



The Young  
Foundation

# Beyond buzzwords

**Embedding a systemic approach to EDI  
across the UK's professions**

Full report

Alice Bell, March 2024

This research was conducted by The Young Foundation on behalf of a collaborative of 12 professional membership and regulatory bodies.



The Young Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation driving community research and social innovation. We bring communities, organisations, and policymakers together, shaping a fairer future through collective action to improve people's lives.

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# Foreword

Inclusion in the workplace is not a passing trend; it is a fundamental necessity for the growth, progress, and success of organisations in today's interconnected and diverse world. A truly diverse and inclusive workplace values and empowers individuals from all backgrounds, fostering collaboration and driving success.

Research consistently demonstrates that prioritising inclusion leads to better outcomes. For example, analysis from management consultancy McKinsey & Company (2015; 2018; 2020), consistently highlights how companies with diverse workforces are more likely to outperform their industry peers. Inclusive environments enhance employee engagement, productivity, and innovation, unleashing the full potential of individuals.

However, significant challenges persist. Discrimination and unconscious biases hinder progress toward inclusion. A staggering 72% of the professionals surveyed for this report highlighted experiencing discriminatory behaviour in the workplace since 2019. This not only harms individuals but also stifles diversity of thought, and hinders organisational performance.

This report highlights the critical role that Chartered, professional and regulatory bodies play in addressing barriers to inclusion in the workplace. As authoritative organisations representing more than 750,000 people working in a wide range of professions in the UK, we have a responsibility to lead by example and drive positive change. Professional bodies possess the influence, expertise, and networks to advocate for inclusive practices, establish guidelines, and provide support to their members.

We are committed to helping our members and their employers create welcoming and equitable workplaces. Through training and education, we can ensure members possess the necessary skills to cultivate more inclusive cultures – implementing strategies to address biases, fair hiring practices, and mentorship programs that boost progression and close gaps.

Moreover, as professional bodies we have a unique opportunity to leverage our collective voice and influence to drive systemic change in the wider business community. That demands collaboration with other organisations, policymakers, and stakeholders, and advocating for policies and regulations that foster inclusion in the workplace. We are also committed – including through this research – to promoting research and data collection to better understand the challenges and opportunities associated with inclusion, thus informing evidence-based solutions.

In conclusion, inclusion in the workplace is crucial, and professional bodies are key agents of change. The data presented in this report highlights the benefits of inclusion and the urgency of overcoming barriers. Alongside commitments from the professional bodies, and calls to action for policymakers, we hope this report inspires and empowers professionals across the breadth of industries we represent – and beyond – to take bold actions towards creating workplaces that are truly inclusive, enabling individuals to thrive and organisations to excel in the increasingly diverse and dynamic world we live in.

## Co-signed by:

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# Executive summary

Drawing on research with more than 7,000 members and learners of 12 professional membership and regulatory bodies across the UK, this report provides a fresh look at how recent efforts to promote equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) have been experienced, across and between several professions. It serves as a call to professionals, and their representative bodies, to reflect on their outlook, conduct and collective actions.

Building on the large body of existing evidence, this research reinforces the importance of EDI and its positive benefits for individuals, organisations, professions and the economy. However, the findings show that the progress of EDI efforts has stalled. In order to move forwards, it suggests a new approach is necessary. While highlighting the pivotal role professional bodies can play in catalysing change, the report also addresses the commitments required from individual professionals, employers, and policymakers to support systemic action.

## Are we stuck?

EDI is on the agenda, but the uncomfortable reality remains that negative experiences are widespread across the professions.

- Almost three-quarters of professionals surveyed report experiencing barriers to progression in their career (73%) or discriminatory behaviour in the workplace (72%)
- Negative experiences are more common among those with more 'marginalised characteristics'
- The testimonies of professionals show how experiences of marginalisation are lived in variable and complex ways on an everyday basis.

Ultimately, scepticism is growing among professionals about the capacity of EDI efforts to enact change, with a widespread perception that there is lots of talk but little meaningful action.

Disillusionment with the practice of EDI could mean that progress to date is at risk of backsliding: around one-fifth (22%) of professionals surveyed believe EDI receives too much focus compared to other issues within their profession.



## We need to be brave

The stakes are high: over half (53%) of professionals surveyed say they have considered leaving their profession and/or organisation because of issues related to EDI. Yet, it will be a challenge to enact the meaningful changes professionals want to see through EDI initiatives.

There is no 'one size fits all' solution and 'what works' will be dependent on the ways in which numerous factors are negotiated – for example:

- How best to demonstrate your commitment to change in the short-term, while enacting change that aims to have longer-term impacts?
- How best to involve those with lived experience of marginalisation in initiatives, without burdening them with the responsibility to drive change?
- How best to build coalitions and alliances across a range of groups, while appropriately recognising their differences?

Striking the right balance requires bravery, and a new approach that reframes how EDI is understood:

- Equality, diversity and inclusion must be guiding principles for all decision-making – not just for specific initiatives.
- Interventions must focus on changing the systems that underpin marginalisation.

This reframing will benefit individuals, their organisations, professions and the economy.

## Fostering a 'race to the top'

As stalling progress risks EDI efforts becoming a disingenuous 'race to the bottom', we suggest professional membership and regulatory bodies hold a key lever for positive action and lasting change. They have the capacity to 'raise the bar' for what it means to be a professional, in relation to the values of equality, diversity and inclusion. We suggest actions and commitments for professional membership and regulatory bodies to ensure that they:

1. **Put EDI at the heart of what it means to be a professional**
2. **Set higher standards for professionals**
3. **Actively involve professionals in change**
4. **Become role models for good practice.**

Professional membership and regulatory bodies **set the standards** of what it means to be a professional

Employers **operationalise these standards** in hiring and promotion decisions, and across its policies and practices

Professionals **enact these standards** to foster more inclusive cultures

Nonetheless, not all issues highlighted in this research are within the influence and control of individual professional bodies. Everybody must play a role in enabling systemic change. The inconsistent patchwork of positive action, from some organisations and professionals, must be matched by commitments from *all* actors across the system, including (local and national) policymakers.



# Introduction

This report grapples with the essence of what it means to be a professional, in relation to EDI. It serves as a call to professionals, and their representative bodies, to reflect on their outlook, conduct and collective actions.

This builds on an established agenda that highlights the central role professionals play in shaping the UK's economy, delivering success and opportunity across the workforce. A concerted effort to improve social mobility through the professions emerged around 15 years ago, with an action plan set out by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, chaired by the Rt Hon Alan Milburn. Recognising there is no single definition of 'the professions', the Panel's final report (2009: p14) characterised these careers as typically having:

- **recognisable entry points** – for example, standard qualification requirements
- **codes of ethics** – for example, that set out aspects of professional responsibility
- **systems for self-regulation** – for example, setting and regulating standards for professional development
- **a strong sense of vocation** and professional development.

The 'Milburn report' foregrounded the potential role of the professions to drive a new wave of social mobility, by opening up access to the growing – but increasingly socially exclusive – professional employment opportunities across the UK's economy (ibid). While progress in 2012 was found to be a 'sporadic' and 'haphazard' 'lottery', in the midst of recovery from the global financial crisis, rising inequality remained a deep social concern across broad public and political opinion (Milburn, 2012: p. 29).

This context resonates with the current drive to enact change through the professions, led by a collaborative group of professional membership and regulatory bodies. This collaborative was formed in response to the economic challenges presented by the Covid pandemic, aiming to help people get back into work and progress in their professions by connecting learners, employers and education providers with opportunities to upskill and retrain.



The collaborative has since increased in number, representing evermore professionals<sup>1</sup> and different types of professional and regulatory bodies:

**ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants)**, a globally recognised professional accountancy body providing qualifications and advancing standards in accountancy worldwide.

**The Chartered Insurance Institute (CII)** is a professional body dedicated to building public trust in the insurance and financial planning profession, with a commitment to driving confidence in the power of professional standards: competence, integrity and care for the customer.

**CILEx Regulation (CRL)** is the independent legal regulator for Chartered Legal Executives, CILEX members, CILEX Practitioners and firms. They work with their regulated community to ensure that they deliver the best outcomes for clients.

**The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)** is the professional body for HR and people development, championing better work and working lives for over 100 years.

**The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA)** is a UK-based international accountancy membership and standard-setting body, the only such body globally dedicated to public financial management.

**The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR)** is the world's only Royal Chartered professional body for public relations practitioners with over 10,000 members. They advance and promote professionalism and standards in public relations by making its members accountable to their employers and the public through its code of conduct as well as through training, qualifications, and accreditation.

**The Chartered Institute of Procurement & Supply (CIPS)** is the global membership organisation for procurement and supply, driving positive change across the profession. They provide education and tools for members. And they are a voice and standard, building a network across the globe.

**The Chartered Management Institute (CMI)** is the Chartered professional body for management and leadership. Their mission is to improve the quality and the number of professionally qualified managers in order to create better led and managed organisations.

**The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland (ICAS)** is a global professional membership organisation and business network for Chartered Accountants. They are also an educator, regulator, examiner and a professional awarding body.

**The Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET)** inspire, inform and influence the global engineering and technology community to engineer a better world.

**The Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH)** is the Chartered body for occupational safety and health professionals worldwide; a registered charity with international NGO status.

**The Institute of Workplace and Facilities Management (IWFM)** is the body for workplace and facilities professionals. They empower and enable members to expand their potential and have rewarding, impactful careers as business enablers who transform organisations and enhance experience.

<sup>1</sup> The professionals covered in this research are: accountants, legal executives, paralegals, insurance brokers, underwriters, claims professionals, financial planners, paraplanners, mortgage brokers, human resources personnel, public relations professionals, managers, procurement and supply professionals, engineering and technology professionals, occupational safety and health professional, and workplace and facilities professionals.



While the 'Milburn report' narrowly focused on improving access to the professions, the scope of concern among the professions has now broadened to encompass the following principles (often abbreviated to 'EDI'):

- **Equality** – aiming to ensure fair access, treatment, and opportunity for all those in a profession or workplace, regardless of difference
- **Diversity** – aiming to ensure that a wide range of identities, backgrounds, experiences, circumstances and perspectives are represented in the workforce
- **Inclusion** – aiming to create environments where everyone's differences are respected and valued, enabling everyone to thrive and feel included.

Work around these issues also often considers:

- **Equity** – beyond equality, this recognises that in order to treat everyone the same, you must account for their different needs
- **Belonging** – beyond inclusion, this is a feeling of security, support and acceptance, that results from the inclusion of different individuals and groups
- **Social justice** – beyond isolated efforts in individual organisations, this aims for a fairer distribution of power and resources across society.

A wide range of interventions and initiatives coalesce around these principles, with EDI becoming an industry of its own. This follows a well-established 'business case' which highlights how these socially desirable outcomes also make economic sense. For example, there is evidence to demonstrate that, with increased diversity:

#### Profits grow

Companies among the top-quartile for gender diversity on executive boards are 25% more likely to outperform the profitability of their peers in the lowest-quartile; and this figure rises to 36% between the most and least diverse companies in terms of ethnicity (McKinsey, 2020).

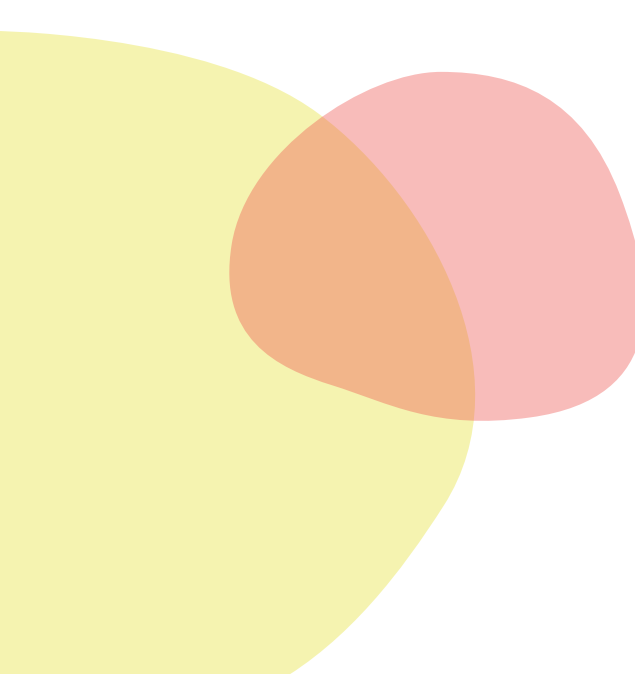
#### Innovation improves

Companies with above-average diversity (across six dimensions) in their management teams report innovation revenues which are 19% higher than those with below-average diversity among their management (BCG, 2018).

#### Productivity rises

Firms can achieve a productivity premium of +3% if managers are more gender diverse, or +7% if managers are more culturally diverse (Criscuolo et al, 2021).

These benefits emerge because EDI enables organisations to attract and retain talented individuals who can contribute a diversity of perspectives to enhance decision-making (Catalyst, 2020). It also improves employee satisfaction, as well as the reputation of the employer (ibid). Nonetheless, government research on the 'business case' for EDI warned that 'gestures cost money' (BIS, 2013: vi). As recent analysis suggests the current global market for EDI is valued at \$9bn, and is expected to grow to \$31bn by 2033 (Fact. MR, 2023), it is important to reflect on how this investment in EDI has been perceived and experienced, and what must be done to maximise impact from interventions.



## About the research

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a fresh look at how recent efforts to promote EDI have been experienced, across and between the professions involved in the collaborative. Drawing on data about professionals' views and experiences in diverse workplaces across the UK, the findings can intervene at the systems-level – particularly highlighting the role of professional membership and regulatory bodies among government, employer and grassroots action.

It explores how these professional bodies have the capacity to 'raise the bar' about what it means to be a professional, in relation to the values and principles of equality, diversity and inclusion, influencing action and behaviours among professionals and their employers. Working together as a collaborative, these bodies represent an ecosystem of different who all co-exist in workplaces, and whose practices influence each other's work and working culture. This therefore provides a significant opportunity to drive change across the diverse industries and sectors that make up the UK economy.

## Aims

Focusing on the professions represented in the collaborative, the research aims to:

1. understand the experiences and barriers faced by those with marginalised characteristics (Part 1)
2. understand the perception of EDI within the professions (Part 2a)
3. explore existing initiatives to improve EDI, identifying what interventions are perceived as effective in order to inform what action the professions should take (Part 2b).

The scope of this study is focused on those members and learners of 12 professional membership and regulatory bodies who are currently working and/or studying in the UK.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This group is referred to as 'professionals' throughout the report.  
<sup>3</sup> Refer to the appendix 1 for the detailed methodology.

## Approach



Conducted between October 2022 and April 2023<sup>3</sup>, the research brings together quantitative and qualitative data about the views and experiences of more than 7,000 professionals. It is supported by insights from existing literature, as well as in-depth conversations with individuals who have expertise in implementing EDI initiatives across the professions.



## Accounting for complexity

EDI touches on some incredibly sensitive and personal issues, and we would like to acknowledge the time, energy and courage so many professionals willingly contributed to this research. For the researchers involved, this comes with great responsibility to represent participants' views and experiences appropriately. We, therefore, have taken care to develop an analytical approach that aims to recognise the complexity of people's identities.

Several people shared the difficulty they had with overly simplistic and reductive labels which 'put people in boxes' and cast widespread assertions about the experiences of those with similar characteristics. This presents a challenge to researchers who necessarily categorise responses to draw conclusions from data.

Professionals told us how their lives and identities are multi-dimensional and complex. It is clear that a range of dynamics interact and compound each other, in variable ways, to shape each person's experiences. Yet, this can be difficult to unpick, explain or categorise.



I always have great fun when you fill in the equality, diversity, and inclusion information and all these standardised forms you get. I say to myself, 'Which hat am I going to wear today?' Because I look upon it and the information that it's asking from me, actually, really doesn't reflect me.

Focus group participant (IOSH member)

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Well, if we call them disadvantages, a lot of barriers, sometimes, cut across, so you may represent different communities. You may potentially be part of lots of different groups because you identify with them.

Focus group participant (CIPR member)

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I think it's a mix of everything. Age for one, ethnicity for another, socioeconomic background for another, where you live, just everything about you, really.

Focus group participant (CIPS member)

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This concept is known as 'intersectionality'. In order to foreground this, the analytical approach taken in this study draws together several different types and interpretations of data. First, we have developed a quantitative proxy for intersectionality, which assumes that people with multiple characteristics that tend to be marginalised have a different (more challenged) lived experience of the workplace than those with no or fewer 'marginalised characteristics'. For the purposes of this study, we have grouped survey respondents<sup>4</sup> on this basis:

No 'marginalised characteristics'	One 'marginalised characteristic'	Two 'marginalised characteristics'	Three or more 'marginalised characteristics'
n = 807 (16%)	n = 1717 (33%)	n = 1753 (34%)	n = 877 (17%)
This group is cisgender, male, white, non-religious or Christian, heterosexual, non-disabled and neurotypical, with no mental or physical health conditions, and comes from a higher or intermediate socioeconomic background.	<p>This group report only <b>one</b> of the following characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A marginalised gender identity (women, non-binary people, trans people, and/or people with other marginalised gender identities)</li> <li>• A minoritised ethnic group, faith or identity (Black, Asian, mixed or other ethnicities and/or non-Christian religions)</li> <li>• A marginalised sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or other non-heterosexual orientation)</li> <li>• A physical and/or mental health condition and/or neurodivergence</li> <li>• A lower socioeconomic background (based on parental occupation age 14)</li> </ul>	This group report only <b>two</b> of the following characteristics:	This group report <b>three or more</b> of the following characteristics:

Although we recognise that this proxy does not include all the possible characteristics that may be marginalised, for the purposes of this report we refer to the characteristics covered in this measure as 'marginalised characteristics'. We did not include the 'life-course' characteristics of age or caring responsibilities in the proxy measure<sup>5</sup>: this is because people of all ages report being disadvantaged because of their age, and caring responsibilities cut across other demographic groups. In some instances, several characteristics may be grouped together as one 'marginalised characteristic' – this is due to overlaps between categories (avoiding 'double counting') and the challenges of defining ways of identifying.<sup>6</sup>

This is a simplistic operationalisation of intersectionality, therefore we acknowledge the limits of this approach to tease out differences *between* characteristics. Readers must be mindful not to assume all characteristics will have the same impact. The different ways marginalised characteristics are experienced by professionals are explored further in 'deep dives' involving qualitative insights and group-specific quantitative analyses. Together, this strives to provide a more nuanced picture.

