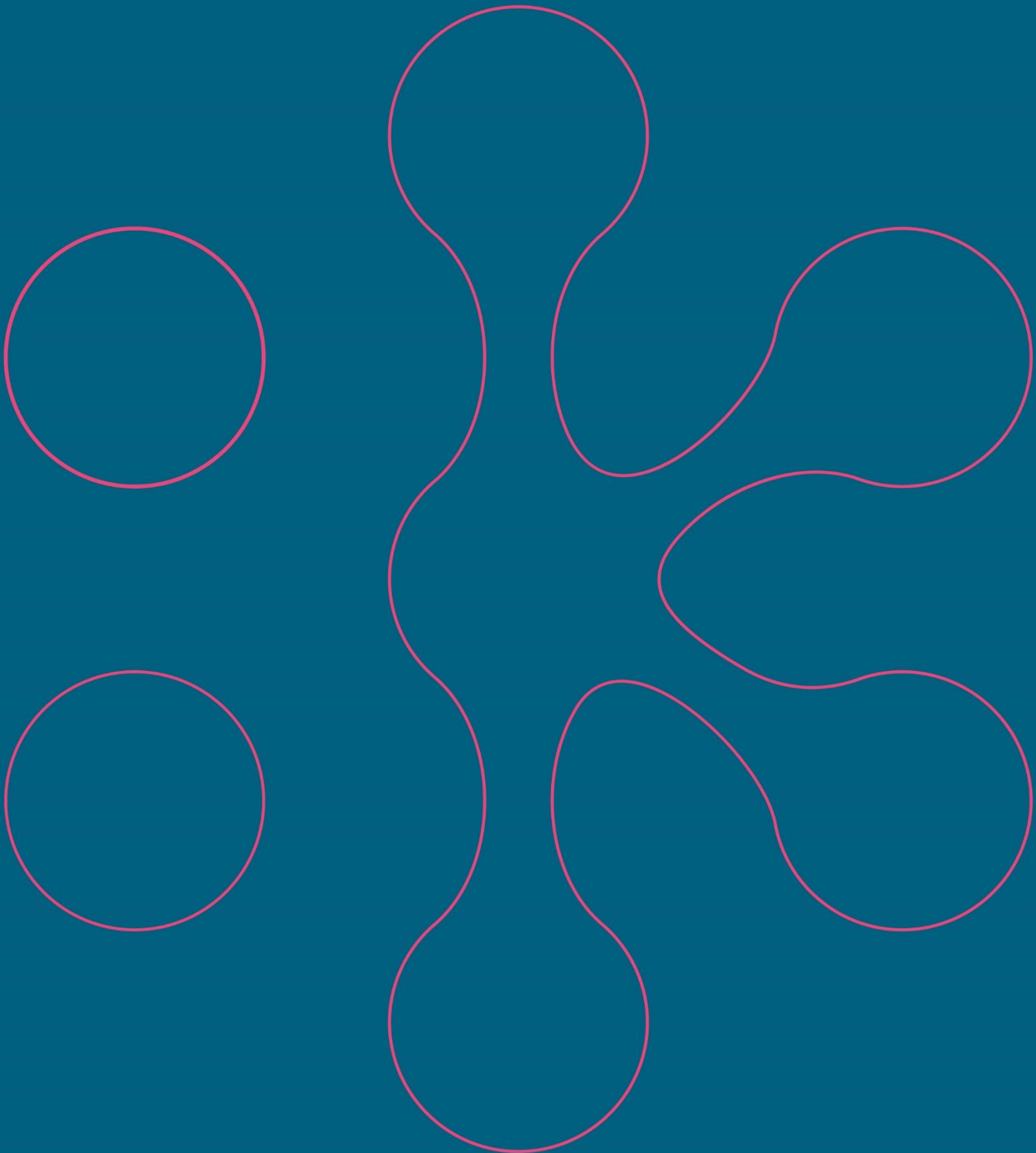




Qualitative
Evaluation of the
Equator project

A Kada
Research
Report

for Sheffield Hallam
University
September 2024



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1 Introduction and project context

Kada research were commissioned by Sheffield Hallam University in March 2024 to evaluate the impact of the Equator project. The Equator project aims to increase the participation and retention of UK-domiciled Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in Geography, Earth, and Environmental Sciences (GEES) research. The report provides qualitative insights into the long-term impact of the Equator project.

