/10	50%
	Aus construction	7/10	70%
Gender targets (N=7, 17.5%)	UK business	2/10	20%
	UK construction	2/10	20%
	Aus business	1/10	10%
	Aus construction	2/10	20%

5.4.1 Gender balance

Overall, 77.5% of participants (N=31) reported that their company had a relevant policy and displayed gender balance in their workforce. The Australian construction sector lagged behind, with only 60% (N=6) reporting there was a gender balance in their companies. It was positive to hear that previously male-dominated sectors like business in both the UK and Australia, and the construction sector in the UK, have recruited more women as employees to balance their gender representation:

"There's definitely gender balance in the role that I have experienced in my short time here." (F, Pakistani, business/finance, UK).

However, despite progress in the lower levels in some companies, there were still participants who indicated there was a gender and race imbalance in leadership roles, where white men predominated, with few executives of colour or from diverse ethnicities. This suggests that a lack of representation may be experienced by diverse project professionals throughout their entire career life cycle, not just in their early-career stage. As one woman noted: "In higher management, my company doesn't really have anyone [diverse] at all at director level. I think it's completely just male, same age, same race, just white. I think under the director level … there's maybe one female. And everyone else is white and male. Under that level, again, there might be one or two females and then under that at Project Manager, Senior Project Manager. Then under that, there are heaps of people with different races and different genders." (F, Chinese, business/IT, Australia).

5.4.2 Inclusion policies

Across the sample, 72.5% of participants (N=29) reported that their companies had inclusion policies:

"The global non-discrimination policy provides that we do not discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of gender, colour, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability, etc." (F, Indian, business/IT, Australia).

"The company has stringent policies related to ensuring all individuals are treated equally without any discrimination." (M, Indian, business/IT, Australia).

The construction industry in Australia appears to be lagging behind, with only 30% (N=3) of participants in that sector reporting that their companies had an inclusion policy in place.

5.4.3 Communities of practice

Overall, 62.5% (N=25) of participants reported that their companies had diverse communities of practice where individuals from different backgrounds came together for mutual support. This practice suggests that these companies are recognising the importance of building diverse workforces. In both the UK and Australia, the construction industry was more likely to have this initiative than the business sector. This practice may explain why participants from the construction sector said they experienced less racism than those in business.

It is important to note that some respondents, while recognising levels of diversity in their companies, still felt underrepresented, which suggests that more employers need to provide communities of practice and ensure that they work towards having more equal representation of different races, ethnicities and genders:

"There are a few people from underrepresented racial backgrounds, but that number appears very low." (F, African, business, Australia)

5.4.4 Gender targets

Only 17.5% of participants (N=7) said that their companies had gender targets for employing more women. The presence of this DEI initiative was equally low across both sectors in both countries. Participants whose companies had gender targets noted that their companies were working towards making their workplaces more inclusive from a gender point of view:

"I think as a company we are championing it and not just doing it to tick a box. We're actually quite active with it as well." (M, Pakistani, business/finance, UK)

5.4.5 Grievance mechanisms

There appeared to be a lack of understanding of company grievance policies. Despite a high proportion of participants experiencing some form of discrimination, only three early-career women working in business projects, one in the UK and two in Australia, had reported incidents to their company's HRM unit. No-one working in the construction sector in either country had reported any discriminatory incidents to HRM. The single British-based interviewee who reported discrimination to her HRM department noted that HRM officers were not always effective in dealing with discrimination, especially for people of colour, and this discouraged incident reporting:

"I think there is still additional work to be done. They try but there could be more. It's something that they've said for ages they want to focus on. But I think there's a struggle around it still. It's obvious that there's still gaps. A number of people have reported bullying and discrimination, but it's never favourable for someone of colour. So you find that people don't report or challenge things." (F, African, business/health, UK)

In contrast to the British-based woman's experiences, the two Australian-based early-career women who complained, recounted their satisfaction with their companies' assistance in dealing with challenging discriminatory situations:

"After I had reported it internally it was a matter of 'taking some days off – as much as you want – and at some point you do need to come back into the office'. So, I worked with the directors from my side to create a plan on how I could feel comfortable working in that workspace again." (F, African, business, Australia)

"My company say that they won't tolerate discrimination and racism of any kind. I did bring a negative instance up in one of the experience surveys. I mentioned the word 'bully' and that triggered a lot of leaders, so they came together and actioned it very quickly." (F, Vietnamese, business/IT, Australia)

5.5 Future career intentions

Table 6 presents the future career intentions of our diverse early-career project professionals sample.