4 The base for the intersectionality proxy is all those answering all the relevant demographic questions, excluding all those that skipped or said 'prefer not to say' or 'don't know' to any of the relevant demographic questions (n = 5154).

5 Whilst these characteristics are not included in the proxy measure, experiences related to age and caring responsibilities are analysed in other ways throughout the report.

6 Limitations are detailed in appendix 1.

## A note on terminology

The term 'marginalised' is used to refer to those that are systematically excluded and discriminated against due to unequal relations of power across society. Like with many of the 'labels' used throughout this report, it is difficult for such terms to reflect the diverse experiences and preferred ways of identifying for all those to which they are attributed. A range of terms (for example, disadvantaged, socially excluded, underrepresented, minority, minoritised) can be used to reflect a similar meaning. We will flexibly employ each as appropriate throughout this report, but have chosen to primarily refer to 'marginalised' as it emphasises that experiences of those with these characteristics reflect their structural position in society, rather than perceived inadequacies in their specific characteristics, backgrounds, or circumstances. Moreover, it does not make any presumption about whether experiences resulting from marginalisation will be positive or negative, or relate to the size of a population. We intended to recognise that experiences resulting from marginalisation are not uniform, but can be complex and diverse.



# Part 1:

## The uncomfortable reality

This section shares the research findings on the lived experiences of professionals with marginalised characteristics. It sheds light on the uncomfortable reality of what it's like to become and be a professional for those with different identities, backgrounds and circumstances.

### Key findings:

Navigating professional life clearly comes with challenges for the vast majority of professionals. Almost three-quarters of professionals surveyed report experiencing:

- barriers to progression in their career (73%)
- discriminatory or exclusionary behaviour in the workplace since the start of 2019 (72%).

Nonetheless, across all metrics used to understand the experiences of professionals, a clear trend emerges in which negative experiences are more common among those with more 'marginalised characteristics'. This contradicts claims that professional experiences are rooted in a meritocracy. Rather, testimonies from professionals show how lived experiences of marginalisation shape the everyday realities of working in the professions, in variable and complex ways.

The implications of this uncomfortable reality must be taken seriously as more than half (53%) of professionals surveyed say they have considered leaving their profession and/or organisation because of issues related to EDI. Most commonly, this is because they feel overlooked or undervalued, with further concerns around progression, management, workload, pay and culture.

While these findings will not necessarily be surprising to everyone, there is a clear perception gap between those that have marginalised identities and those that do not. This is a clear barrier to change – especially as senior leaders, with greater decision-making power, more commonly have fewer marginalised characteristics.

# Professional journeys

## Accessing professions: 'falling into' it?

First, we consider the experience of becoming a professional. When asked about what motivated people to join their respective professions, we heard some very personal experiences – ranging from people pursuing long-held passions, to those who discovered a role that fit their unique skills and attributes. For many others, the profession was simply something they 'fell into' in the search for employment. While, at the surface, this may seem random or accidental, further analysis of people's routes into the professions reveals significant barriers and enablers which structure these experiences.



I fell into facilities management quite accidentally but absolutely loved it the moment I even understood it.

Focus group participant (IWFM member)



The majority of the people I have met ... have 'fallen into' insurance because uncle so-and-so got him a job.

Focus group participant (CII member)

### Professionals experiencing barriers when joining their profession

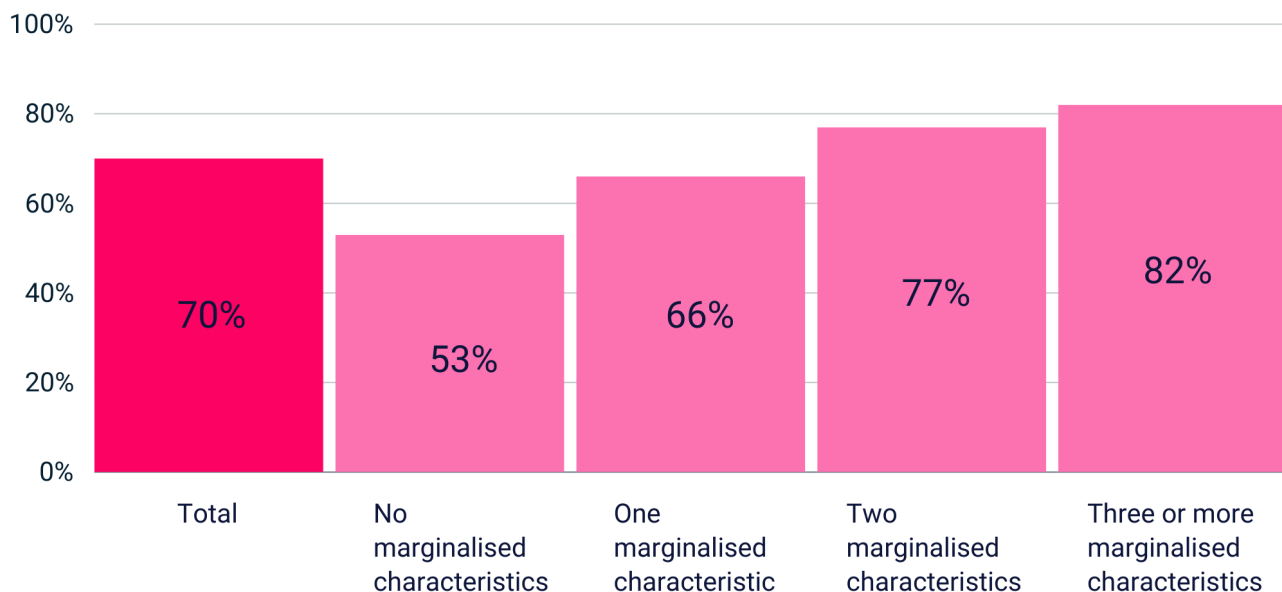


Figure 1: Proportion of professionals surveyed who have experienced any type of barrier when considering joining their profession and/or looking for their first role in the profession, by number of 'marginalised characteristics'.

**Barrier to access**

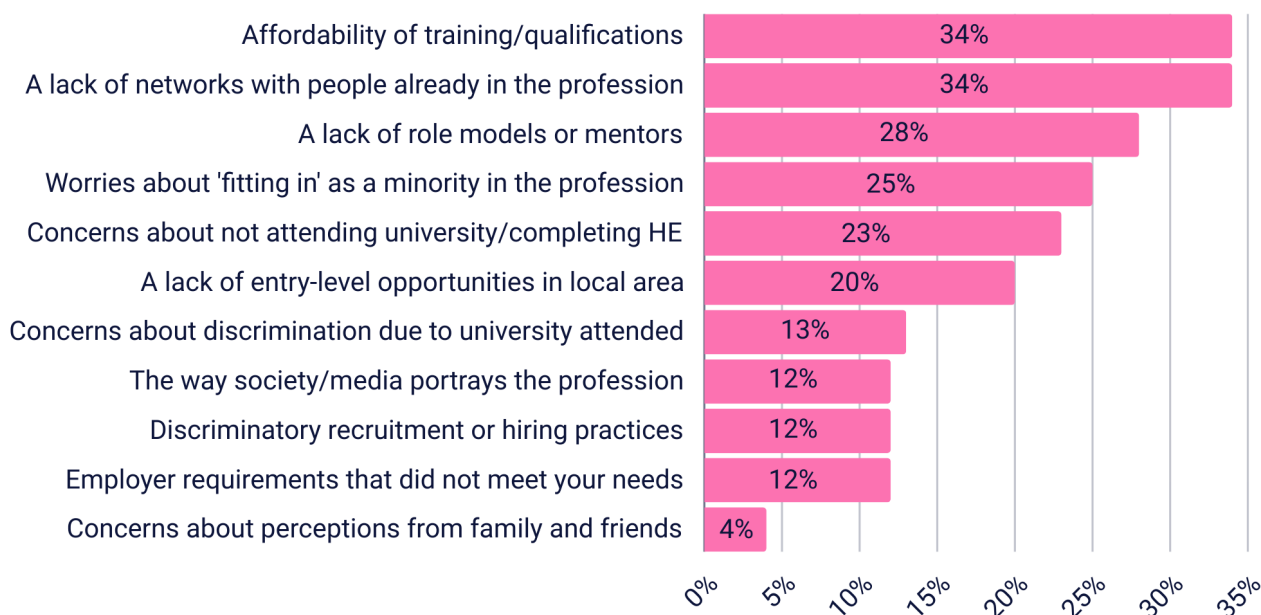


Figure 2: Prevalence of the above potential barriers when considering joining their profession and/or looking for their first role in the profession, among professionals surveyed.

**Enablers of access**



Figure 3: Prevalence of the above enablers which helped in their decision-making or search when considering joining their profession and/or looking for their first role in the profession, among professionals surveyed.



Among professionals surveyed, 70% report experiencing barriers when joining their profession – and this rises to 82% among those with three or more ‘marginalised characteristics’ (figure 1). Among the range of barriers (figure 2)<sup>7</sup> and enablers (figure 3), educational factors shape many experiences. This relates to practical things, like the affordability and accessibility of qualifications, as well as wider structures mediating access to university education – in specific subject areas and at specific institutions – and prejudices around different educational backgrounds. Some professionals also felt that the lack of practical application in learning meant some professions remain unknown or misunderstood among many people.



There’s so much you can do under the bracket of insurance, and I think as a young person going into education, there’s still quite a lot we need to do to make sure that everybody knows ... about the opportunities in the insurance market.

Focus group participant (CII member)

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When I joined HR, I didn’t feel there were any role models that I’d say would be the biggest barrier to it those first couple of months. Settling into a role in HR was pretty difficult, purely with the fact, qualification wise, I was really privileged that my company paid for my CIPD qualification.

Focus group participant (CIPD member)

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Cutting across this, is a range of cultural factors. These are largely shaped by access to professional networks, role models and opportunities that can support engagement with or entry into a profession – but vary across place and demographic groups. People often discussed how professional aspirations could be shaped through the ways these educational and cultural factors intersect with people’s identities, for example:

- socioeconomic factors can work to limit the opportunities available to some
- gendered, racialised and classed expectations and stereotypes influence the ‘type of person’ that tends to engage with and feel a sense of belonging in certain subject areas and professions
- a (perceived) lack of compatibility of roles with caring responsibilities and/or mental or physical health conditions can prevent some people joining certain professions
- some neurodivergent people find certain qualifications to be inaccessible.

<sup>7</sup> Key differences between demographic groups are covered in deep dives on pages 34-50.





I think, partly, it relates to maybe how people break into public affairs, which is often internships, usually for a political party or potentially for a consultancy or charity ... it's very Westminster-London focused. Again, that deters those from backgrounds without that family support.

Focus group participant (CIPR member)

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I think a lot of these things are gatekeeping. Especially in my area, you see a lot of people have close ties and friends and spouses and all of that who work within the same organisation ... I think maybe they might be intentionally not being put out there.

Focus group participant (CIPS member)

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Ultimately, experiences of becoming a professional are shaped by individuals' uneven access to professional networks, role models and opportunities. This means everyone can play a part in supporting and inspiring those from a diversity of backgrounds to become professionals, through providing mentorship or acting as a role model. This must be coupled with systems-wide action to ensure professional opportunities are fairly distributed, and education provisions and employment services support fair access to the professions.



## Professional culture: who belongs?

Beyond the routes into a profession, professional culture plays a key role in influencing *who* is made to feel like they belong or not. Belonging is a complex feeling, which is experienced on an everyday lived basis in subtle interactions and relationships with colleagues. While the majority of professionals surveyed (73%) say they feel like they belong within their profession, only about half (53%) feel their unique personal attributes, characteristics, and background are valued. Those with more 'marginalised characteristics' are significantly less likely to feel this way (figures 4 and 5), and people also feel this changes over time, in different situations, and in relation to their outlook on life.



I would say I sometimes feel like I belong within the profession, but I have been made to feel like I don't in the slightest. I've had some really awful experiences by senior [people in the profession] that will talk all day about EDI and inclusivity within the workplace and everything like that, but actually when it comes down to their day-to-day, they make you feel like an outsider and push you out.

Focus group participant (CIPD member)

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I feel like I belong now, but I'm well aware of the fact that [the reason why] I feel like I belong now is directly linked to my own sense of self-worth and confidence in myself. I've got myself to a point where I don't care about what they think. I'm going to get in your face and I'm going to challenge you. ... I end up having a lot of very uncomfortable conversations with people, but I've got myself into a place where I relish that now.

Focus group participant (IWFM member)

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**I feel like I belong within the profession**

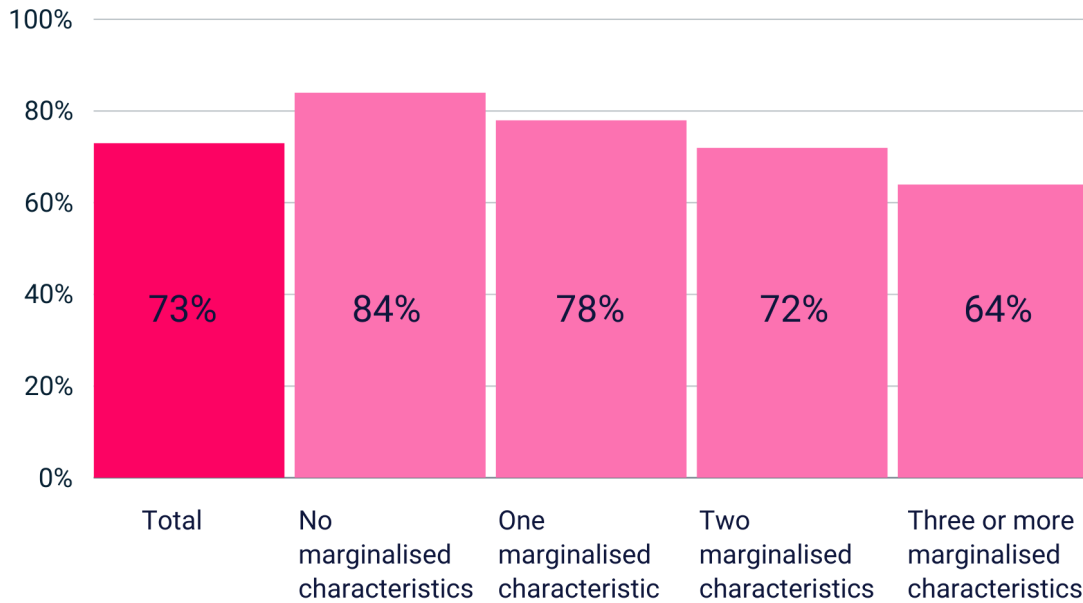


Figure 4: Proportion of professionals surveyed who agree with the statement 'I feel like I belong within the profession', by number of 'marginalised characteristics'.

**I feel like my unique personal attributes, characteristics, and background are valued within this profession**

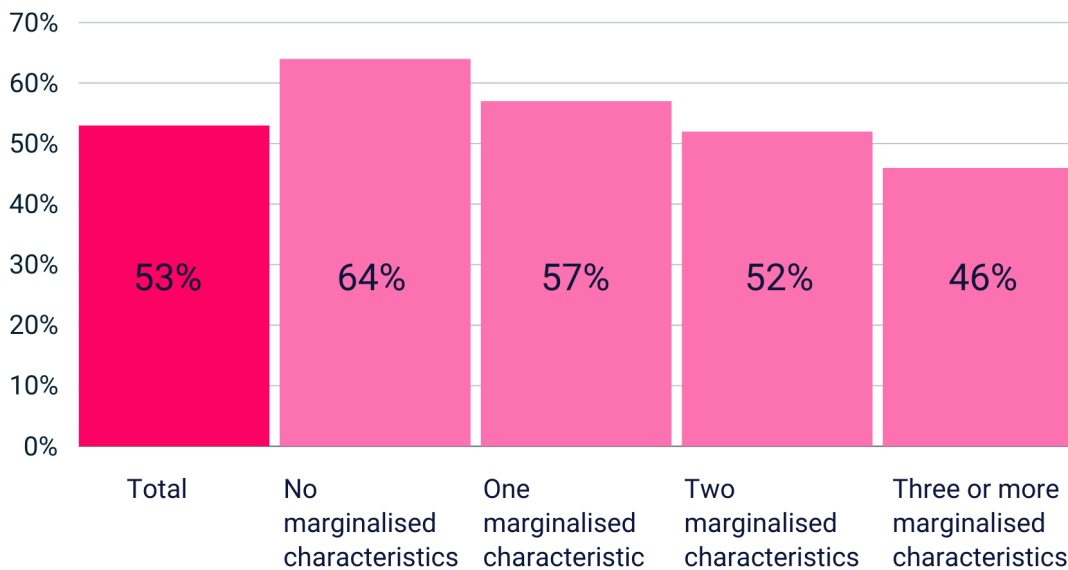


Figure 5: Proportion of professionals surveyed who agree with the statement 'I feel like my unique personal attributes, characteristics, and background are valued within the profession', by number of 'marginalised characteristics'.

Exclusionary and discriminatory behaviours frequently make people doubt their sense of belonging. Some 72% of professionals surveyed have experienced this since the beginning of 2019, involving a spectrum of behaviours – most commonly subtle ‘microaggressions’,<sup>8</sup> which can make them question how their value is recognised (figure 6).<sup>9</sup> Compared to people with no ‘marginalised characteristics’, those with three or more ‘marginalised characteristics’ are close to three times more likely to report experiencing exclusion or discrimination (figure 7). This has deep consequences for some individuals, shaping their career trajectories and impacting on their health and wellbeing (figure 8).

Ultimately, this research shows that professional culture is regularly experienced as exclusionary for those with marginalised characteristics – both within individual organisations and across industries and professions more broadly. As complex feelings and subtle behaviours influence professionals’ sense of belonging, it is important for everyone to reflect on how their behaviours in the workplace influence others, and work with colleagues to foster more inclusive professional cultures.