1.1 Project background and summary

The Equator project delivered co-designed (with students and GEES professionals), evidence-based, ring-fenced, fully remunerated interventions over two waves – the first led by Sheffield Hallam University (2022) and second ‘Equator 2.0’ led by the University of Birmingham (2023-24). Both iterations of Equator developed two targeted interventions – a research school and a mentoring network.

The five-day in-person research schools (April 2022 and July 2023) provided networking sessions, talks by mentors/role models, workshops (demystify PhD/career opportunities), training sessions (academic skills), and a conference day. The 30 attendees at each school were PhD students or masters/undergraduate students, with some postdoctoral students and recent graduates (with two streams of activities tailored to different groups). The research schools had four objectives (RO):

- facilitate networking and create a broader network of community for the participants (RO1)
- improve awareness and perceptions of the broad spectrum of GEES research careers (RO2)
- increase sense of belonging in the GEES academic environment (RO3)
- improve confidence in moving forward into GEES research (RO4).

The first mentoring network ran for four months (Jan – May 2022) and had six mentoring sessions for each beneficiary. Mentees were matched with one academic and one non-academic mentor by the Equator project team. There were 10 mentees and 20 mentors. The mentoring network had four objectives (MO):

- facilitate networking (MO1)
- improve sense of belonging and inclusion for Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in GEES (MO2)
- build a body of experienced mentors to support future students within GEES (MO3)
- improve confidence in moving forward into GEES research (MO4).

At the time of writing (2024), the second mentoring network is in progress. For more information about the Equator project, please contact Natasha Dowey (N.Dowey@shu.ac.uk) or visit <https://equatorresearchgroup.wordpress.com/>.

1.2 Study scope and objectives

The study qualitatively evaluates both waves of the research school and the first mentoring network. The study has the following objectives:

- To provide longitudinal insights into Equator project participants' progression, sense of belonging (within GEES) and feelings towards a GEES research career.
- To explore the impacts of the Equator project on participants and their subsequent education or employment opportunities.

This study builds upon quantitative research carried out by the Equator project team which used several online surveys to evaluate the different streams of the project before, during and immediately following each intervention (Dowey et al. 2024¹).

1.3 Study approach

The evaluation had three phases which are detailed below.

Phase one: Focus group design and recruitment

A focus group provides an opportunity to feedback and discuss shared experiences and is therefore a useful method to evaluate the Equator project. The focus group topic guide was co-designed with the client team and the format of the session was open and engaging. A participant information sheet and consent form were developed, aligned with Sheffield Hallam University's ethics approach. In addition to the focus group, a short online survey was created to provide an opportunity for those unable to attend a session to provide feedback.

The client team provided information of previous Equator project attendees and warm introductions to improve recruitment. Four focus group sessions were held with 13 participants and there were nine survey respondents (there is some overlap between these two cohorts).

Phase two: Focus group delivery

The focus groups were held across May and June 2024 with different times and dates to increase participation in the evaluation. The sessions covered four questions with the discussion starting with what had motivated people to participate in the Equator project, which provided a way to open up the discussion. Next, people discussed the impact of the Equator project, talking about both the practical and personal ways the experience had made a difference to their life. The conversation then moved on to explore how people felt about GEES research careers and whether this had changed through attending the Equator project. The focus group was drawn to a close with asking people for any final reflections or feedback about the Equator project.

Focus group attendees were given a £25 voucher as a 'thank you' for their time. All focus groups took place online and were no more than one hour long. All sessions were recorded, with the participants consent, and transcribed.

¹Dowey, N. et al. 2024. The Equator Project Research School and Mentoring Network: Evaluated Interventions to Improve Equity in Geoscience Research. Earth Science Systems and Society. Available here: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/esss.2024.10123>

Phase three: Thematic analysis and reporting

All transcripts from the focus groups and qualitative data from the survey were analysed thematically, which then informed the narrative structure of the report. Anonymised transcripts are available in Sheffield Hallam's open access repository². The full draft of the report was completed by August 2024. A visual minute was produced alongside the written report.