Table 6. Future career intentions

Future intentions	Sector	Women	Men
Intention to stay (N=28)	UK business	62.5% (5/8)	100% (2/2)
	UK construction	50% (3/6)	50% (2/4)
	Aus business	72.5% (5/7)	100% (3/3)
	Aus construction	80% (4/5)	80% (4/5)
Intention to change industries (N=12)	UK business	12.5% (1/8)	–
	UK construction	50% (3/6)	50% (2/4)
	Aus business	29% (2/7)	–
	Aus construction	20% (1/5)	20% (1/5)

As Table 6 shows, all the early-career diverse project professional men working in business projects in both the UK and Australia planned to stay in that sector.

Most of the women in business projects also intended to remain (UK 62.5%; Australia 72.5%). Some women in the business sector planned to change sectors (UK 12.5%; Australia 29%). One British woman working in business projects planned to return to study and another was hoping to work overseas.

In the UK construction sector, half the women and the men planned to change sectors, whereas in Australia only 20% of the women and men working in construction intended to do so.

6 Discussion

6.1 Discussion of results

6.1.1 Comparative recruitment experiences

Our first research question explored the job-seeking experiences of racially diverse early-career project professionals (both women and men) working in two prominent project-based sectors – business and construction – in the UK and Australia.

Overall, it is evident that much more needs to be done to ensure that racially diverse early-career project professionals have positive job search experiences within both the business and construction sectors and across both the UK and Australia. Just over a third of our diverse participants had neutral experiences (neither good nor bad); a further third reported positive experiences; while almost another third was subjected to negative recruitment experiences.

When considering these results, it is particularly important to focus on the experiences of diverse professionals across different sectors. For example, in our sample, racially diverse women applying for construction jobs reported no negative experiences. However, this does not necessarily mean that they did not experience negative experiences, but it may simply be that they chose not to share the details of such experiences in their interviews.

Men attributed their negative job search experiences to racial/ethnic discrimination in the hiring process. In contrast, for women, the source of discrimination was a little more complex for them to identify. This was due to their intersectional identity, i.e. being members of two underrepresented minorities in terms of both gender and ethnicity/race. Some women reflected that it was impossible to tease apart the contribution of each of their marginalised identities.

These findings indicate that, in both the UK and Australia, there is still more work to be done in the business and construction project sectors to further improve the recruitment processes for early-career project professionals from racially diverse identities. We recommend a greater focus on creating safe spaces for professionals to share their negative as well as their positive experiences to enable change within the profession.

6.1.2 Comparative early-career experiences of diverse project professionals

Our second research question explored the comparative early-career experiences of racially diverse project professionals working in the business and construction sectors in the UK and Australia.

Gender discrimination is prevalent for early-career women, especially in construction

Consistent with previous literature (e.g. Galea et al., 2015; Baker et al., 2021), women reported experiencing discrimination in projects based on their gender. None of the early-career racially diverse men in our sample believed that they were devalued due to their gender. This may be because in both the business and construction sectors, men have historically occupied (and still do) the majority of roles, hence being a man is seen as 'the norm'. Our findings highlight the importance of considering the intersectionality of gender and race/ethnicity when promoting diversity and inclusion within project-based organisations.

Across both countries, a far greater proportion of women working in the construction industry experienced gender bias compared with women working in the business sector. Even the women who felt relatively accepted within their project team and company still experienced gender bias and differential treatment from client stakeholders who were men, suggesting that the construction industry would benefit from a greater focus on fostering the inclusion of gender-diverse early-career professionals.

Moreover, while gender bias against women was reported in both sectors in both countries in our sample, the incidence of women experiencing gender discrimination was over twice as high in the UK than in Australia, indicating the value of comparative diversity research that takes country context into account (Triana et al., 2019) to add nuance to current knowledge on diversity and inclusion.

Racial/ethnic discrimination is more prevalent within business and the UK

While it was encouraging to see that some participants felt that being from a traditionally minoritised group could be viewed as an advantage by companies trying to focus on diversity and inclusion, racism remained the most frequently reported form of discrimination across the sample. Given that almost half of the diverse early-career professionals in our sample reported experiencing racial discrimination, our research highlights the importance of advocacy for an enhanced diversity and inclusion focus within the project management profession.