**Experiences of discrimination or exclusion**

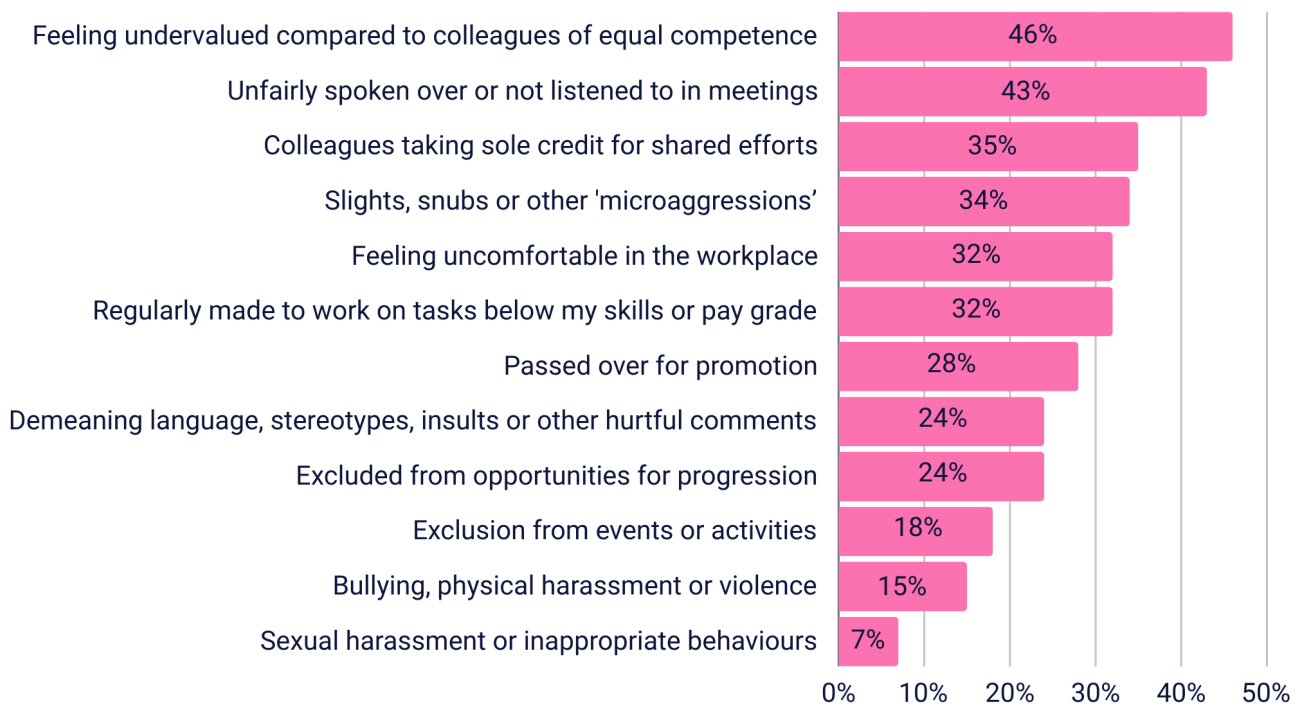
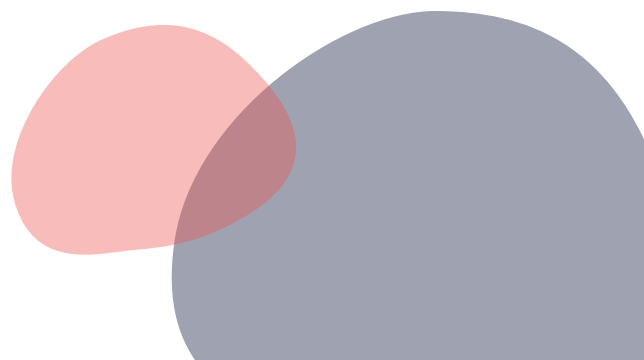


Figure 6: Prevalence of the above discriminatory or exclusionary behaviours personally experienced in the workplace by professionals surveyed, since the start of 2019.

8 Microaggressions refer to discrimination borne from subtle behaviours which communicate exclusionary or discriminatory sentiments towards those with marginalised characteristics.

9 Key differences between demographic groups are covered in deep dives on pages 34-50.



### Professionals experiencing discriminatory or exclusionary behaviour in the workplace

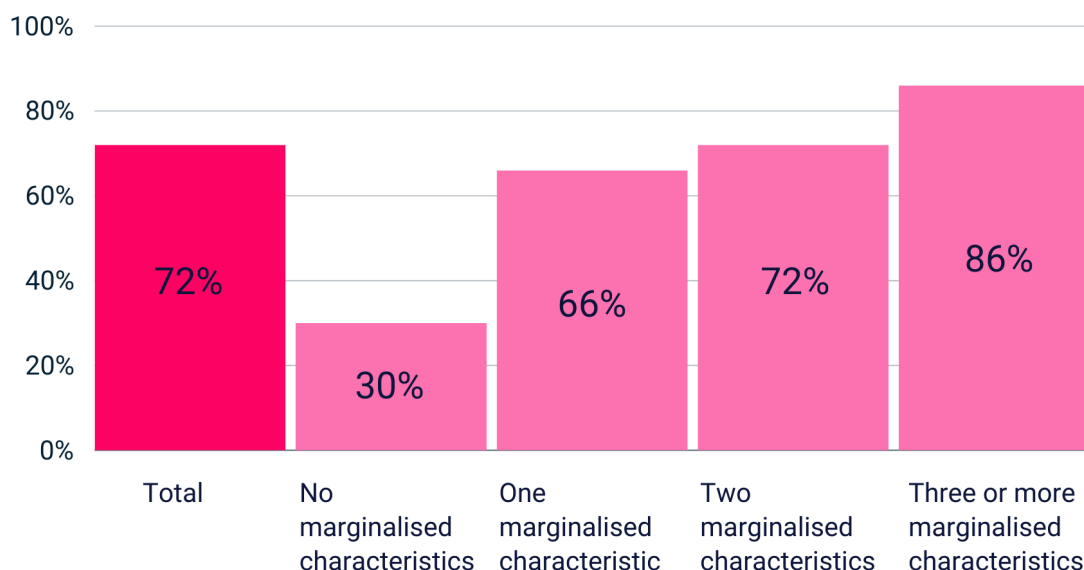


Figure 7: Proportion of professionals surveyed who have personally experienced any type of discriminatory behaviour in the workplace since the start of 2019, by number of 'marginalised characteristics'.

### Consequences of discrimination and exclusion

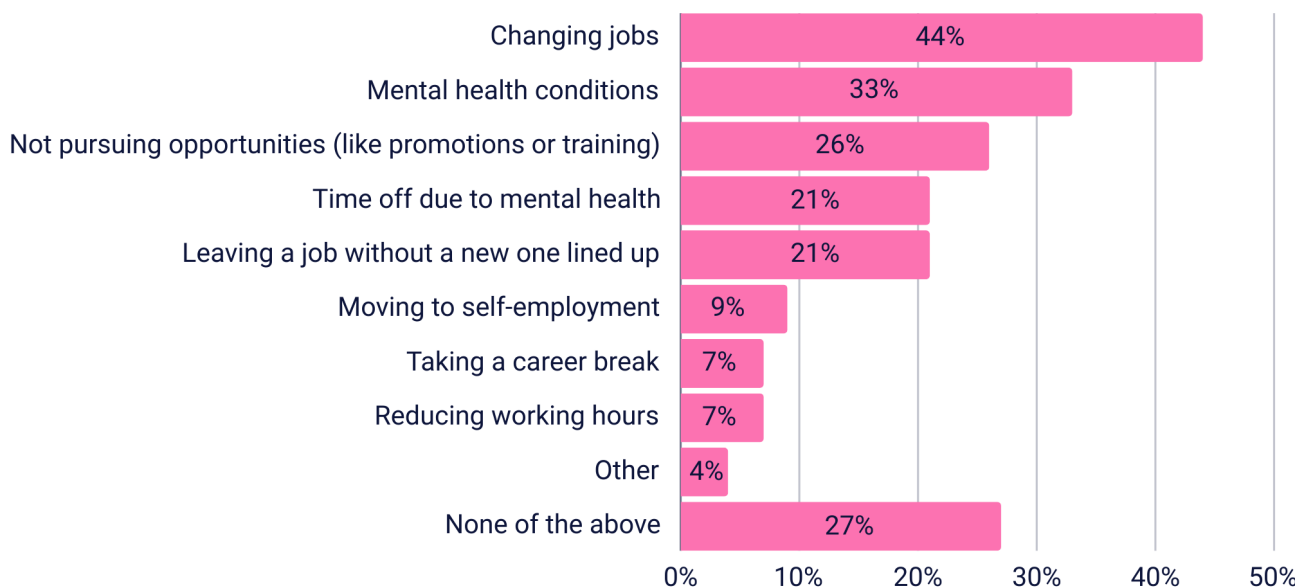


Figure 8: Prevalence of responses to 'Has experiencing exclusion, harassment or discrimination in the workplace ever resulted in any of the following for you?', among those who report experiencing any form of discrimination (n= 5203).

## Professional development: A broken ladder

Experiences of professional culture ultimately shape professionals' career trajectories and their access opportunities to progress and develop. Almost three-quarters (73%) of professionals surveyed report experiencing barriers to progression in their career. Although apparent across all groups, these barriers are significantly more common among those with more 'marginalised characteristics' (figure 9).

**Professionals experiencing barriers to progression in their careers**

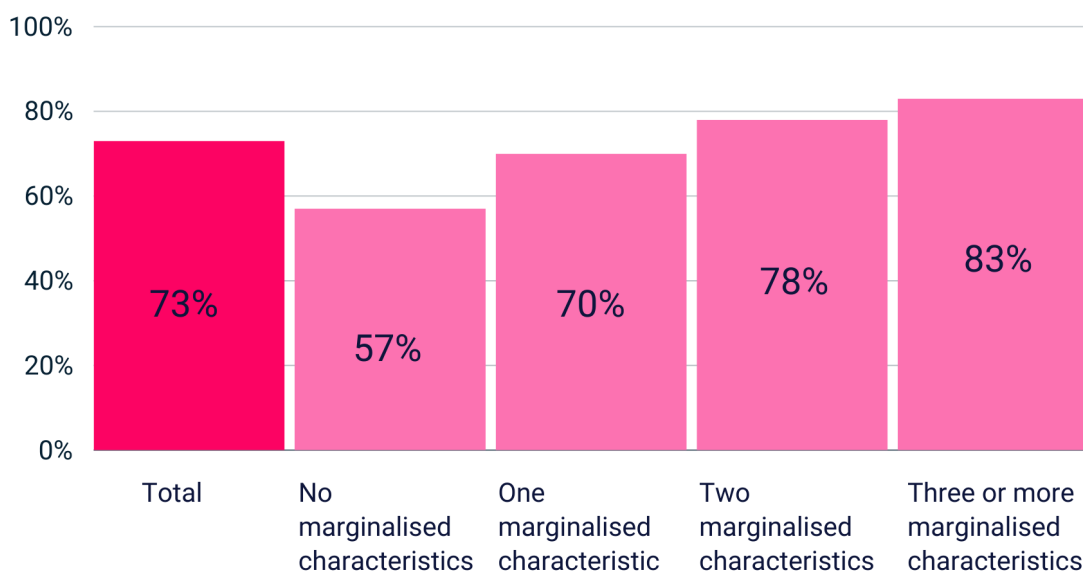


Figure 9: Proportion of professionals surveyed who occasionally or often experience barriers to progression in their careers, by number of 'marginalised characteristics'.

### Barriers to progression

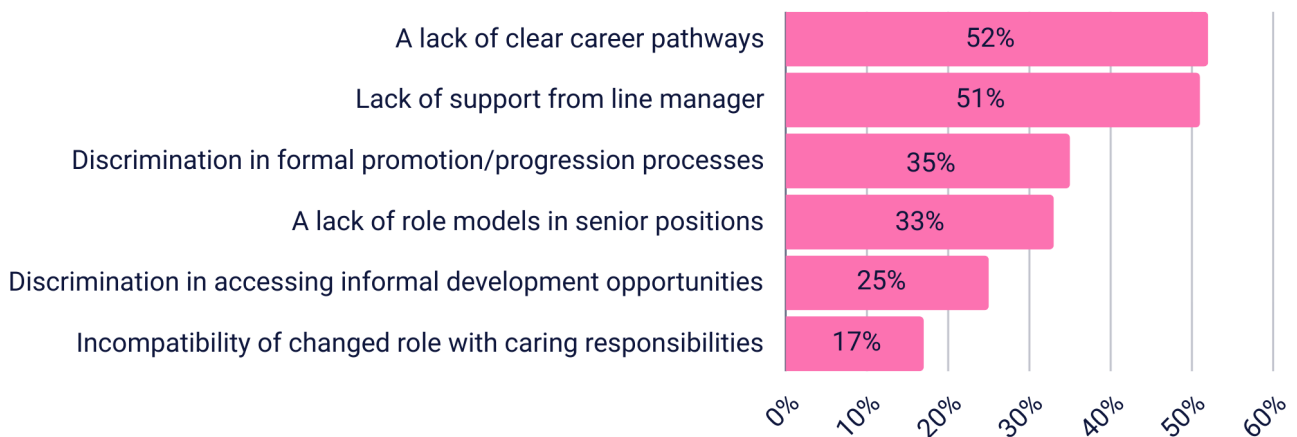


Figure 10: Prevalence of the above barriers professionals faced within their career, among those professionals surveyed who say they experience barriers to progression within their career (n= 4913).

In contrast to the findings around accessing professions, where most professionals situate barriers in a systemic context (playing out through relationships and institutions across society), many of those we spoke to view progression pathways as a more localised problem. The barriers (figure 10)<sup>10</sup> mostly play out within organisations, teams and workplace relationships, via two key mechanisms.

First, on a day-to-day basis, colleagues – and managers in particular – are believed to have a significant impact on an individual's development. Good managers can help offer opportunities to grow and demonstrate skills; provide support and mentorship amidst unclear pathways; or act as role models. In contrast, poor managers can alienate people from these opportunities and support, fostering a constraining working environment and introducing doubt around abilities. Many professionals expressed that these relationships appear to be influenced by (un)conscious biases and prejudices that shape the way people interact with one another.



I've had my share of terrible managers and good managers, and I can't really stress how important that is, a manager's role in your career progression. Me having a supportive manager made the difference between being a qualified lawyer or not because I couldn't have afforded the additional legal training that I had to do. Had I not qualified, I would've been stuck in a cycle of poverty as a single parent with a child.

Focus group participant  
(CRL regulated member)

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There's literally no one that I can look up to that I can get advice from, from a female or even a different varied background. I do have a mentor, but he's a 50-year-old white man. He does his best, but [chuckles] he doesn't quite understand the different experiences I have compared to what he's done.

Focus group participant (CIPR member)

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Second, progression pathways may be perceived to suit some types of people better than others. For example, senior roles can often bring high pressure and may require greater demands on time, thus some feel they become less compatible with caring responsibilities and some mental or physical health conditions. There is also sometimes a perception that senior roles must fit with certain cultural or behavioural norms, which can lead minoritised groups to feel out of place or isolated. In addition, roles tend to become less technical – instead focusing on management or business development. Some professionals feel these roles do not suit everybody, with some neurodivergent people highlighting the particular barriers this presents for them.



I think the promotion system in academia is not helping women, maybe because some of the standards require a lot of travelling which is not easy to do when you have young children.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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<sup>10</sup> Key differences between demographic groups are covered in deep dives on pages 34-50.





Even if we do get these people climbing the ladder, they don't stay very long because again, they find themselves in a position where they're in a minority, and they're required to maintain a certain level of status quo. They end up compromising their own integrity in order to be able to do that.

Focus group member (IET member)

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The main criteria for advancement is whether you want to stay technical or go managerial in my company ... you have to take an either more authority as in responsibility for the product authority roles, or you need to manage people. If you want to stay hands-on engineering technical, you will eventually reach a barrier.

Focus group member (IET member)

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Because of the localised ways in which these barriers are experienced, some people feel they have had to leave their organisation – or the profession as a whole – in order to progress. In all, more than half (53%) of professionals surveyed say they have considered leaving their profession and/or organisation because of issues related to EDI. Concerns about progression (particularly feeling overlooked and undervalued) were among the most common reasons contributing to this consideration (figure 11).



There's nothing else left for me here ... it's a decision that I've made, in order for me to progress and move on, there's not a lot more I can do where I am.

Focus group participant (CIPR member)

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**Reasons professionals consider leaving their profession and/or organisation**

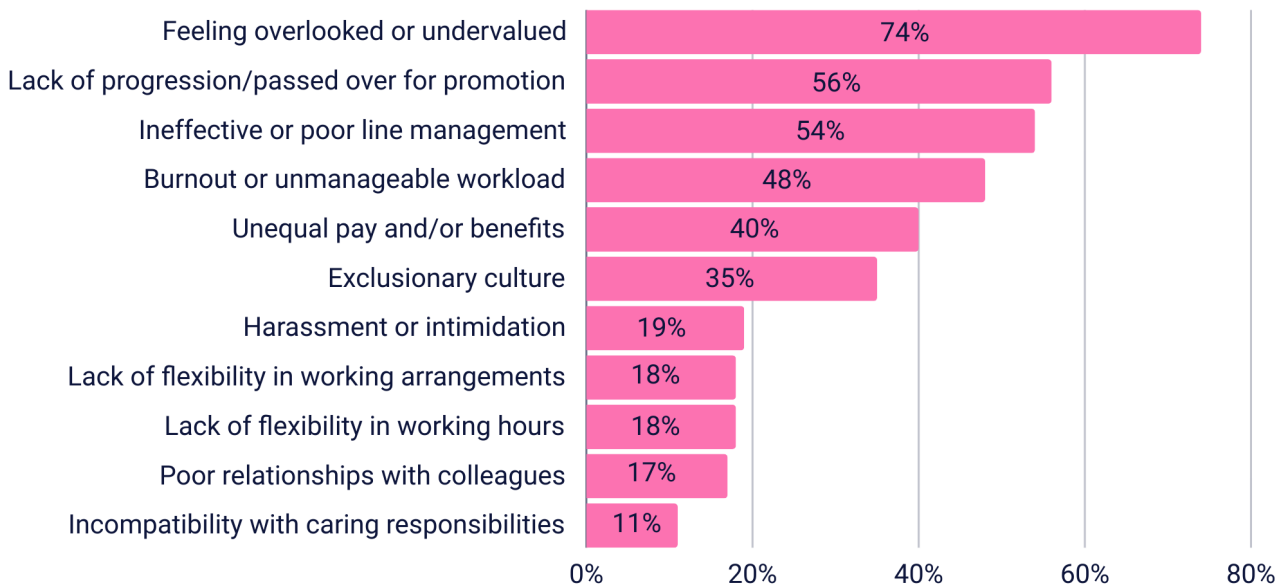


Figure 11: Prevalence of factors that led professionals surveyed to consider leaving their profession and/or organisation, among those who say that they have considered leaving their profession and/or organisation (n= 3559).