1.4 Report structure

Chapter two investigates the impacts of participating in the Equator project including educational and career progression, and wider skills and employability. It also explores the impact on networks and communities, personal impacts, and the importance of the fully funded nature of the project.

Chapter three explores how participating in the Equator project changed the perceptions and feelings towards a GEES research career. It first details people's feelings prior to Equator and then how these were changed, the sense of belonging through the Equator project, and the creation of safe spaces. It then considers the lasting EDI legacy of the Equator project.

Chapter four provides wider feedback on the Equator project and the lessons from the evaluation.

² See here: [SHURA - Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive](#)

2 Impacts of participating in Equator

Participation in the Equator project directly led to successful applications to postgraduate study and research. The Equator project has created networks which people still utilise for support and advice. People also described how the Equator project had increased their confidence and equipped them with skills to navigate academia. Whilst the impacts are discussed separately, they can be interlinked, and the power of the impact strengthened.

2.1 Education and career progression

Engagement with the Equator project positively impacted several focus group attendees' education and career progression. This section details the tangible impacts on education and careers and is linked to section 3.1 which explores the perceptions towards GEES careers. The Equator project inspired one person to do a master's degree after Equator showcased the opportunities at post-graduate level.

"...I think it really did help inspire and inform my decision to stay on to do a master's degree so thank you!" (RS 2022 Attendee)

It enabled another person to enrol in a master's programme as it helped them to understand the support, funding and opportunities as they explain:

"Without this information, I would not have had the ability to enrol on a master's program as I'm disadvantaged as a Romani person due to my culture and lifestyle which limits my ability to compete with settled people on a fair and equal standing".

For three others it helped them to gain funded PhD places. Two of these individuals were previously planning on an industry career. Sessions on applying for PhD study during the Equator research school equipped people with the skills and understanding of how to apply as one person explained *"we had sessions dedicated to each step of the process, it really helped"*.

For one individual at the focus group, Equator provided the skills, confidence, and connections to successfully apply for a PhD which was described as 'life changing'.

Participation in the Equator research school also led one individual to get a job in the GEES field and help them to secure a job for another Equator attendee. They attributed this to the networking through Equator and advice given during the research school. Additionally, one person explained how the Equator project gave them confidence to *"... pave my way in the same sector rather than just leave it and start something new"* and they had recently been selected to the UK Government funded Product Builder Programme which is an accelerator run by Barclays Bank. Thus, Equator had given them the confidence and increased knowledge for them to remain in GEES research and 'pave' their own way.

2.2 Skills and employability

Participation in the Equator project provided knowledge and skills to help individuals navigate academia and GEES research career paths. People praised the various workshops which equipped them with the tools to succeed:

"...or how to write the grant that it no longer became this dark, like black voodoo magic sort of thing. It was sort of, like, this is how you practically do it" (RS 2022 Attendee)

"It definitely gave me skills in terms of what to do during a PhD and after. So, these practical skills like how to start thinking about writing, academic writing, how to start publishing papers, how to start thinking about your viva, just things like that" (RS 2022 and 2023 Attendee)

For those who attended Equator as an undergraduate it also provided opportunities to improve their core skills such as communication and presentation in a supportive environment. It also helped with CV writing and important networking tools such as LinkedIn.

One individual explained how the Equator project 'opened their eyes' to funding opportunities and helped them to successfully gain £2,500 from two funding sources which they used for educational materials and fieldwork costs.

The model, with different strands of activities which produced a tailored experience, was praised as it ensured the experience felt relevant and rewarding to participants.

"...I think the fact that you had lots of options for different places to go and what you actually wanted to gain from the whole research school, really gave the impression that they cared about upskilling people, and actually developing people and developing their confidence..." (RS 2022 Attendee)

Alongside the content of the research school, the delivery of sessions was also praised which made sessions 'engaging' and 'interesting'.