Our study highlights that the industry sector affects the likelihood of an early-career project professional from an underrepresented racial/ethnic group experiencing workplace racial discrimination. Early-career project professionals in business experienced more racial discrimination than those working in construction.

The host country context also affected the prevalence of racism experienced by ethnically/racially diverse early-career project professionals regardless of their gender; early-career project professionals in the UK reported experiencing more racial discrimination than those in Australia. This finding lends weight to the claim that diversity researchers should consider country context (Triana et al., 2019) as an important variable when conducting their research.

Intersectionality of multiple underrepresented identities impacts women more

Some of the women in our study attributed negative and discriminatory experiences to a combination of gender bias and racial discrimination, which supports Ayoko and Fujimoto's (2023) contention of the relevance of intersectionality (i.e. having two or more underrepresented identities). Our participants' identities as women from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds resulted in more discrimination than would be experienced by ethnically/racially diverse men or by non-racially/non-ethnically diverse women. This highlights the importance of paying particular attention to intersectionality when considering the experiences of diverse individuals working on projects.

6.1.3 Comparative diversity management practices

As part of our exploration of the early-career experiences of racially diverse project professionals working in the business and construction sectors in the UK and Australia, we asked participants to tell us about the diversity management policies and practices in their organisations.

DEI policies not necessarily indicative of successful implementation

A little over three-quarters (77.5%) of our full sample of diverse early-career project professionals worked in companies that had **gender balance** in place and 72.5% reported that their company had an **inclusion policy**. However, as reported in Section 5.3, 65% of participants experienced some form of discrimination at work, confirming Baker and Clegg's (2023) assertion that having DEI policies and practices in place does not mean they are either enacted or effective. Our results suggest a need for greater focus on the implementation and monitoring of DEI policies and initiatives.

HRM departments must more actively champion DEI

Our study revealed a lack of effective grievance methods and a deficit of trust in HRM units/departments to address discriminatory incidents. This was particularly felt by women of colour. Only a very small proportion (7.5%, N=3) of our sample of early-career project professionals reported discriminatory occurrences to their companies' HRM departments. This suggests a reluctance to officially report incidents. These three interviewees were all women, which may suggest that women may be slightly more accustomed to requesting organisational assistance in dealing with discriminatory behaviours.

6.2 Implications for project management practice

Our research reveals insights into the under-researched experiences of early-career project professionals from traditionally underrepresented groups. Moreover, our cross-sector, cross-country findings provide an opportunity for organisations to implement practices that are working well in other countries and sectors. Based on our research results, in Section 6.3, we present a set of evidence-based recommendations to project-based organisations and professional associations, as guidance on how to better support their diverse early-career project professionals. The implementation of our recommendations presented in Section 6.3 may have positive implications for project management practice by way of sustainably supporting a diverse early-career project workforce.

6.3 Recommendations for supporting diverse early-career project professionals

The third research question considered how project-based organisations can better support diverse early-career project professionals. The following set of recommendations are derived from our interview analysis.

6.3.1 Pre-recruitment: Employers need to collaborate with universities

Connect with diverse students at universities

Participants suggested that universities need to help connect diverse early-career professionals with supportive companies. Eary-career project professionals recommended that universities need to be more heavily involved in identifying companies that welcome diverse employees. Further, university job advertisement sites can make a practice of indicating when a role is diversity friendly. Companies can also cooperate with university careers officers to encourage diverse students to make connections with them at career fairs and networking events.

Highlight diversity and inclusion in employer brand

Diversity-supporting companies can ensure that their employer brand clearly articulates their DEI values and practices. Project-based employers can also ensure that their company employment web page contains images of diverse employees and text relating to their DEI values.

6.3.2 Post-recruitment: Organisational support required

Listen to early-career professionals' voices

Fundamentally, early-career project professionals recommended that organisations can help their young diverse professionals feel more valued and included through listening to and acknowledging their employees' voices by holding regular catch-ups. Early-career professionals know best what their needs are.

Effective onboarding

Participants recommended that organisations should provide a direct focus on supporting minority groups by fostering a welcoming culture through providing more support throughout their onboarding process.

Management support

Participants appreciated receiving support from management, including from their direct line managers. Effective support during the very early stages of their employment fostered a smooth transition, as well as providing opportunities for ongoing development. Diverse project professionals particularly valued the support of line managers who shared similar diversity traits (i.e. same gender and/or same race), suggesting the need to promote more diverse project professionals into managerial and leadership roles in project-based organisations.