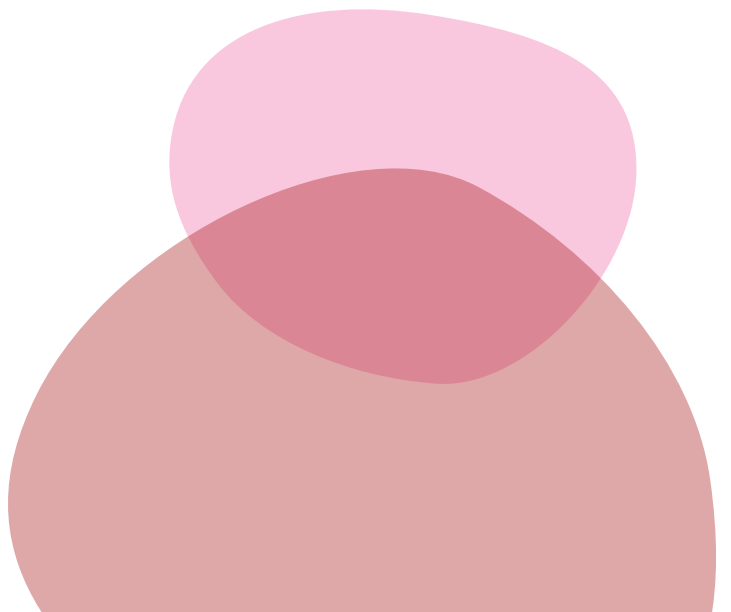
While leaving the profession because of EDI concerns is a consideration among people from all backgrounds (34% of all those surveyed), it is significantly more common among groups with ‘marginalised characteristics’. Those with three or more ‘marginalised characteristics’ are more than twice as likely to have considered leaving than those with no ‘marginalised characteristics’ (figure 12).

The talent retention issue is even more critical for individual employers, with 44% leaving or considering leaving their current or most recent employer for the same reasons – a figure that rises to 55% among those with three or more ‘marginalised characteristics’ (Figure 13). On the flipside, strong EDI credentials can attract new talent, with several professionals sharing that it is something they actively look for in an employer.



I do sometimes wonder how many other people ... were pushed out because of factors like burnout and workplace pressure and other things like bullying and whatnot ... stuff that can have a huge impact on whether you stay or you leave.

Focus group participant  
(CRL regulated member)





I actually ended up leaving that organisation because there were two other gay people that I knew in the senior management team. We used to talk about the 'rainbow ceiling', ... we went on the development path alongside everybody else and ... even though we threw our hats in the ring, all three of us never made it out of where we were and all three of us left. To be honest, all three of us have really flourished since because we all went to organisations that we specifically chose because of the way they treat people and the way they encourage people to be themselves.

Focus group participant (IWFM member)

**Professionals who have considered leaving their profession as a result of EDI concerns**

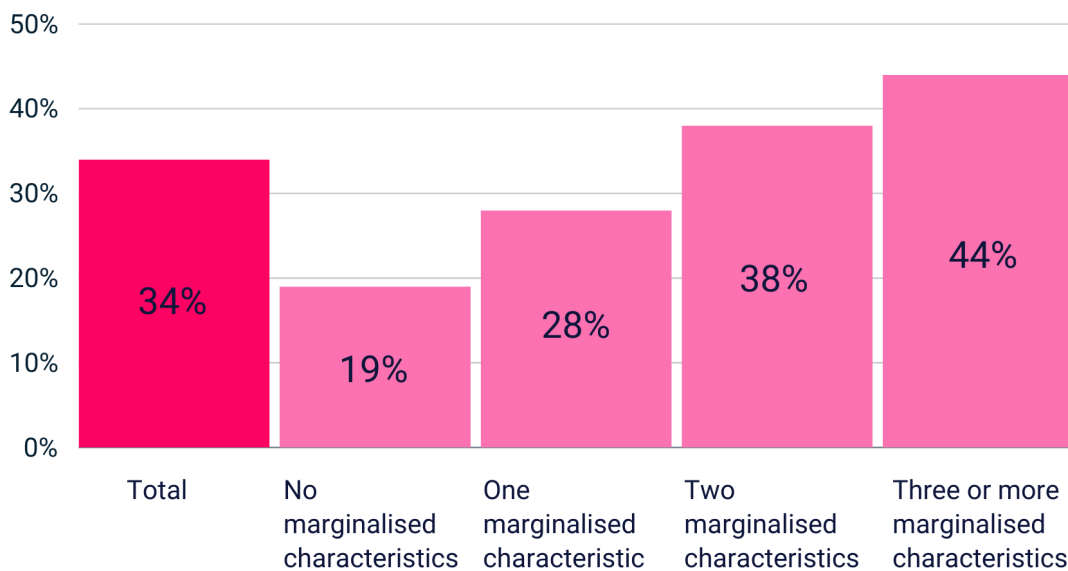
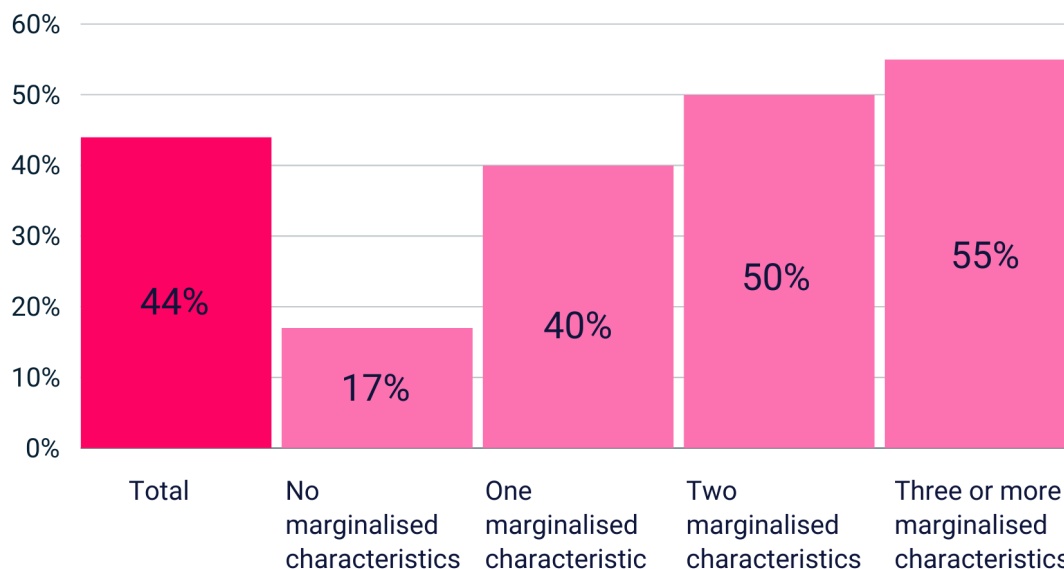


Figure 12: Proportion of professionals surveyed who say they occasionally or often consider leaving their profession as a result of concerns related to discrimination or to the lack of diversity, inclusion and equality, by number of 'marginalised characteristics'.



**Professionals who have left or considered leaving their organisation as a result of EDI concerns**



*Figure 13: Proportion of professionals surveyed who say they have left, or occasionally or often consider leaving, their current or most recent organisation as a result of concerns related to discrimination or to the lack of diversity, inclusion and equality, by number of 'marginalised characteristics'.*

Ultimately, existing progression pathways are not always inclusive for a diversity of needs, and the lack of both support and opportunities for progression create a talent retention issue. Managers, in particular, must reflect on the impact they have on colleagues' experiences and opportunities to progress – while employers and professional bodies should consider what management training and support is needed, to enable a fairer distribution of progression opportunities. In addition, the research has identified a need to develop diversify progression pathways, in order support and retain a diversity of needs and roles.



## The myth of meritocracy

Across these professional journeys, our research shows that negative experiences are more common among those with more 'marginalised characteristics'. These lived experiences call into question the idea of a meritocracy, whereby success is believed to be a result of individual capabilities. Instead, the insights highlight the biases and subjectivity of hiring, promotion and pay processes, which influence who has the capacity to 'rise to the top' based on people's identities, backgrounds and circumstances.



We recruit the best person for the job and are genuinely blind to background.

Survey respondent (CII member)

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It is common for those from marginalised backgrounds to feel people with marginalised characteristics had to work harder than others, going 'above and beyond' to prove themselves, as their competence is frequently undermined. Many see 'ceilings' for people from marginalised backgrounds, where they are not considered for promotion opportunities or unsuccessful even when they do similar work as others of an equivalent grade. This is reflected across the professionals we surveyed, with a disproportionate number of 'senior leaders' having no 'marginalised characteristics' (figure 14).



I've noticed, on average, people of colour specifically progress much slower in accounting than other people.

Focus group participant (ACCA member)

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A lot of times it is the women, it is the people of different cultures and ethnicity ... you've had to fight so much more to get there. To be able to maintain that, to have the resilience to continue on even with the setbacks, you've got to have a lot of drive, you've got to have a love and a passion for it. It's difficult when you love something so much to then have to continually face limitations because of a lack of understanding and training, and experience.

Focus group participant (ACCA member)

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It was very noticeable that people would move up through the ranks. Just by complete coincidence, the gay people never got picked. There was always some reason why they weren't quite as good as that other person against different things. It was a very clear pattern over a large organisation with thousands of people.

Focus group participant (CIPFA member)

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**Seniority by number of marginalised characteristics**

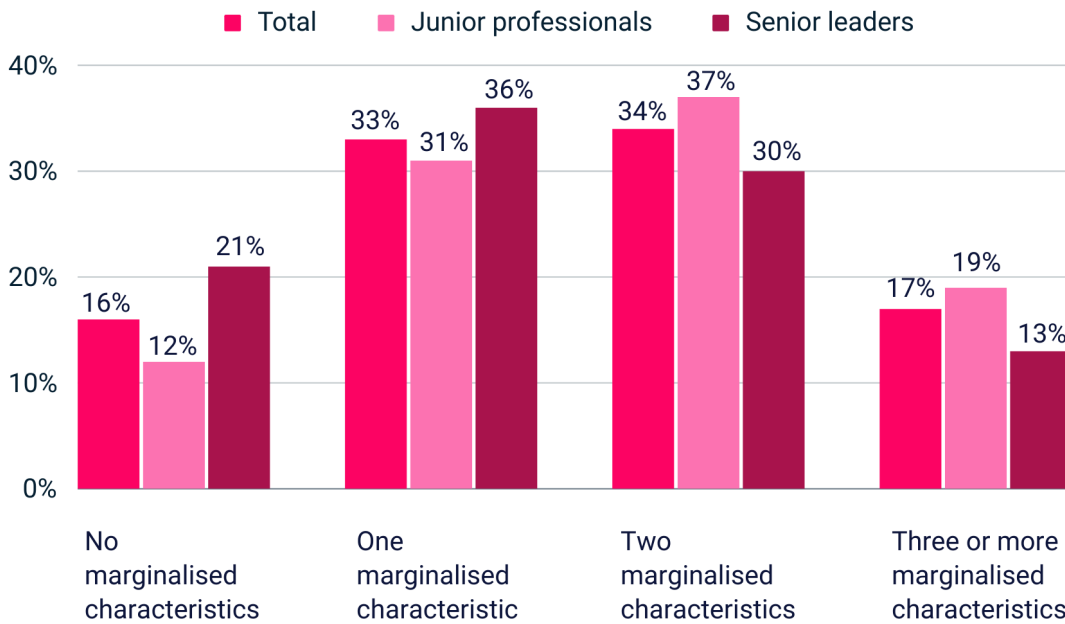


Figure 14: Proportion of professionals who describe their job role as junior ('entry-level', 'intermediate level', or 'mid-management') or senior ('senior management' or 'board level') by number of 'marginalised characteristics'.

Professional qualifications can interact in interesting ways with ideas of meritocracy. For some professionals, they feel they are doubted despite being equally qualified as counterparts. For others – especially in professions where it is not necessary for everyone to be chartered or accredited – qualifications can act as a leveller for people from marginalised backgrounds. They act as a mechanism to prove oneself, but it can feel alienating to know that your counterparts did not have to go through the same process.



I have found that even though I am qualified, ... it's still very much you're welcome to the table, but [it's because] 'we need to bring our token person.'

Focus group participant (ACCA member)



I was the only one with my full MCIPS and a bachelor's and master's. Nobody else had any of that and I was still the lowest grade in the whole organisation.

Focus group participant (CIPS member)

While this uncomfortable reality, that marginalisation shapes professional experiences, may be unsurprising for some; the belief that opportunity is fair and based on merit persists among many. Around half of professionals surveyed believe:

- their organisation ensures training and opportunities to develop are evenly taken up by those from all backgrounds (60%)
- hiring decisions are made fairly and transparently (55%)
- work is fairly and equally evaluated by managers (50%)

- they have been able to progress within their organisation at an equal rate to others of their skill level (47%)
- promotion decisions are fair and based on merit (43%).

This perception gap could be attributed to a lack of empathy with the experiences of others: those with fewer marginalised characteristics, who are less likely to have experienced barriers and discrimination, more commonly believe that a meritocracy shapes professional experiences (figure 15). This is a clear barrier to change – especially as senior leaders, with greater decision-making power, more commonly have fewer marginalised characteristics.

**Belief in meritocracy, by number of marginalised characteristics**

- My organisation ensures training and opportunities to develop are evenly taken up by those from all backgrounds
- Hiring decisions are made fairly and transparently
- Work is fairly and equally evaluated by managers
- I have been able to progress within the organisation at an equal rate to others of my skill level
- Promotions decisions are fair and based on merit

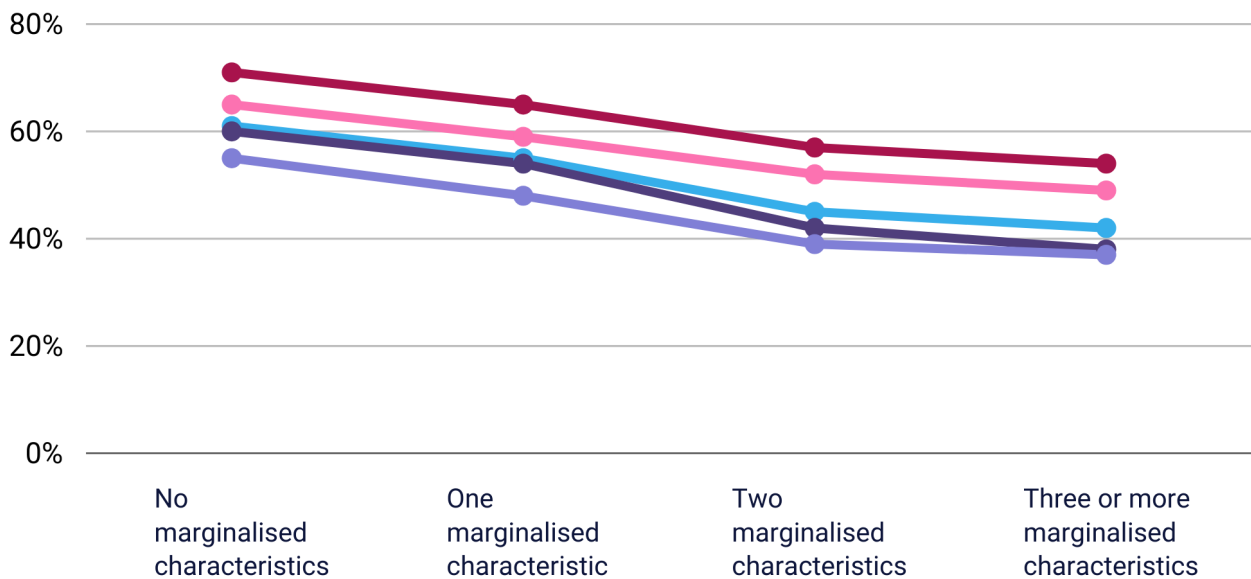


Figure 15: Proportion of professionals surveyed who agree with the above statements, by number of 'marginalised characteristics'.

## Variation in professional experiences

This research shows that demographic make-up and stereotypes about the 'types of person' in each profession are primary factors shaping the ways access, culture and development vary between professions. While it is not within the scope of this study to provide a benchmark for the diversity of each professional membership and regulatory body, data about the respondents gives an indication of the demographic tendencies for each profession:

- While the overall gender split of respondents is 51% female and 48% male, some professions are more female-dominated (for instance, CIPD and CRL have more than 75% female respondents), and others are more male-dominated (IET has more than 75% male respondents)
- ACCA is the most ethnically diverse professional body, with around one-third (34%) of respondents from minoritised ethnic groups, including significantly more Asian and Black respondents. Just 13% of the overall sample, across all 12 bodies, is from minoritised ethnic groups – with more than 90% of respondents from ICAS and IOSH being white
- While more than half of all respondents (55%) are religious, ACCA is the most religiously diverse professional body, with 15% from a minority (non-Christian) religion compared to 7% overall
- Respondents from CIPR, ICAS and IWFm are most diverse in terms of sexuality, with more than 10% identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or any other non-heterosexual sexual orientation, compared to 7% overall
- Physical health conditions and disabilities are most common among respondents from CIPD and IOSH; mental health conditions are most prevalent among respondents from CRL and CIPD; and respondents from IET are most likely to be neurodivergent. Overall, 43% of respondents have at least one type of physical health condition and/or mental health condition and/or are neurodivergent
- While more than half of respondents from CII, CIPFA, ICAS and IET had their main household earner working in a professional occupation when they were age 14; more than 40% of respondents from CRL and IOSH are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (with their main household earner unemployed or working in technical, craft, routine or semi-routine manual/service labour when they were age 14)
- Intersectionality varies between professional bodies (figure 16).