2.3 Networks and community

The networks and sense of community was the most widely spoken of impact of participating in the Equator project. One participant described the instant welcome they experienced at the Equator research school:

"And I was really surprised by how welcoming, welcoming and caring everyone at the Equator programme was, they really wanted to, you know, bring each other up and help each other in the best way possible" (RS 2022 Attendee)

"I think there's just been a very lovely community, like everyone always, like supports each other with their achievements" (RS 2022 Attendee)

Many spoke of the genuine sense of community and support through the networks fostered by Equator with the networks still active in some cases two years later. The networks (maintained through LinkedIn and WhatsApp) are used to share opportunities, successes, and support.

"...there is a hope for us as well. And there is a place where we can connect, we can come back, and we can share our success stories as well. And, you know, kind of it is [a] reassuring platform, really good. It should continue. You know, because it has given us hope, a lot of people have taken hope from this platform" (RS 2023 Attendee)

The comment demonstrates how the impact of the network can extend beyond practicalities and provide 'hope' that it is possible to succeed. The impact of being part of the Equator network has provided some with validation in sharing their lived experiences and confidence to do this outside the network.

"I feel like it validated lots of thoughts and feelings I had, or like, insecurities that I was too self-conscious to share with other people. But now that I have this network to talk to about issues that we face, yeah, it gives me a lot of confidence to then talk to other people about it, and be a bit less scared of being shut down" (RS 2022 Attendee)

The safe space created through the Equator community is discussed further in section 3.2. Importantly, it highlights the power in bringing people together and creating a space for their voices to be heard.

2.4 Personal impacts

Whilst some personal impacts of participating in the Equator project have already been touched upon (such as feelings of hope and validation), increased confidence was the most widely reported. The confidence has enabled some to speak more openly about their experiences and say yes to more opportunities such as speaking about their research on a podcast.

"It's left us all, with stuff for wanting to do more wanting to be more open for more opportunities" (RS 2022 Attendee and MN)

The increased confidence coupled with the skills/understanding gained from the Equator project has created a sense of momentum for some attendees in terms of their wider academic and EDI activities (this is discussed in section 3.3).

One focus group participant described how *"I feel like in some way, it's kind of changed my life..."* (RS 2023 Attendee) as it led to new connections, confidence, and meeting one of their role models. It also led to the individual winning a competition to have an article published and go to Parliament to represent a GEES Society. Additionally, the individual has been successful in applying for a funded PhD.

The experience of Equator was inspiring to many in various ways from connecting with other students to hearing from their role models in the field:

"And that's, that's really inspiring, inspirational. motivator. So just seeing role models who are in academia and, and passionate about, and also listening to all the different early career researchers talks and everything that was really inspirational because everybody was so passionate about their own sub discipline" (RS 2023 Attendee)

People recognised the importance of the personal impacts participating in the Equator project had but also the wider need for more experiences like this:

"I just wanted to say that Equator was [a] really, really amazing opportunity, I think, one in the lifetime, opportunity that really helped me, personally, and I, I'm sure helped others too in other ways, but I just wish that there was more opportunities like that, because we definitely need that in geography, at least in Geography and Environmental Sciences, where we have such a high number of minority groups who need help..." (RS 2022 and 2023 Attendee)

2.5 Impact of fully funded project

The fully funded nature of the Equator project (including travel, accommodation, and a bursary of £50 per day for research school attendees, and £150 for mentoring network mentees) was praised and several commented how they would not have been able to participate without it. Thus, the funding extended the reach of the Equator project as it enabled people to participate who would usually struggle to because they are living on a low income.

"...but the fact that it was a fully funded programme, it I don't think I would have been able to commit to it otherwise, because the fact that it's so accessible for everyone, it means that anyone from any socio-economic background can attend. There's no barriers. And I think that's really important, and it's probably very difficult for them to attain. I think it really does make a difference, because I know for myself. I don't think I would have been able to do it otherwise" (RS 2022 Attendee)

The funding is particularly important as people from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups are more likely to experience poverty compared to those who are White – the latest figures from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation³ demonstrate individuals from Pakistani or Bangladeshi groups are the most likely to be in poverty. Given the precarity of academia and nuances of postgraduate funding, the Equator funding is even more important. One person explained how attending the Equator research school helped to bridge the gap financially between handing in their PhD and completing their Viva.