Support and mentoring from colleagues

Peer support was also identified as an important source of support for asking questions and seeking guidance. Developing buddy systems and the provision of mentoring from both non-diverse and other racially diverse men and women is likely to be very effective.

Training and early-career development

Participants suggested there is still a lot more that organisations can do in terms of offering **training to support early-career development.** Interestingly, the participants who made this recommendation were all women, which suggests that they may perceive that they receive less extensive career development support than their male counterparts. Training was considered important for fostering confidence, learning and job satisfaction in early-career professionals. Project professionals in the business sector reported receiving more training than those in the construction sector, suggesting the need for construction companies to pay more attention to developing formal training and development opportunities. Project professionals in Australia reported receiving more support through training than those working in the UK. Therefore, British project-based organisations need to consider developing training programmes for their early-career project professionals.

Communities of practice and diversity networks

Overall, 62.5% (N=25) of participants reported that their companies had **diverse communities of practice** where individuals from different backgrounds came together for mutual support. This practice suggests that these companies are recognising the importance of building diverse workforces. In both the UK and Australia, the construction industry was more likely to have this initiative than the business sector. This practice may explain why participants from the construction sector said they experienced less racism than those in business.

6.3.3 Professional bodies can promote DEI

Champion DEI in the project management profession

Funding research like this study represents a critical step in signalling the importance for organisations to cater to the needs of their diverse workforce. A further step is to champion the economic, social and environmental value of diverse project teams and to encourage greater diversity and inclusion across the project management profession.

Educate project-based organisations on effective diversity and inclusion policies and practices

Our study revealed inconsistencies in DEI policies and practices across project-based organisations in the business and construction sectors in the UK and Australia. Some employers may not have the resources, nor the HRM expertise, to meet the needs of traditionally underrepresented professionals. By providing clear guidelines that employers can follow and implement, professional associations can take an active leadership role in helping foster a more inclusive environment for diverse early-career project professionals.

7 Conclusions

7.1 Summary of research

Our cross-country, cross-sector qualitative research compared the experiences of early-career racially diverse project professionals working in business and construction in the UK and Australia. By exploring both the negative and positive experiences of these diverse early-career project professionals in their entry and early-career advancement within the profession, our study has identified factors that facilitate a more positive experience. The study's findings have guided the formulation of research-based recommendations to professional associations and project-based organisations on how to champion diversity and inclusion in projects, particularly young, racially and gender-diverse talent, and ways to support their professional growth and development within the project management profession.

7.2 Contributions and key takeaways

To date, the main focus of diversity research in the management field has been the impact of gender diversity on organisational performance in work teams, top management teams and boards (van Bommel et al., 2023). Very little attention has been given to the lived experience of other categories of diversity, such as race and ethnicity and intersectional identities (Ayoko and Fujimato, 2023), especially in the project management context. Furthermore, since qualitative studies of diversity management practices are rare (Yadav and Lenka, 2023), this present study adds to the literature by providing rich narrative accounts from early-career diverse project professionals themselves.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first qualitative cross-national, cross-project-sector study of the lived experiences of early-career project professionals with underrepresented racially diverse identities and of the diversity management practices utilised by their project-based organisations. By exploring the under-researched perspectives of early-career minority groups, this research contributes to an area where few studies have been conducted (Borg and Scott-Young, 2021). In doing so, this research advances the project management literature by comparing the workplace experiences of diverse early-career project professionals in two different countries, the UK and Australia.

Following the advice of Cooke et al. (2022), our practical diversity management recommendations are drawn from the voiced suggestions of the study's diverse participants themselves, giving them greater relevance and value. It is anticipated that these recommended practices will positively contribute to greater job satisfaction, better career development and the retention of diverse early-career project professionals. Moreover, we assert that the recommended practices will increase social justice for people from underrepresented identities and are likely to contribute to improving the triple bottom line of project-based organisations in terms of economic, social and environmental sustainability through developing and nurturing a more diverse project management workforce.

7.2.2 Contribution to project management knowledge

Our research is innovative in its focus on fostering inclusive and socially sustainable project management careers for underrepresented groups who are known to improve financial, social and environmental sustainability in projects (Hunt et al., 2015; Nadeem et al., 2020). The findings of this study compare the degree of diversity and inclusion in two important project sectors, business and construction, in two different Anglo-based countries, the UK and Australia, where the majority of the population is white. This research has identified that early-career project

professionals from diverse backgrounds (gender and race/ethnicity) experience both positive and negative situations in their project workplace. The findings of our study identify a series of recommendations on how the project workplace can be improved for minority groups and in turn will produce greater job satisfaction and retention.