### Intersectionality by professional body

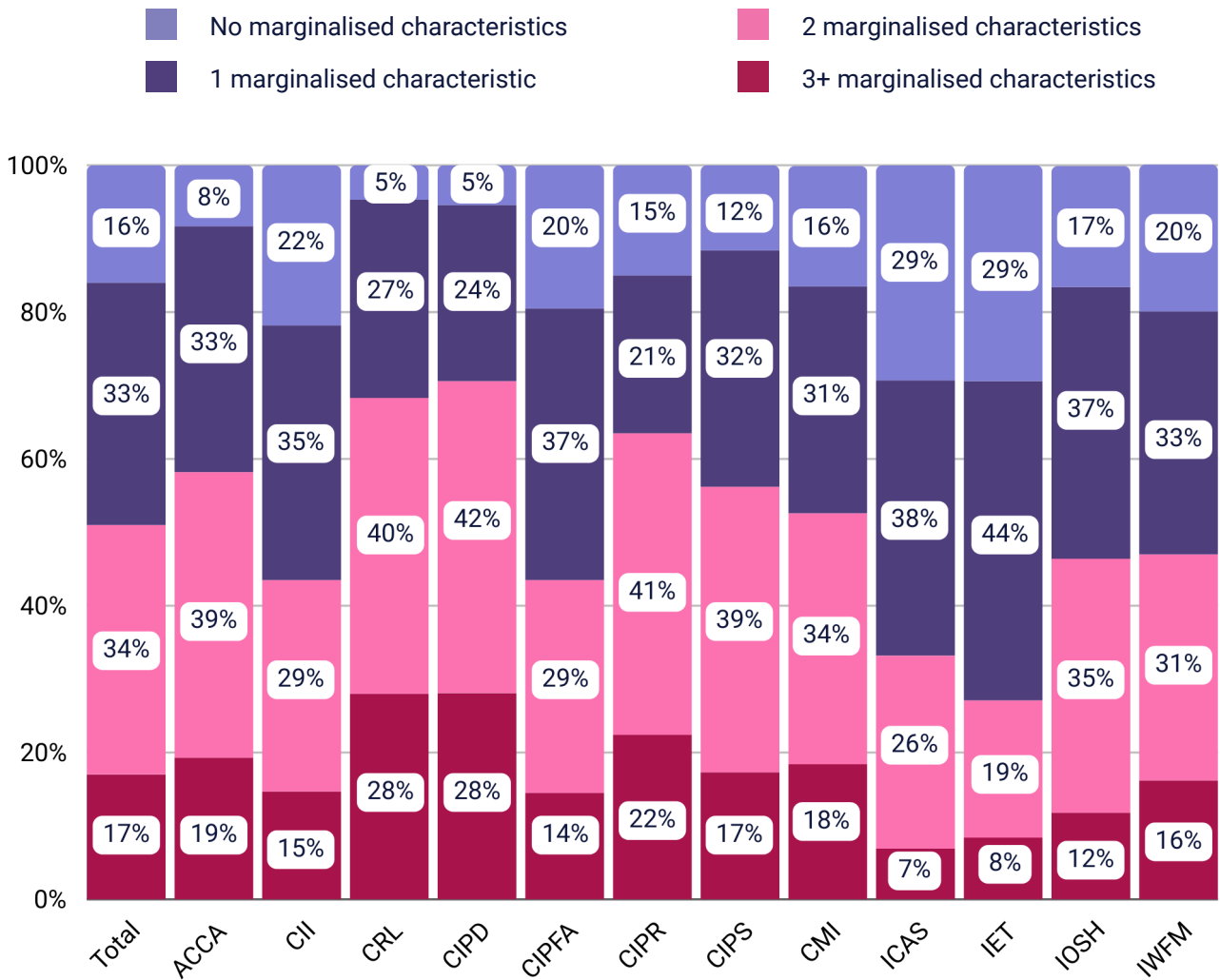
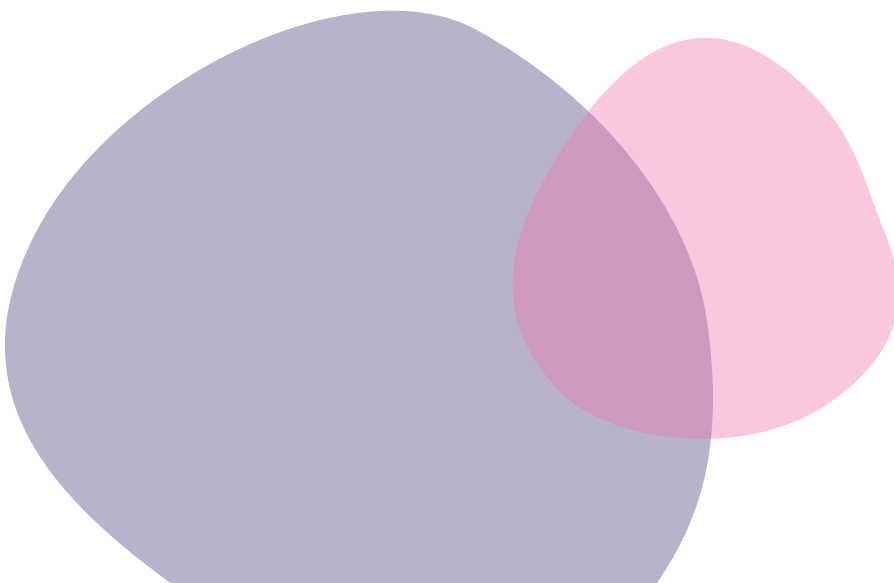


Figure 16: Proportions of professionals surveyed with different numbers of 'marginalised characteristics' by professional body.



## Deep dive: age

Across the age spectrum, professionals shared how age had shaped their experiences in the workplace.

Participants shared how they thought a working environment can benefit from diversity in age: younger professionals can bring vibrancy and fresh perspectives to the workplace; while older professionals can bring rich experience and an understanding of how the profession has evolved over time. Yet, both younger and older professionals reported feelings undermined by those that doubt their competence because of their age. Younger professionals often feel they are perceived as inexperienced; while some older professionals feel they are perceived as 'past it', with the relevance of their skills challenged by changes in professions over time. This may result in feeling they are not listened to or have to work harder to prove their worth. In many cases, age intersects with those other characteristics which tend to experience having their competence undermined.



Being young and Black, I have had to showcase I am very serious and hardworking and good at what I do.

Focus group participant (IOSH member)

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Additionally, some people shared clashes in workplace culture as a result of generational differences. There are apparent stereotypes – for example, about a 'snowflake' generation or a 'stale' older workforce. Differences in life stages also impacted workplace culture, intersecting with a number of other factors such as caring responsibilities and health-related changes.



I just think it's the inexperience and people maybe not getting to know and understand that there is more to life than just work, work, work. I remember feeling like that when I was younger. My work was my life. I socialised with my work peers. We did everything together. That changes and that dynamic changes as you go through the life stages.

Focus group participant (CIPS member)

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## Deep dive: caring responsibilities

This characteristic encompasses those who care for adults or children – as a primary or secondary, joint or sole carer. This diversity in familial relationships often is not recognised in EDI policies and initiatives around caring responsibilities.



People have now a caring responsibility for older parents, ... kids from previous relationships, foster children, adoption leave, all of these things are not being adequately factored into the workplace.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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The most prominent concern of those with caring responsibilities relates to the ability to balance these with work commitments. Often, expectations (around travel and working time) and workload do not align well with caring roles – which has an impact on progression pathways as people face choices about which to prioritise. Even if carers remain in the workforce, often part-time or flexible roles are deemed incompatible with progression. There is evidence of some improvement, with the Covid-19 pandemic spurring increased remote and flexible working, though progress is patchy. Additionally, the rising costs of care make the financial viability of decisions more pressing for some.



I found that as a working mother, I had to make choices that actually I would've preferred not to have to make. In that I had basically a choice to sacrifice family life over career progression.

Focus group participant (ACCA member)

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Gendered expectations around care are apparent. For women, sometimes the perception (rather than reality) of caring responsibilities is believed to shape prejudices. Men who take on greater caring responsibilities can also face negative consequences as they challenge norms. These expectations also tend to be highly heteronormative.



My husband did take three months of the 12 months maternity leave that I had. That was, 'Oh, why are you asking for this?'. Then mysteriously when he went back to work, he went for a promotion and didn't get it, and then his job wasn't there to go back to.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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## Deep dive: ethnicity, religion and race

Racialised and religious discrimination and exclusion are clearly apparent in workplaces across the professions. All Black and minority ethnic groups are significantly more likely than White people to have experienced or witnessed any type of discrimination since the start of 2019; they are also significantly more likely to feel like they don't belong.

This relates to a number of ways minoritised ethnic groups and religions are stereotyped, and ways their differences are not accepted or celebrated in the workplace – for example:



Muslim women and South Asian women are [often seen] as ... we're very timid and unable to be management level, but also [we're] equally aggressive and troublemakers.

Focus group participant  
(CRL regulated member)

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Health and safety professionals can be seen as enforcers, inspectors or the 'bad guys'. As an ethnic minority this can be quite challenging as there is that barrier or difference already. I personally overcome this by dressing smart, being professional and being knowledgeable.

Focus group participant (IOSH member)

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It's certainly around personal appearance, especially hair and the perception around what is professional hair styling or not according to some industries... making sure that you present yourself in a way that isn't going to get you in trouble.

Focus group participant (CIPR member)

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Barriers to progression and access are also significantly more common among minoritised ethnic groups, compared to white people. This emerges due to biases and discrimination in recruitment and progression processes, as well as the lack of access to professional networks and roles models among these groups (which often intersects with social class). In some instances, professionals mentioned cultural factors which meant they were less likely to aspire towards certain roles or professions, or be supported by their families and/or communities.

The subtle ways in which these experiences are articulated can sometimes make people doubt their perceptions, or ensures these are difficult to overcome.





At the beginning of my career, about 20 years ago now, racism was more obvious, really obvious, and as we've started to educate ourselves more, it's become more discreet but it's still there in terms of structures and systemic processes if you think about performance, appraisals, et cetera. I still think it's there because the system is created for a certain group of people and from that lens as well.

Focus group participant (CIPD member)

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The Black Lives Matter movement has given more prominence to these issues in recent years, and there have been increasing conversations about what meaningful allyship looks like; yet there is still a feeling that race is a characteristic that tends to be associated with more discomfort; and therefore EDI efforts tend to focus more on other characteristics (particularly gender, in many male-dominated professions).



I know that racism is a quite sensitive topic, especially with everything that's gone on during Covid and with Black Lives Matter.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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The negative impacts of both discrimination and a lack of support meant that several participants highlighted the importance of developing support networks and providing mentorship for fellow racially minoritised people in professions and organisations.



I also try to mentor people, and most young Black people ... they just find that there is a ceiling when you come to the corporate world, there's quite a lot of us in middle-level management, and it's because they ... don't have the opportunity, we're not given that chance to prove ourselves.

Focus group participant (ACCA member)

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**Key significant differences by ethnic group**

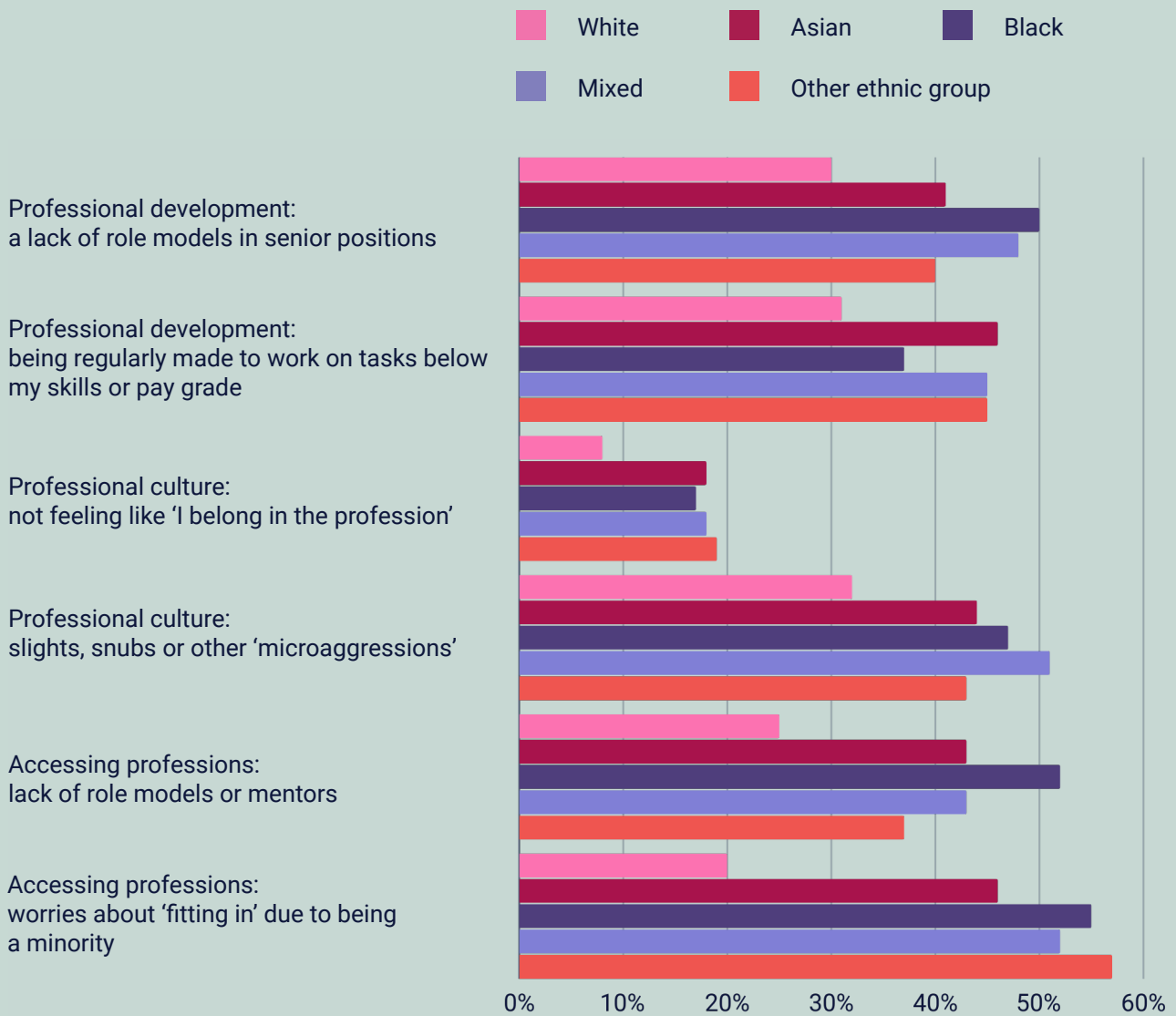


Figure 17: Key significant differences by ethnic group.



## Deep dive: gender identity

Experiences in the workplace are shown to be gendered. Societal roles and expectations influence the types of professions women enter, and roles they do within these: whether related to the types of jobs they aspire towards, the roles they fulfill within teams, or the ways they balance their professional roles with unpaid caring responsibilities. While some people feel their 'female characteristics' are beneficial in male-dominated workplaces, others do not appreciate this, the burden of responsibility they must take on, and the ways these attributes are undervalued at work and across society. Particularly in heavily male-dominated professions, this influences a sense of belonging. Both women and non-binary people are significantly more likely than men to feel they don't belong in their profession. Additionally, even in female-dominated industries, these factors influence progression opportunities – with a clear 'glass ceiling' for women and non-binary people.



They definitely put very female roles on me ... It's very much that they're the things that I get the praise for. My actual day job just gets ignored most of the time, progression-wise, gets ignored. All I get was this praise for these female roles I do, but a man wouldn't have to organise parties on top of the day job. A man wouldn't have to train everyone on top of a day job.

Focus group participant (CIPR member)

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While overt forms of discrimination – such as harassment and insults – tend to be less common, they remain an issue for some women, particularly in certain working environments and cultures. Women also raised specific issues around their accommodations for reproductive health needs around pregnancy, menstruation, menopause and other issues.



I had a reasonably on-site role ... I experienced verbal harassment, physical harassment, sexual comments nonstop. I didn't feel safe, I didn't feel supported. ... There'd even been rumors flying around. I didn't tell anybody I was gay out of fear because of how badly I've been treated just for being a woman, [then] that got found out and it was awful. Honestly. I've never felt so alone and unsafe and unwanted.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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For trans<sup>11</sup> and non-binary people, and those with other marginalised gender identities, experiences are often even more challenged. While some reported a very understanding culture in their workplace, others felt significant discomfort around the ability to be oneself at work – particularly amidst a lack of education on these identities and a fraught societal context. For many, these felt like less ‘socially acceptable’ EDI issues for organisations to tackle. In most instances, the interventions mentioned were limited to the use of pronouns – which non-binary people noted could be comfortably adopted by cis-gender people, but disclosing this at work was a more difficult choice for trans and non-binary people.



For me right now, I’d say I feel I belong at this moment, but I won’t in a couple of years’ time because I’m trans and about to transition. I think at that point, there’s a very fair chance I’ll be forced out, because that’s always I think the most controversial, the newest right now, the most argumentative.