Alongside the practical implications of the funding, some people commented on how it made them feel:

"...made for once you to feel that you are of value that you weren't just, like begging or like, unimportant, but actually for, you know, we value your commitment and your engagement in the programme too. And I think that was really special, because usually, you might be able to get on to say, a programme, then you have to come up with expenses yourself. I think that sort of was a way to honour the attendees, but also to show that they were like genuinely wanting to make things better as well" (RS 2022 Attendee)

Hence, the impact of the funding not only extended the reach of participation in the Equator project, but it also made the experience more meaningful for those who attended as they were made to feel of 'value'.

³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation. 2024. UK Poverty 2024. [Available here.](#)

3 Perceptions of GEES research careers

The Equator project has positively changed people's perceptions of and feelings towards careers within GEES research. It has provided people with a sense of belonging through the development of networks. It also created safe spaces for people to openly discuss their lived experiences which some had previously not had access to. Notably, the Equator has galvanised people to undertake more EDI activities as they want to support the next generation.

3.1 Perceptions and feelings towards GEES research careers

To understand whether participation in the Equator project changed perceptions and feelings towards academic GEES careers, it is important first to consider how people felt prior to engaging in the project. Many people commented that prior to Equator they had few connections with other GEES students or academics who came from a Black, Asian, and minority ethnic background.

"I didn't really know any people doing PhDs, especially that looked like me or had similar issues to me, and no-one in my family has done one". (RS 2022 Attendee)

"...but coincidentally, I already been searching for stuff like this online. Because I was, I wanted to see what other people who were like me, well, who are also in geoscience, what they're getting up to". (RS 2022 Attendee)

"... but I felt like I wanted to find someone who were like me in that same situation where they had the same doubts or the same like obstacles" (RS 2022 and 2023 Attendee)

Some people were already actively seeking out opportunities like those provided through the Equator project in recognition of the lack of diversity within their academic environment. For others, they were considering leaving academia altogether:

"I didn't see anybody getting hired [in academia], and I was about to leave. I mean, the thought of joining academia at that time, it was a quite disheartening time... And it was quite helpful in a way that I now think that there is a space for me here in geoscience sector". (RS 2023 Attendee)

"...a year before doing Equator, I was like, no, I'm definitely not going to go into academia, because it doesn't appeal to me. I don't think I'm going to survive in the academic world. Whereas now I keep my eyes open to that. And it's opened up that option to me". (RS 2022 Attendee)

The challenges of academia are compounded with being in spaces which are not diverse in terms of ethnicity. The experience of participating in the Equator project (research school) showed people that an academic career within GEES was an option as there was 'a space' for them. People explained how the Equator project had shown the opportunities within GEES research careers and equipped them with the knowledge and skills to help navigate this pathway. Thus, the Equator project made opportunities

within GEES research careers more accessible to the people from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups who attended. Moreover, for some it led them down a new path which previously felt unobtainable:

"...because it is my passion, and it is my dream to become an academic. The Equator project helped me to realise that I can do it. Yes, I'm from minority group, but I can do it because I'm just as much important as any other person who's doing this" (RS 2022 and 2023 Attendee)

"Equator kind of gave me the courage to kind of just follow my interest. So even if I don't know what the job is, at the end, there probably is something that, you know, I can use my skill set for? Well, I think it gave me a bit of courage to just in a corny way, like, follow my dreams and all of that" (RS 2023 Attendee)

The comments above are from individuals from a low-income household who (prior to Equator) had no academic connections and so had limited understanding of the post-graduate research opportunities and the application process. After participating in the Equator research school, both went on to successfully apply for a fully funded PhD. One explained how:

"I know even when I go into my PhD, where I will, like, you know, probably be the only black girl in the department or one of few so like that gives me resilience, because I know that we exist, even if they're not here, we exist somewhere. And it's possible to meet them. Just need to find them. So that's what is great it has given me as well as the confidence that you know, I'm not I'm not the only one" (RS 2023 Attendee)

The lasting impact of the Equator project which has provided 'resilience' and 'confidence' is helping people navigate academia and creating a more positive feeling towards GEES research careers. Whilst there are still clear challenges for the inclusion of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups within GEES research, the Equator project has shown there is a community that exists, and that people are not alone.