This study's findings are particularly relevant to professional bodies for guiding the delivery of positive and effective change in the project management profession at large. Moreover, this research is aligned with the United Nations' Sustainability Development Goals 5, 8 and 10, which focus on creating gender equality, removing economic inequalities and fostering more inclusive and just societies. Through a better understanding of the lived experiences of early-career project professionals from diverse backgrounds, professional bodies and project-based organisations are uniquely positioned to become champions of change for the inclusion and social sustainability of underrepresented minority groups within the project management profession, and to advance governmental goals to deliver meaningful change for societal benefit.

7.3 Study limitations and future research

As with all studies, the current research has several limitations that could be addressed in future research. The first limitation is the study's sample size of 40 early-career project professionals. While the value of this qualitative study is its in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of women and men working in business and construction projects in the UK and Australia, greater numbers in each project sector would enhance the generalisability of the study. Larger samples of these diverse groupings would enable a more robust comparison of different identities and their experiences in their different host countries. Future researchers may wish to employ quantitative methods (e.g. surveys) to validate our findings with larger samples.

The second limitation of this study is that there was an almost 2:1 ratio of women (26) to men (14). While a more equal split of genders would be desirable, the numerical strength of the sample of women (N=26) has enabled greater reliability when exploring the intersectionality of more than one underrepresented identity (e.g. race and gender), thereby contributing to the important area of identity intersectionality research (Ayoko and Fujimoto, 2023). Future research should aim for more equal gender representation by offering more incentives to encourage greater participation from men.

A third limitation is that this study involved a cross-cultural comparison of two similar countries. Although the UK has been a leader in diversity research (van Bommel et al., 2023), Australia is more atypical (Ayoko and Fujimoto, 2023), hence this country comparison has extended project management knowledge. Despite the similarity of country cultures, different patterns in some of the results around gender bias, racism and industry sector were noted. Confirming Triana et al.'s (2019) assertion, our findings suggest that further comparative studies in a greater variety of countries and cultures, including developing countries, would advance knowledge on inclusion experiences and DEI practices adopted in projects in different locations.

Appendix: Semi-structured interview protocol

Demographic characteristics

Participants were asked to provide the following information on their signed consent form:

- Gender
- Nationality
- Ethnicity
- Visa/Citizenship status
- Age
- Role
- Industry
- Company size
- Approximate percentage of project professionals in your company who are women/from minoritised racial groups
- Employment history
- Employment history in other country/ies
- Education history/degree and country of education
- Years in country
- Years in project role.

Interview questions

Entry into the project management profession

1. What was your experience in finding your first project management role? *(PROBES: How long did it take you? How many companies did you approach? How many interviews did you do? How many rejections and why? How were you treated in the recruitment process and how did you feel?)*

Inclusion

1. Do you consider that your identity (gender, ethnicity, race) was a barrier to getting a job in project management? *(PROBE: Give an example if it did)*
2. Tell us a bit about the diversity composition within your company – *gender, race, ethnicity etc.*
3. What diversity and inclusion policies does your company have? *Are they used/enacted? Are there consequences if people breach the policies?*
4. Do you feel that your organisation is accepting of diverse groups in the workplace? *Why?*
5. How much do you feel accepted and valued in your company and as part of your project group/team? *Why?*

6. Have you experienced discrimination at work (or have you seen others experiencing this)? *(PROBES: What type? How did you handle it? How did bystanders/colleagues/HR department respond?)*
7. Have you ever been bullied or treated badly at work? Do you think this was related to your gender/race?

Support

1. What support is available to early-career minorities like yourself in your company? *(PROBES: Do you think the level of support you have received has been the same as that given to the main race/gender (More/Less/Same)? How is it different?)*
2. What could your organisation have done better to help you transition into your early-career project management role as a underrepresented professional? *(PROBE: What did/didn't they do?)*
3. Do you have a mentor/sponsor? *(PROBES: Who is this?/Are they in your organisation?)*

Retention

1. Do you intend on staying within the project management profession? *Why? Why not?*
2. Do you intend on staying with your company? *Why? Why not?*

Concluding question: *Is there anything else you would like to add about your early-career experience?*

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