Focus group participant (CIPFA member)

### Key differences between genders

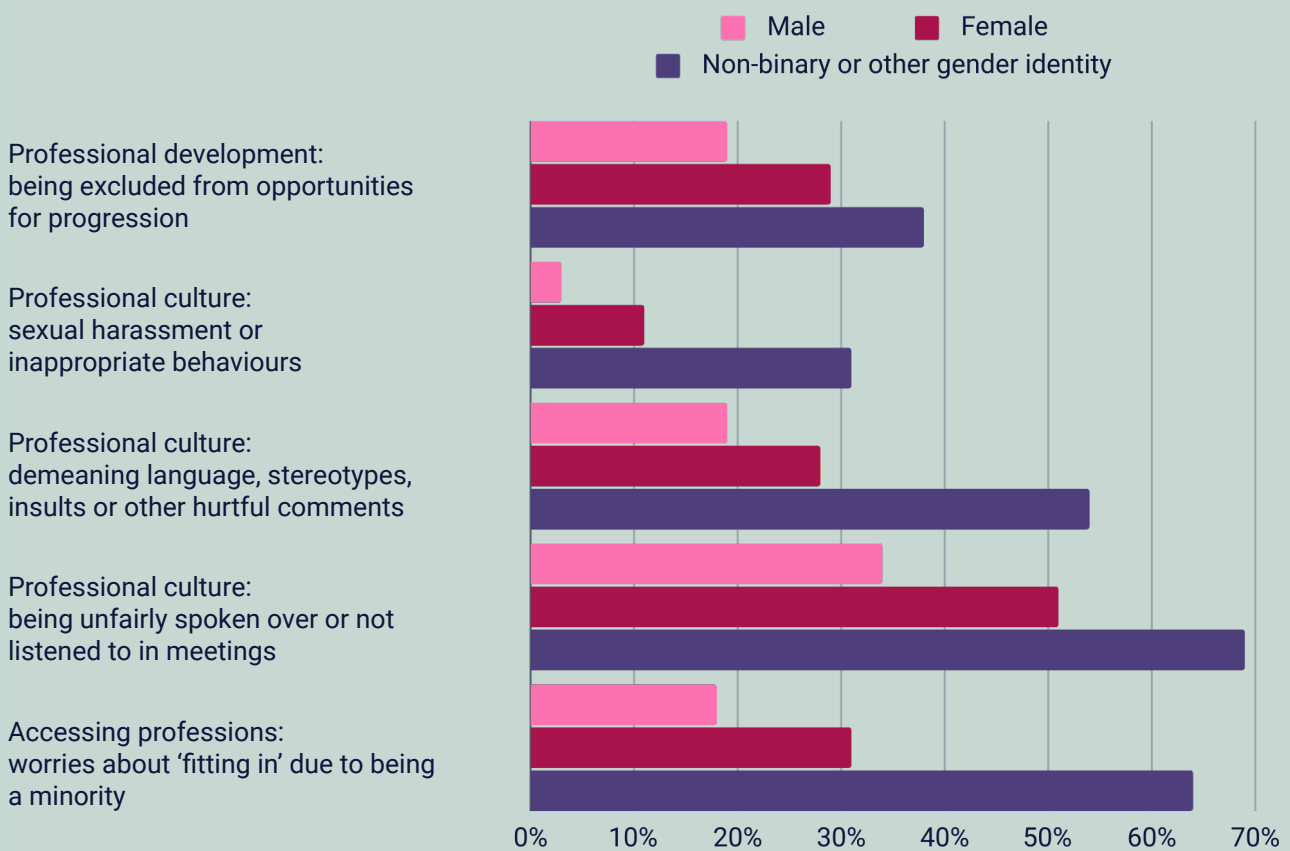


Figure 18: Key differences between genders.

11 Unfortunately the sample size of trans people is too small to draw out any statistically significant differences in the quantitative data.



## Deep dive: mental health

Societal conversations around mental health have grown significantly in recent years. Mental health conditions are recognised as a factor that can both influence and be impacted by experiences in the workplace. However, gendered, racialised and classed cultural factors are understood to influence who is more likely to come forward with concerns.



One of the things we've set up is, actually, a men's allies network [that discusses] the suicide rate in construction and [shows it's] OK to talk ... One of the things we've actually found [is] that in breaking up traditional male, female teams and getting that mix, there is a much better level of openness.

Focus group participant (IOSH member)

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Those with a mental health condition are significantly more likely to feel they do not belong in their profession, and this can be shaped by a number of factors, such as a lack of accommodations to people's mental health needs, and struggles they experience in interacting with colleagues or in high-pressure environments and situations. This includes recruitment processes and exams and qualifications.



It's something that I'm doing at my current company at the minute, where I'm trying to challenge and move away from this idea that they're not allowed to give you in advance what they're going to ask you in an interview. If they change that, I believe it's going to make it a lot more inclusive for people and alleviate a lot of that unnecessary anxiety that a lot of us do get when going to an interview. It shouldn't be a stressful experience.

Focus group participant (CII member)

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Mental health conditions are also understood to be aggravated by experiences of discrimination and exclusion – even where these appear to be more closely related to other characteristics.



My mental health was extremely poor. I didn't feel safe, I didn't feel valued. It was horrendous.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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### Key significant differences for professionals with mental health conditions



Figure 19: Key significant differences for professionals with mental health conditions.



## Deep dive: neurodiversity

Neurodiversity became an issue many professionals wanted to talk about as part of the research – it is felt that it has been neglected and misunderstood on EDI agendas for too long. Many professionals had contended with late diagnoses and discussed their experiences of coming to terms with neurodivergence and what this meant for them in the workplace. For others, this had been a longer-term experience – and the wide spectrum of experiences and needs was sometimes a tension in discussions.

Many professionals identified a number of ways neurodivergent characteristics provided beneficial ways to think differently from the majority of neurotypical people, which was an asset in their professions. Nonetheless, this was balanced with a wide range of challenges they face – particularly when sufficient accommodations were not in place or adhered to. Particular issues related to the ways qualifications and progression pathways account for neurodiversity.



I find it difficult because I don't like perceiving myself to be disabled, nor do I like to see myself as having superpowers ... I'm super good at some things and other things I'm bad at. Hopefully, if we're candid about those things and people come to understand that we can harness people's strengths and there's an advantage in doing that, and accommodating for the areas that they struggle.

Focus group participant (CII member)

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How we get to that end result is different to neurotypical people and that's the bit that's not taken into account. You have to stick with these rigid pathways that everyone's put in place for decades. All we're asking for are those rigid pathways to be a bit wider, a bit different so we can still get to the end goal just a little bit differently.

Focus group participant (CIPS member)

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Many described the ways in which a feeling of difference impacted their sense of belonging, which often intersected with other characteristics that made them stand out or feel different too. Several people spoke about the ways in which they 'mask' their difference, and the burden this put on them – highlighting a particular intersection with mental health. Some chose not to disclose their neurodivergence at work due to fear of judgement.



I'm relatively good at masking these days, had some ups and downs in university, but got quite good at pretending to be a regular grownup business person. I spent a lot of my career feeling like I was cosplaying<sup>12</sup> as a grownup and a lot of imposter syndrome and all of that stuff.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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<sup>12</sup> This refers to the practice of dressing up and/or role playing as fictional characters, usually from popular culture.

**Key significant differences among neurodivergent professionals**

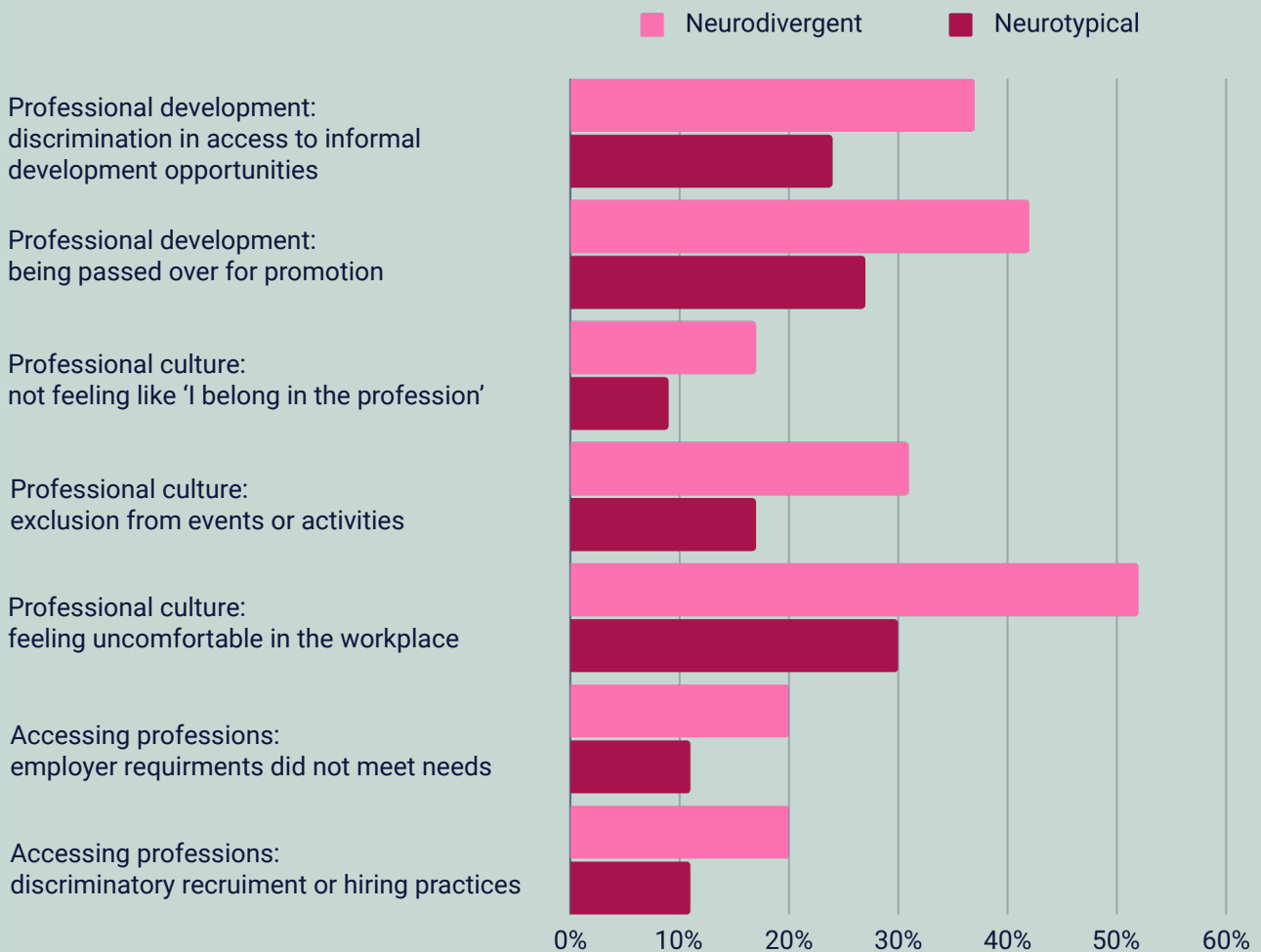


Figure 20: Key significant differences among neurodivergent professionals.



## Deep dive: physical health and disability

A number of different types of physical health conditions and disabilities can influence people's experiences in the professions in variable ways. Some of these are related to age, or may start or become apparent at different stages of someone's life; others are longer-term and experienced since childhood.

The most significant issues for people with physical health conditions tend to be focused on the accommodations they need, and whether these needs are met appropriately. This can also impact on progression, as the expectations of more senior roles may (be perceived to) become less compatible with certain health conditions.

While the capacity to provide accommodations is undermined by systemic issues that limit, or impose challenges, to the lives of disabled people (for example, poor infrastructures for disabled access), often, accommodating to different needs is thought to require some level of empathy, understanding and awareness from employers, colleagues and managers. Broad misunderstandings can negatively impact a professionals' sense of belonging – whether it means people fail to be included in events or activities, or they are treated differently through subtle microaggressions.

There is a general perception that visible disabilities are better understood than those that are 'invisible'. Those with an 'invisible' condition additionally face the dilemma of when or how to disclose this.



You feel invisible, as such, it's an invisible disability, and I have visible [disability], I use a wheelchair, as well. People just think, oh, you're disabled, because you're in a wheelchair, they ignore anything else. It's the behaviours and attitudes.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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For professionals with 'visible' health conditions, they regularly feel like they 'stand out' in the workplace – lacking role models, or people with similar conditions, who could demonstrate (to themselves and others) what they are capable of.



I think if there are more [disabled] people that are visible, they can see that it can be done.

Expert interviewee

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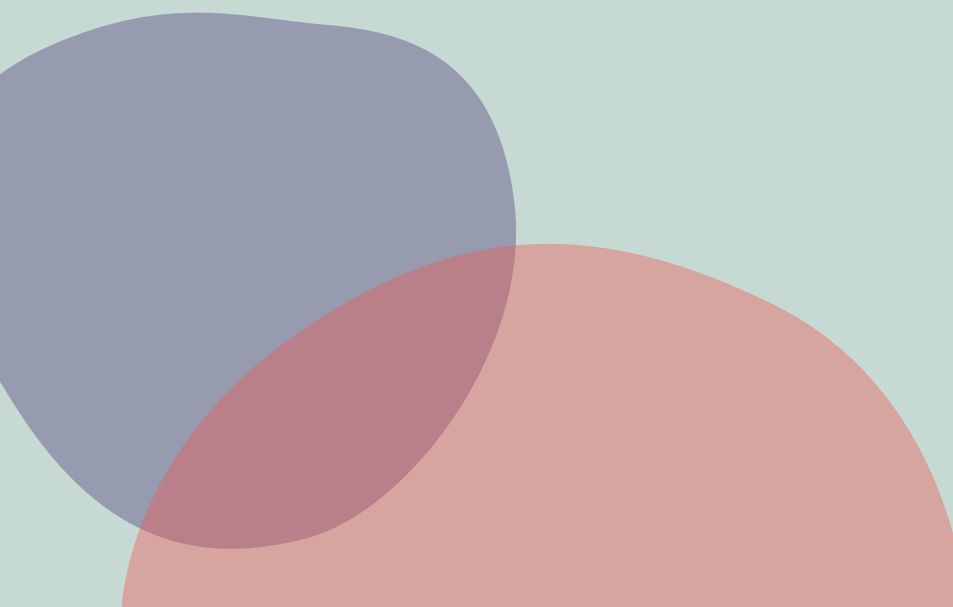
With EDI initiatives and awareness often focused on race, class and gender; many feel that disability is another area that does not receive enough attention in EDI initiatives.



### Key significant differences among professionals with physical health conditions/disabilities



Figure 21: Key significant differences among professionals with physical health conditions/ disabilities.



## Deep dive: sexuality

Diversity in sexuality tends to be more overtly celebrated in organisations, particularly around Pride. While this clear stance of acceptance is appreciated by some, others are wary that this may be disingenuous “rainbow washing”.



We are quite good at attending Pride and we're making it a big thing and everyone is really positive about it and it goes everywhere and it's lovely. It does feel very corporate. It feels very much it's almost for the company to be seen at Pride rather than for the people.

Focus group participant (CII member)

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There is a perception that sexuality does not have much to do with a person's job role in most professions. This can lead to some positive experiences of accepting organisational and professional cultures – yet this starkly contrasts with those that feel uncomfortable disclosing their sexual orientation and ‘bringing their full self’ to work due to a fear of judgement – particularly in exclusive cultures. Not feeling able to be authentic can take a toll on people's wellbeing and belonging. When people choose to ‘come out’, some highlighted negative experiences of discrimination and exclusion in the workplace in relation to their LGBTQ+ identity. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer people are significantly more likely than heterosexual professionals to experience several types of discrimination.



I went into a very male-dominated environment where I went back in the closet because they needed me to appear to be a ‘real man’ in order to treat me like an equal. It was very difficult to navigate that as a gay man.

Focus group participant (IWFM member)

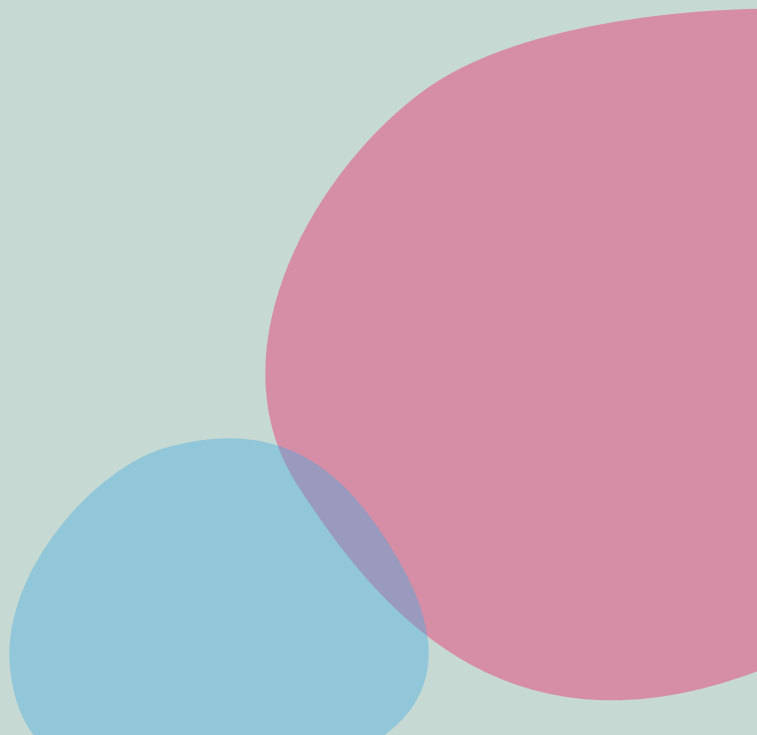
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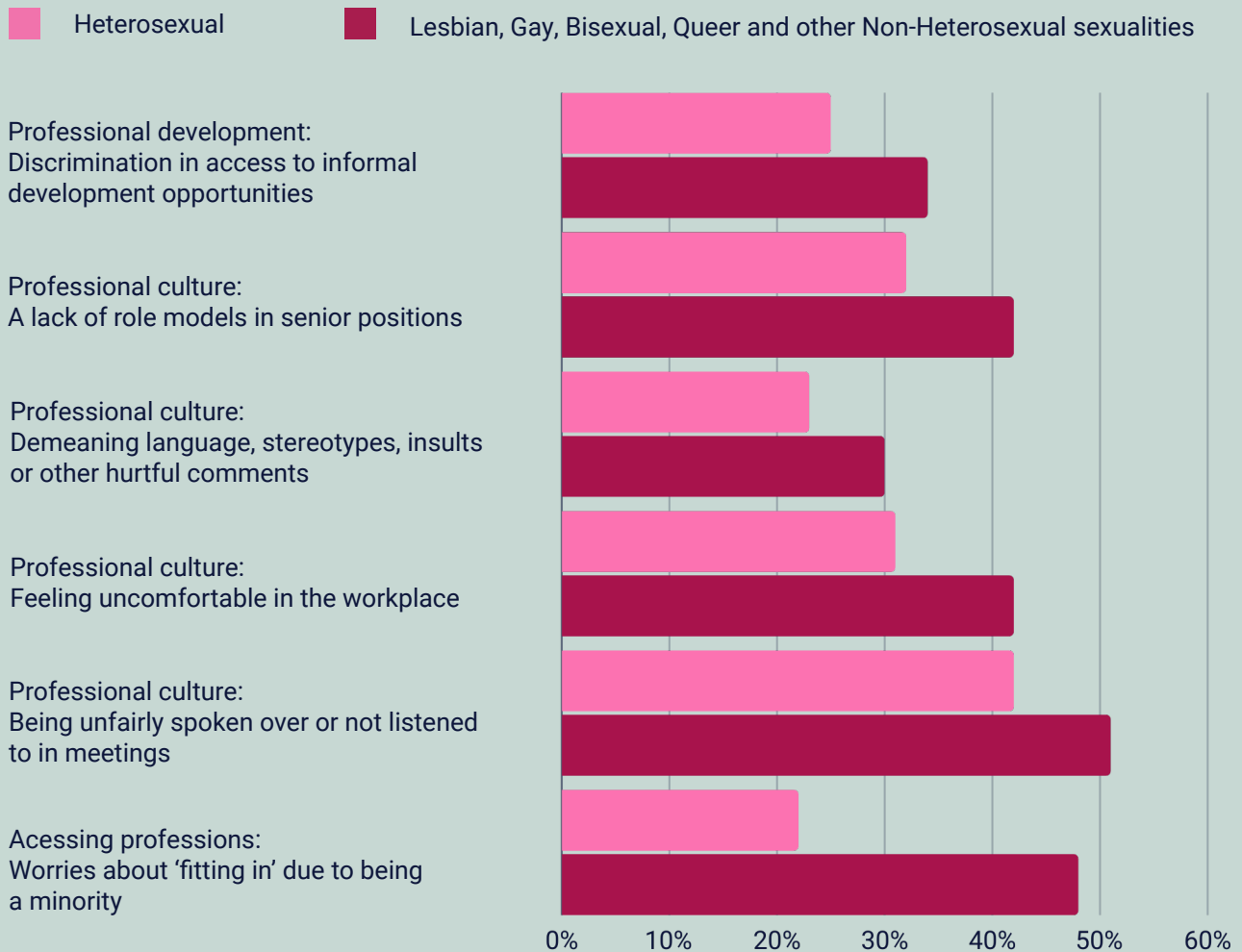
I'm cautious of saying I'm bisexual in my workplace because of how it was reacted to in a previous law firm where I was told you shouldn't say that to people. It caused problems.