One session was referenced by several people as impactful in changing their perception of GEES research careers which was where GEES academics openly spoke about their own challenges during their career and how these were overcome.

"What I really enjoyed was actually the careers day, where they brought in scientists of colour, not just scientists, but actually just academics and researchers of colour who discussed like the obstacles that they had faced in their careers that might be more relatable to people of colour or marginalised groups for example, that was actually really inspiring" (RS 2023 Attendee)

"...different academics and different participants speaking about their experience and where they are in their career. And it was, it opened my eyes that I can actually, you know, become a lecturer, and even, even go further than that, become a professor...it definitely changed my perception of academia that's not as bad, as cutthroat as we think it is sometimes..." (RS 2022 and 2023 Attendee)

The impact of seeing and listening to people (role-models) with similar lived experiences who have successfully built GEES research careers has helped to inspire and motivate Equator participants to explore GEES research opportunities.

3.2 Belonging and safe spaces

Linked to feelings towards GEES research careers is a sense of belonging which some participants were searching for.

"We [PhD students] automatically have like an imposter syndrome that we don't feel like we belong, or what are we doing there. And I think it's also emphasised even more so because we look around and we don't see anyone that looks like us or has gone through similar stuff. And it wasn't, I don't think I realised how much I had that sort of way of thinking until I went to the Equator school. And I would speak, and people would listen. And I'm like, oh, people actually care what I have to say, or are genuinely interested in what I have to say, and I have a voice." (RS 2022 Attendee and MN)

The realisation of finding a community and the sense of belonging which you did not know you were missing can be powerful as the participant describes. The challenges and peculiarities of doing a PhD are made more complicated through experiences of imposter syndrome which is reinforced for people from a Black, Asian, and minority ethnic group as they do not 'see anyone that looks like us'. This supports previous research by the University of Huddersfield⁴ through its Geoscience Access, Inclusion and Attainment (GAIA) project.

The power of belonging and feeling heard is a long-lasting impact which stays with people. The comments highlight how often people do not feel heard in academic spaces and the damage feeling like an imposter can have on people's self-confidence. The community and sense of belonging has been sustained after participation in the original Equator project and continues to have momentum:

"I think it's inspired and been a good catalyst for all of us and encouraged us to keep in touch with each other as well. Like, I think a big problem in academia that probably puts, you know, lots of people off is it feels like an old boys' network. And it's nice to have our own network where we do things in our different way. But where we can still support each other, and lift each other up and find opportunities for each other" (RS 2022 Attendee)

The creation of a network which provides a sense of belonging within academia has empowered and motivated individuals to continue a GEES research career. This is a supportive space where people can 'lift each other up' unlike elsewhere in academia which can feel like 'an old boys' network'. Many people commented on the supportive network post Equator and the importance of belonging to this community. Seeing and hearing the experiences of current GEES academics also added to the feeling of belonging as people saw there were opportunities for them and that the challenges they faced could be overcome. The feeling of belonging through the Equator project created a space where people could connect, broaden their GEES horizons, and 'empower' others with similar experiences and backgrounds.

⁴ University of Huddersfield. 2022. Making geoscience degrees a place of belonging for all. Available here: [Making-Geoscience-Degrees-a-Place-of-Belonging-for-All.pdf \(geoaccess.org.uk\)](https://geoaccess.org.uk/Making-Geoscience-Degrees-a-Place-of-Belonging-for-All.pdf)

The community also provided a safe space for people to speak openly about their lived experiences and challenges they had encountered:

"I would say the most significant impacts were definitely networking, so meeting people of colour in the environmental space, as well as discussing like shared lived experiences, I found that quite what would the word be? It's just a nice feeling, you know, to connect with people from similar backgrounds and maybe discuss topics and issues that are more difficult to discuss in a less kind of safe space" (RS 2023 Attendee)

The safe space created by the Equator project highlights that for some people there are few places where they can openly discuss their experiences with people from similar backgrounds. This can provide a sense of validation as others recognise their lived experiences and feelings and a space without judgement or feeling different. One person reflected on how the research school created an open and safe environment and the positive impact this had:

"The research school really focused on setting us up with skills and knowledge about, for example, how to write our CVs, how to submit to a journal and that process, and made it so open that we could ask all our questions that we had. And I'm a person who I always felt embarrassed to ask questions, because I didn't want to seem stupid. But in this, in that environment, I asked so many questions, because I felt so safe to be able to, it doesn't matter if I say something stupid, it's a safe environment." (RS 2022 Attendee and MN)

Not wanting to appear stupid is intensified by the imposter syndrome many people experience within academia, as mentioned earlier this is deepened by being in spaces with people who do not look like you. The learning experience is far more impactful if people feel they are in a safe environment where they can ask questions - which the Equator project successfully created.

3.3 Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion legacy within GEES

Participation in the Equator project has led to some individuals starting or deepening their own EDI activities. Several people explained how EDI activities helped them to give back to the next generation in the same way the Equator project had done for them. The Equator project has helped drive this by increasing confidence, connections and demonstrating the impact of being part of a diverse GEES community.

"But it's also inspired me to do a bunch of other things to try and give back to the next generation of people coming through. I'm one of the mentors this time, for the Equator research school, which is really good...And I've been doing a bunch of other things, but I don't think any of that would have been possible without coming to Equator, not only because it just gave me the confidence, and helped me to understand how important that was". (RS 2022 Attendee)

The EDI legacy from the Equator project gains momentum through each person who does one thing to support another person from a Black, Asian, and minority ethnic group. One participant explained that along with the confidence boost from Equator, they had the "...buzz to try and do things myself.." which had led them to more EDI work. Examples of EDI activities included participating or leading EDI networks within specific GEES societies, setting up seminars to provide a space for Black, Asian, and minority ethnic voices and experiences, outreach work, and providing opportunities and support to help the next generation. One individual was seeking to support the Equator project through their

employer providing sponsorship as they would like "...for it [the Equator project] to be just more expanding and expanding and expanding, so that we can get our voice out there. And we can make impacts in the next generation". Thus, through additional funding the Equator project could expand its reach and thereby extend its impact. The drive to support this from participants highlights the meaningful experiences it has given and the drive to support the next generation. People detailed how participating in the Equator project was different to other programmes they had been involved with as it had a 'lasting legacy' through the impacts detailed in the previous chapter coupled with the momentum and motivation to increase diversity within GEES spaces.

"I think something that's really stood out to me about Equator is that it does actually feel like it's making a lasting legacy, which I haven't really had with other workshops that I've done in the past" (RS 2022 Attendee)

"...so, the programme definitely helped kind of galvanise that, that motivation to continue with this work and to meet and network with other people who are really passionate about EDI and increasing diversity within the environmental sector..." (RS 2023 Attendee)

Interestingly, the momentum around EDI has been developed through both seeing GEES role-models and hearing about their experiences, which was inspiring, but also through the bringing together of students which created a community with a commitment to EDI.

4 Wider feedback and lessons

The report concludes with wider feedback on the Equator project and lessons learned. Notably, the fully funded nature of the project increased the reach and impact of participation in Equator. The communities created through the Equator project are still valued and used by participants.

4.1 Wider feedback for the Equator project

The level of funding provided directly to participants (as discussed in section 2.5) was a strength of Equator which increased the reach of the project.

"So, I think having these opportunities that are, you know, paid and allows people who can't really afford to still have these opportunities and chances. So, for me, I think, I think having more of those to allow the groups that can't usually afford to have a chance in, in succeeding in academia or in even in Geography and Environmental Sciences" (RS 2022 and 2023 Attendee)

As the participant describes, the funding enables people to take 'these opportunities and chances' which they can be excluded from due to the cost, so they can increase their chance of succeeding within GEES research careers. One person also explained how the Equator project had been inclusive of the multiple barriers which can challenge participation such as caring responsibilities, being older or not coming from an academic background. A space was created where issues could be openly discussed and where "...they were not irrelevant problems; they are completely relevant". The thought and consideration in the design of the Equator project and the subsequent positive experience for participants (and its impacts) highlight the importance of seeing intersectionality.