Focus group participant  
(CRL regulated member)

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**Key significant differences among lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and other non-heterosexual professionals**



*Figure 22: Key significant differences among lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and other non-heterosexual professionals.*





## Deep dive: socioeconomic background and class

Social class is a complex concept that reflects the ways people identify with social and cultural factors in association with current or previous economic factors. It is also often thought to underpin and intersect with several other causes of disadvantage. Conversations around social class therefore covered a broad spectrum of experiences. While quantitative differences between those from professional, intermediate, and lower socioeconomic backgrounds (based on parental occupation aged 14) weren't consistently significant for metrics regarding professional culture and barriers to progression, qualitative insights reflect a range of ways in which class and social mobility shapes experiences.

Much of the social capital professionals identified as *enabling* factors for entry and progression in professions was closely aligned with class – in terms of access to networks, role models and mentors, as well as better (regarded) educational institutions. Some professional and organisational cultures appear to be particularly nepotistic. People felt they faced discrimination based on socioeconomic background through a range of subtle characteristics, ranging from accent to cultural references. Availability of opportunities and support varied based on family, community and educational background. There are also more practical factors, such as affordability.



Coming from the place that I come from, a lot of people would look at it and go, 'No, definitely not.' ... I've been told things like, 'You need to lose your accent because it's too Northern.' It is very Westminster-centric.

Focus group participant (CMI member)

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I started my training with what was then one of the 'big six' accounting firms and within two days of starting, I get asked what school I went to, to be responded by a manager in the department who said, 'Oh, that was just the high school, that wasn't the academy'. Then I get asked what my dad did. It was very much a case of not about your ability as to why you had the job, it was all about where you came from, what your family did.

Focus group participant (ICAS member)

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Belonging among those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds was often mediated by a sense of imposter syndrome.



In the past, I've never felt like I belonged at any of my jobs. Working for the local government in a middle-class area, working in private schools, I always felt like I didn't fit in. Especially like, I don't speak like them either and also, my background was very different from where they came from. I always felt like I did suffer with the imposter syndrome a lot.

Focus group participant (CMI member)

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**Key significant differences between professionals from different socioeconomic backgrounds**

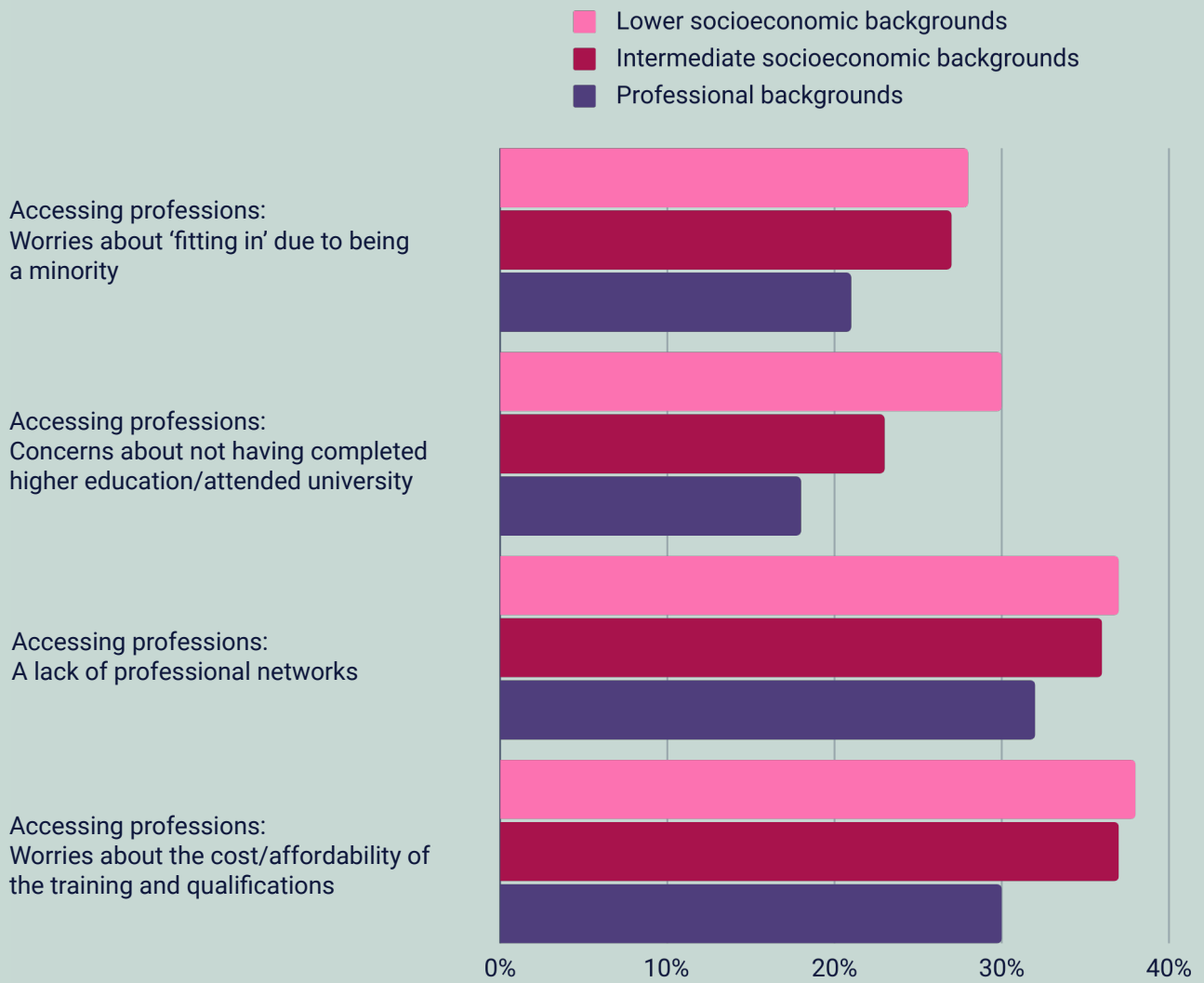


Figure 23: Key significant differences between professionals from different socioeconomic backgrounds.



# Part 2:

## Exploring approaches to drive change

This section shares the research findings on professionals' perceptions of EDI and reflections on existing efforts to drive change. It questions the extent of progress, and highlights key tensions that shape experiences of intervening on EDI.

### Key findings:

EDI is on the agenda. More than three-quarters (77%) of professionals surveyed report at least one type of EDI initiative or intervention in place at their organisation. However, professionals' views on the extent of progress are split.

While most are supportive of the principles of EDI, there is widespread scepticism about the capacity of EDI initiatives to deliver meaningful change. The overriding feeling is that progress seems to be stalling as there has been a failure to convert words into action.

Because of these concerns, disillusionment is growing and support for action on EDI seems to be flagging. Around one fifth (22%) of professionals surveyed believe EDI receives too much focus compared to other issues within their profession. At the extreme, there is a backlash against the EDI agenda from a few professionals who feel efforts have 'gone too far'.

Initiatives practised in recent years are generally viewed as effective, but the ways these are executed is vital. There is no 'one size fits all' solution, and 'what works' depends not only on the context (across professions, sectors, industries, and different types of organisation) – it also requires navigating several tensions:

- How best to demonstrate your commitment to change in the short-term, while enacting change that aims to have longer-term impacts?
- How best to involve those with lived experience of marginalisation in initiatives, without burdening them with the responsibility to drive change?
- How best to build coalitions and alliances across a range of groups, while appropriately recognising their differences?



The professionals we spoke to largely attribute this EDI agenda to generational and societal shifts in attitudes. They highlight the influence of global social movements (including #MeToo and Black Lives Matter) and the Covid-19 pandemic on workplace changes, as well as concerted efforts by organisations.



I would say I have certainly seen some improvement just in the sense of a willingness to talk about EDI, to acknowledge, to actually know that it's a priority and it's on the agenda.

Focus group participant (CIPR member)

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Recently, [my employer] seems to have made some significant changes to ... make sure that everybody's heard and respected. There's been some really strong work in that area.

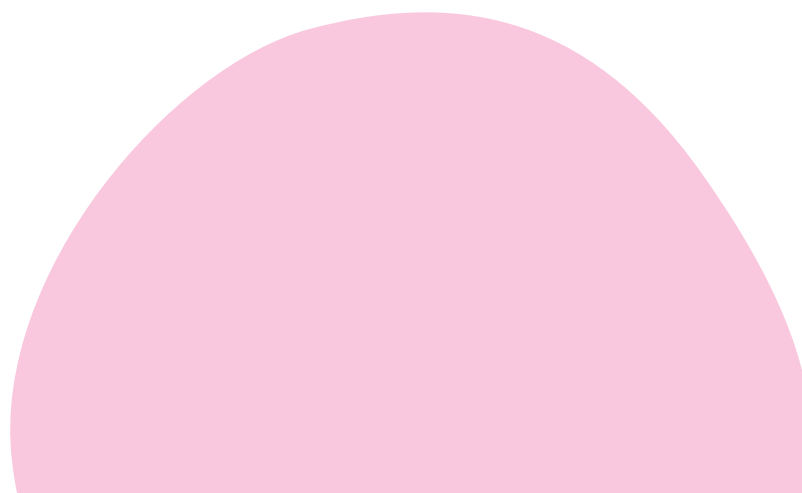
Focus group participant (IET member)

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Nonetheless, despite some positive changes, the findings shared in Part 1 suggest progress has yet to be translated into the everyday lived experiences of many professionals. Professionals' views on the extent of progress are split.

- Similar proportions of those surveyed agree (37%) and disagree (40%) that their profession represents the diversity of society, with about half of respondents (49%) disagreeing that there is good representation of minority groups at senior levels.
- Likewise, around half (56%) of those surveyed believe their organisation invests sufficient resources to address issues of equality, diversity and inclusion, and 43% believe their profession is doing all it can to address these issues.

We know that progress varies between professions – but we cannot be sure if the ways that perceptions vary between professional membership and regulatory bodies (figures 25 and 26) align with the reality. While, across all these metrics, a trend emerges where more positive views on the current extent of action and issues are significantly more likely among those who have experience of EDI initiatives or interventions (figure 27); it seems negative views are significantly more likely among those with more 'marginalised characteristics' (figure 28). This quantitative analysis leaves an unclear picture about what is driving views on the EDI status quo: whether perceptions match the reality of progress, or reflect wider sentiments around EDI efforts among different groups.



**'The profession represents the diversity of society'**

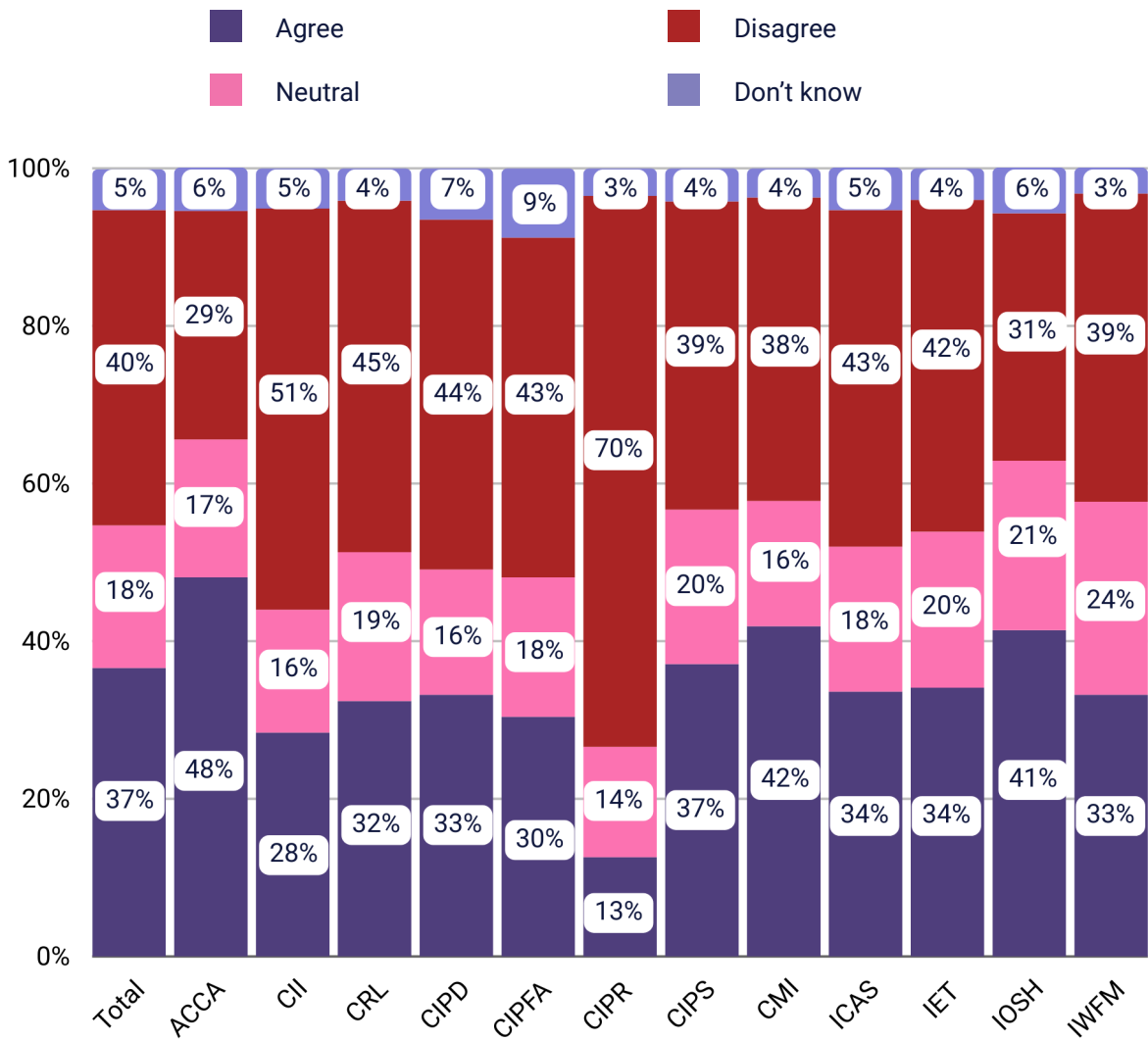


Figure 25: Responses to 'To what extent do you agree or disagree: the profession represents the diversity of society?' among professionals surveyed from each professional body.