The attitude of Equator organisers and attendees demonstrated a genuine desire to improve experiences for Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups within GEES research:

"Yes, there are issues in geosciences for ethnic minorities. But we are actually genuinely here to help. We're not here to boost our egos. We're not here to accumulate power or influence over our peers. We actually want to make this genuinely better for ethnic minorities" (RS 2022 Attendee)

The underlying message is that other EDI initiatives have not always been done for the right reasons. One person explained in their experience the EDI space could be 'nasty' and that "It's almost like you or me, or we're fighting who can become the most dis-privileged". The Equator project was experienced as the opposite with people wanting to lift each other up and share opportunities.

People were keen for the Equator project to continue and those who attended the focus groups were eager to stay involved. Those who attended the first research school (2022) welcomed the opportunity they had to attend the second research school (2023) as it felt an 'effort' was made to stay in touch. This is also reflected in the communications of the Equator team to previous participants of the project via the LinkedIn group which was seen positively.

The balance of academic and social activities was praised, and people commented on their enjoyment of going for dinners and walks in the Peak District with other Equator participants. One individual who attended both research schools commented that the second felt more 'sociable' and 'more homely'. It was also felt the second research school had improved on the first with more tailored sessions for students.

Whilst participants of the Equator project are keeping in touch via social media, several commented they would like an event in the future for Equator alumni:

"I enjoyed attending the Equator project, it was inspirational, empowering, and insightful. If the funding was available, I think it would be good to have a follow-up event as a type of reunion/networking even if it was incorporated into another Equator project for one day/afternoon"

"The Equator project was one of the best experiences I have had as a student. I learnt a lot from so many amazing people. It would be great to have a yearly networking event for all past attendees where they can meet people in GEES-related roles, as well as reflect with fellow attendees on their experiences since the project"

A reunion would provide an opportunity for people to re-connect, share experiences, and consolidate the legacy of the Equator project.

4.2 Lessons from the Equator project

The feedback from previous participants of the Equator project demonstrates the clear impact it has already had. It has helped educational and career progression within GEES and equipped people with new skills and understanding to help navigate academia. Perhaps more importantly, it has created and shown the power of a community and sense of belonging with a legacy beyond the project. It has also changed people's feelings towards a GEES research career and through the other impacts given people the tools to navigate it. Thus, the evidence from the focus group and survey suggests that the Equator project has met its original aims.

Based on the feedback provided by focus group participants, the key lessons from the Equator project which can inform future support include:

- **Financial support can increase both reach and impact:** Providing funding to attendees opened up participation to a wider range of people from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic backgrounds and made the experience for those participating more meaningful as people felt that their involvement was valued.
- **The creation of peer networks and connections create communities of support and celebration:** The opportunities through the Equator project to connect with people from similar Black, Asian, and minority ethnic backgrounds who shared comparable lived experiences were important and provided validation. It provides a safe space to speak share challenges and feelings, and to support each other.
- **Visibility of and access to role models inspires and motivates:** Seeing and hearing from role models demonstrated to participants of the Equator project that whilst a GEES research career is challenging, it is possible and that there are people who look like them in academia.

Motivation and inspiration also came from seeing other students from similar backgrounds successfully navigate the early stages of a research career in GEES.

- **The Equator project's legacy extends beyond the original participants through a grass-roots EDI drive:** People want to help the next generation within the GEES and several have increased their involvement in EDI activities and others have actively shared opportunities to their peers. There is also an appetite from Equator alumni to continue engagement with the project highlighting the positive impact it has had. Supporting the Equator alumni community will help to consolidate the legacy of the project and continue to provide a safe space for conversation and inspiration.

Whilst the Equator project focused on increasing participation of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups within GEES research careers, there is learning which can be shared to other projects seeking to achieve similar objectives within other fields.



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