**'My profession is doing all it can to address issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion'**

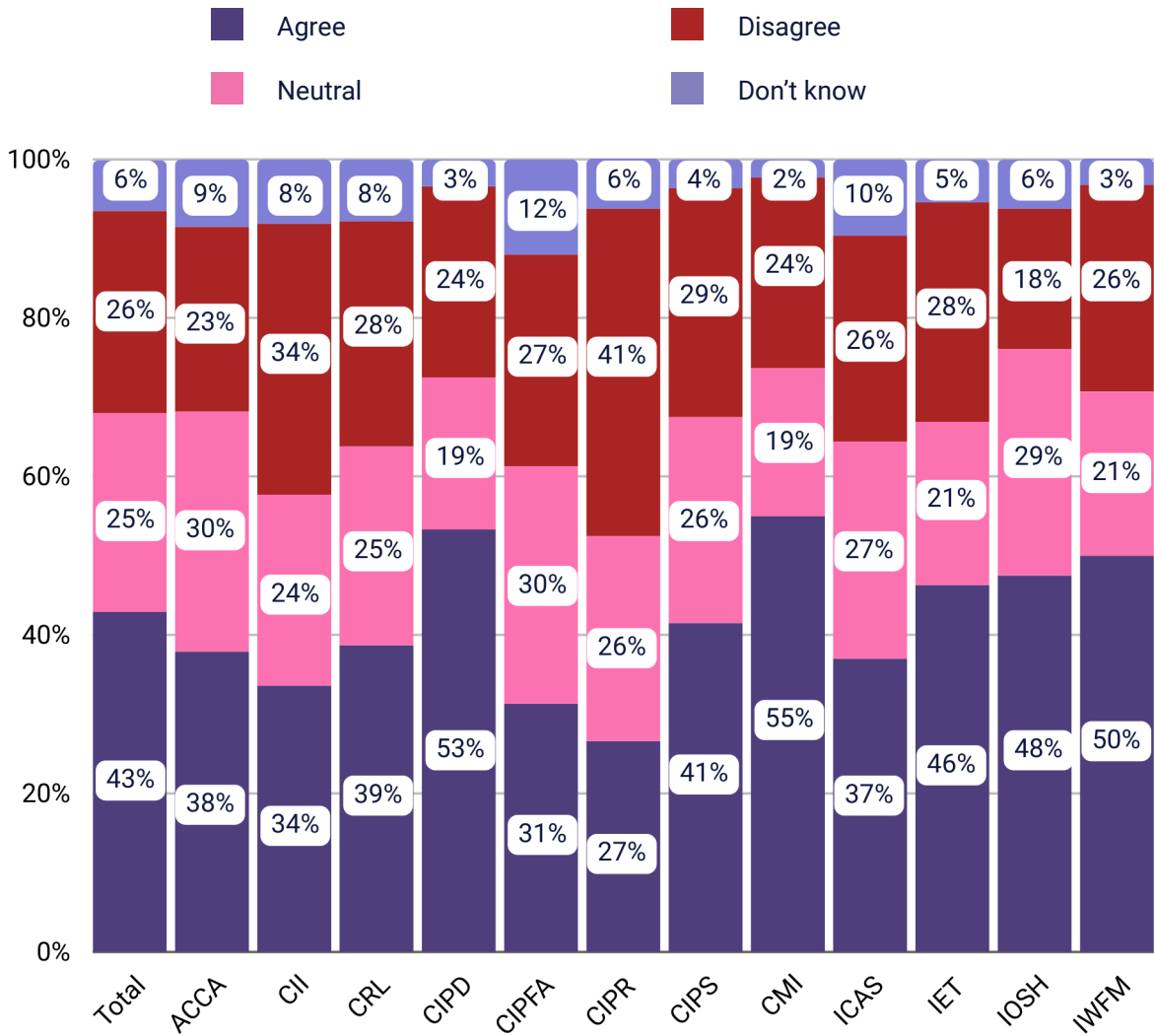
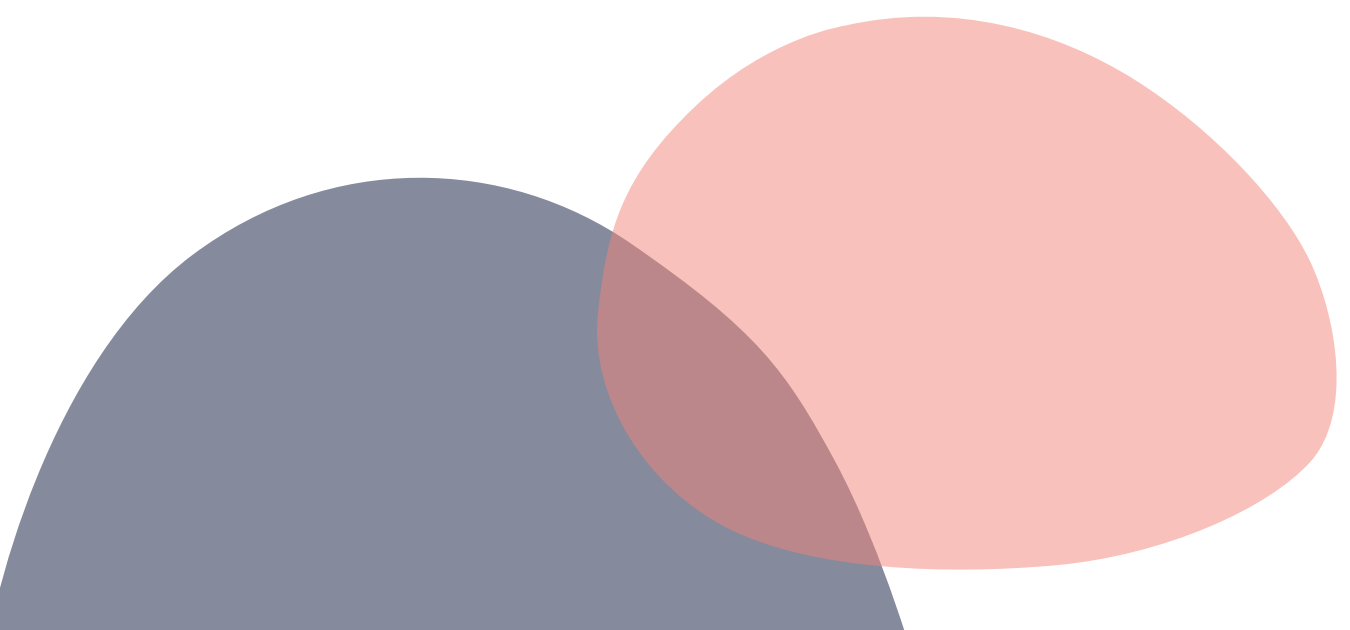


Figure 26: Responses to 'To what extent do you agree or disagree: my profession is doing all it can to address issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion?' among professionals surveyed from each professional body.



**'My profession is doing all it can to address issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion'**

- Agree 'The profession represents the diversity of society'
- Agree 'There is good representation of minority groups at senior levels in the profession'
- Agree 'My organisation invests sufficient resources to address issues of equality, diversity and inclusion'
- Agree 'My profession is doing all it can to address issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion'

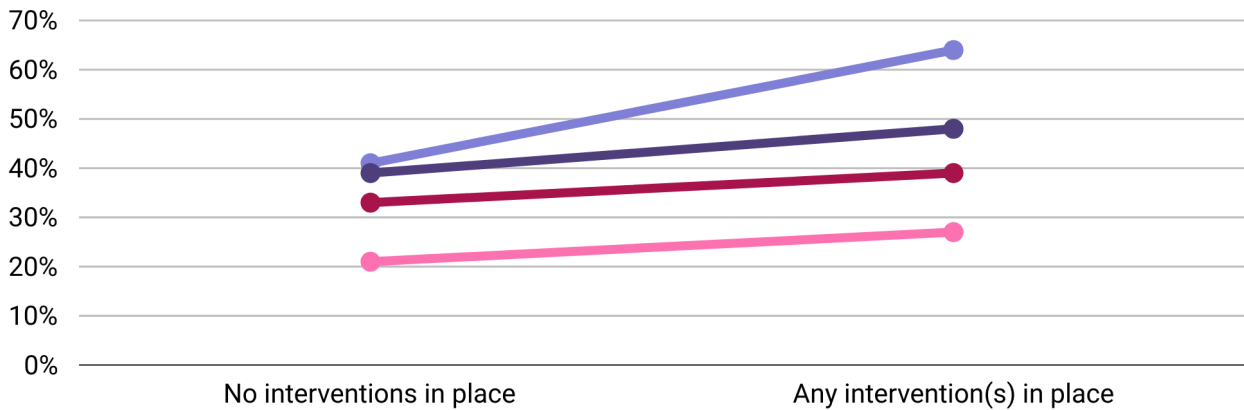


Figure 27: Proportion of professionals surveyed who agree with the above statements, between those who report any (n= 4196) or no (n= 3498) type(s) of EDI intervention or initiative implemented by their current (or most recent) employer.

**Negative outlooks by number of 'marginalised characteristics'**

- Disagree 'The profession represents the diversity of society'
- Disagree 'There is good representation of minority groups at senior levels in the profession'
- Disagree 'My organisation invests sufficient resources to address issues of equality, diversity and inclusion'
- Disagree 'My profession is doing all it can to address issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion'

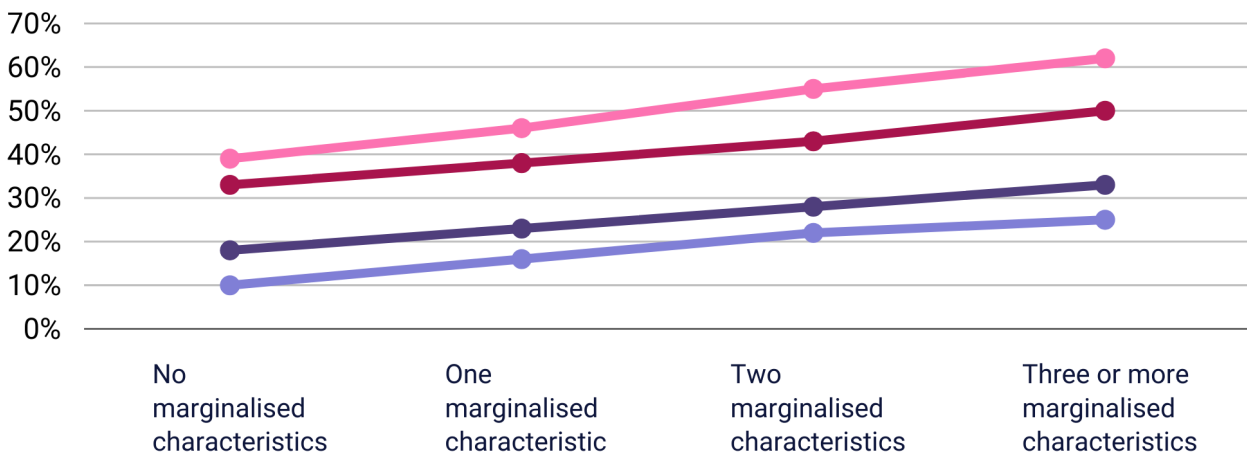


Figure 28: Proportion of professionals surveyed who disagree with the above statements, by number of marginalised characteristics.



## Less talk, more action

Qualitative insights suggest the mix of views about the extent of progress constitutes a challenge to the way EDI tends to be enacted and mobilised thus far, rather than the values it represents *per se*. Our research reveals many professionals are beginning to lose faith in the capacity of EDI initiatives to deliver meaningful change. Time and time again, we heard in the survey, focus groups and expert interviews a perception that EDI has become a “box-ticking exercise”, where organisations pay “lip service” to the issues, rather than committing to genuine improvements in outcomes. In many cases, it seems to be a ‘race to the bottom’, with employers doing the bare minimum to “keep up appearances”.



I feel like it's very much the tick-box exercise where I work and the industry in general. That they brought a policy in, it ticks a box, they publish it, nothing actually ever happens.

Focus group participant (CIPS member)

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Where there is further action on EDI, professionals were sometimes sceptical about the motivations. Action – from individuals, organisations and professional bodies alike – was often associated with ‘virtue signalling’.<sup>13</sup> Again, this was rooted in a failure to see much change, despite a lot of talk about the issues – which all too often takes place in echo chambers.



It does feel much more like they are ticking tick-boxes and attending webinars and showing that they're supporting Pride, but it feels sometimes like it's more of a business image than actually caring about the people that are being impacted by this.

Focus group participant  
(CRL regulated member)

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It is starting to feel a lot like lip service where conversations are happening ... it's great that these groups and networks exist, but it's usually always the same people involved in them ... it probably really sounds really harsh, it's almost becoming a little club for EDI.

Focus group participant  
(CRL regulated member)

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13 Virtue signalling refers to public expressions intended to externally demonstrate one's social consciousness.

Those from marginalised groups and backgrounds often have particular concerns about the ways EDI is approached. Some feel that, despite so much conversation, none of this is speaking to their individual experiences. They, therefore, feel isolated by efforts because of a lack of consideration for the intersectionality of issues, or a perception that some issues are more socially accepted than others.



Everybody wants to jump on the bandwagon of LGBTQ and BAME and that's easy. It's a quick win. When you've got what's termed as a disability or disadvantage in the case of neurodiversity, then nobody wants to know.

Focus group participant (CIPD member)

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Where accountancy is not good, it's the things it finds embarrassing and doesn't want to talk about. It doesn't talk about disability or neurodiversity or any of those sorts of issues. It doesn't talk about LGBT or gender identity. It doesn't talk about social class or any of those kinds of things that people feel uncomfortable talking about.

Focus group participant (CIPFA member)

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The overriding feeling is that progress seems to be stalling as there has been a failure to convert words into action.



I think we need to be getting past the educational stage into the structural changes stage. And at the moment we're still kind of in that 'this is why we're doing it' stage rather than 'these are the things we need to do to make that change.

Expert interviewee

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## Going too far?

The consequences of this stalling progress are significant. Because of these concerns, professionals are becoming put off by the practice of EDI and disillusioned with efforts. Support for action on EDI seems to be flagging. Despite the work that has been done to highlight the importance of these issues, around one-fifth (22%) of professionals surveyed believe EDI receives too much focus compared to other issues within their profession.

This view brings together a wide spectrum of opinions. While it is apparent among those from all backgrounds, it is significantly more common among those with no 'marginalised characteristics' (figure 29).

At the extreme, there is a backlash against the EDI agenda from a few professionals. Some feel efforts have 'gone too far' and might be unfairly threatening the rights and freedoms of some groups of people. These people tend to believe that it is the EDI agenda, rather than lived experiences of marginalisation (discussed in part 1), that prevent decisions being made on the basis of a meritocracy.



EDI is intolerant, divisive and only leads to unnecessary friction.

Survey Respondent (CII member)

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The other thing is getting the right balance. I feel that we don't want to go too far and alienate other groups of people along the way.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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**'Equality, diversity, and inclusion receive too much focus compared to other issues within the profession'**

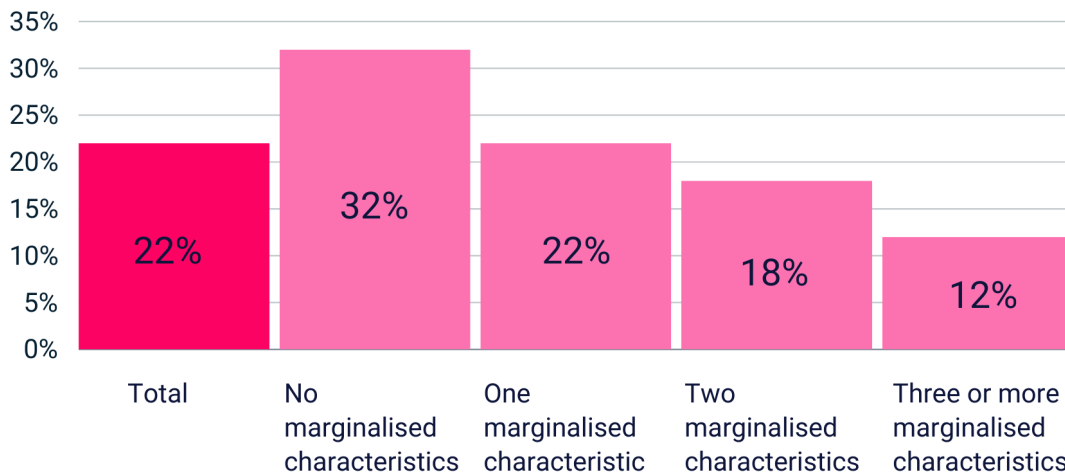


Figure 29: Proportion of professionals surveyed who agree 'Equality, diversity, and inclusion receive too much focus compared to other issues within the profession', by number of 'marginalised characteristics'.

Some feel that the minority with more extreme views against EDI are unlikely to change their views (in the short-term, in particular), which implicates risks as it becomes difficult to pursue an approach that is guaranteed to meet the interests of all parties.



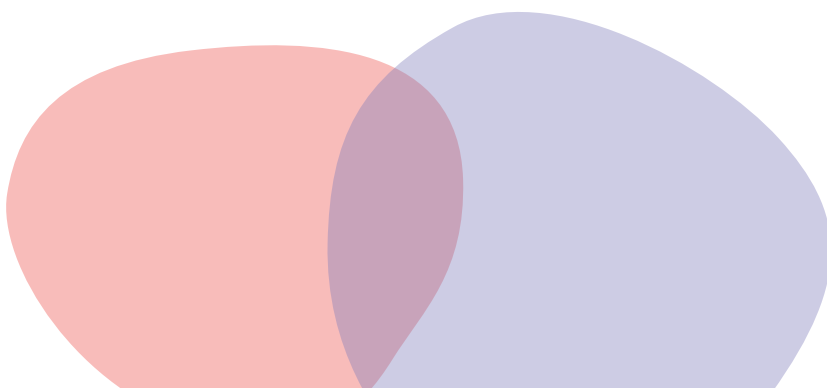
If you do not believe we are all equals then no amount of training, policies or practices are going to help.

Survey respondent (CII member)



Are we going to shift the views of someone who thinks ... 'this is all wokism'? Not necessarily, but actually, I don't really care about them because they're not going to be the leaders of the future. They might be the leaders now. ... My interest is that middle bit that wants to run the sector in the next five to seven years. They need to get the message that this is their absolute core competence.

Expert interviewee



## B: What works?

As professionals want to see more action, there is no shortage of solutions that have been tried in recent years.<sup>14</sup> A range of different initiatives are practised across professional organisations: while some are more common than others, there is largely a feeling among professionals surveyed that these are effective and worthwhile (figure 30).

Flexible working arrangements are most prevalent: they are available at the organisations where almost three-quarters (72%) of the professionals surveyed currently work. These were also deemed as most effective, by 78% of those who have them in place at their current organisation. Other common practices, available to around half of those professionals surveyed, include access to EDI resources, training, and staff networks. Meanwhile, initiatives providing targeted opportunities for marginalised groups (such as mentoring, coaching and leadership programmes, or placements, internships and targeted recruitment) and innovation in recruitment practices (such as 'gamified' methods<sup>15</sup> or anonymising CVs) are among the least common interventions, in place at less than two-fifths of the organisations where the professionals surveyed currently work.

Across all the initiatives we asked about, at least half of those who have experience of the initiative within their current organisation believe it is effective for meeting its goals – and there are few significant differences in perceived effectiveness by number of 'marginalised characteristics'. Many professionals also report positive outcomes from EDI efforts in recent years – particularly for personal growth and improved interactions in micro-level teams (figure 31). These perceptions add to building evidence and evaluation on the effectiveness of different practices in the wider literature, with improving (though still limited) monitoring of outcomes.

However, this does still come with challenges. Action on EDI can, in some instances, create worse outcomes for marginalised groups – whether interventions create a backlash, or the wider culture does not support an initiative (for example, when workload expectations do not fit with flexible working arrangements). Sometimes, initiatives can be poorly executed which may cause individuals with marginalised characteristics to feel further isolated by tokenistic efforts. For example, a CIPFA member involved in a focus group told us about a lecture for her professional qualification where "the question was something about a company having issues recruiting and retaining women". The scenario had focused on the pool table in the staff room which led to a "quite excruciating" line of questioning "where everyone knew what [the lecturer] wanted us to say, ... [but] no one wanted to say it." She ultimately felt disappointed that "they just went down the stereotypical route", using simple assumptions about gendered preferences as an explanation, rather than taking the opportunity to delve into the complex and multifaceted issues at hand.

14 Please refer to this [resources bank](#) collated by Memcom in collaboration with several members of the collaborative.

15 This refers to innovations in recruitment practices which deploy elements from games (often digitally) as part of tasks used to select candidates.



**Prevalence and effectiveness of EDI initiatives**

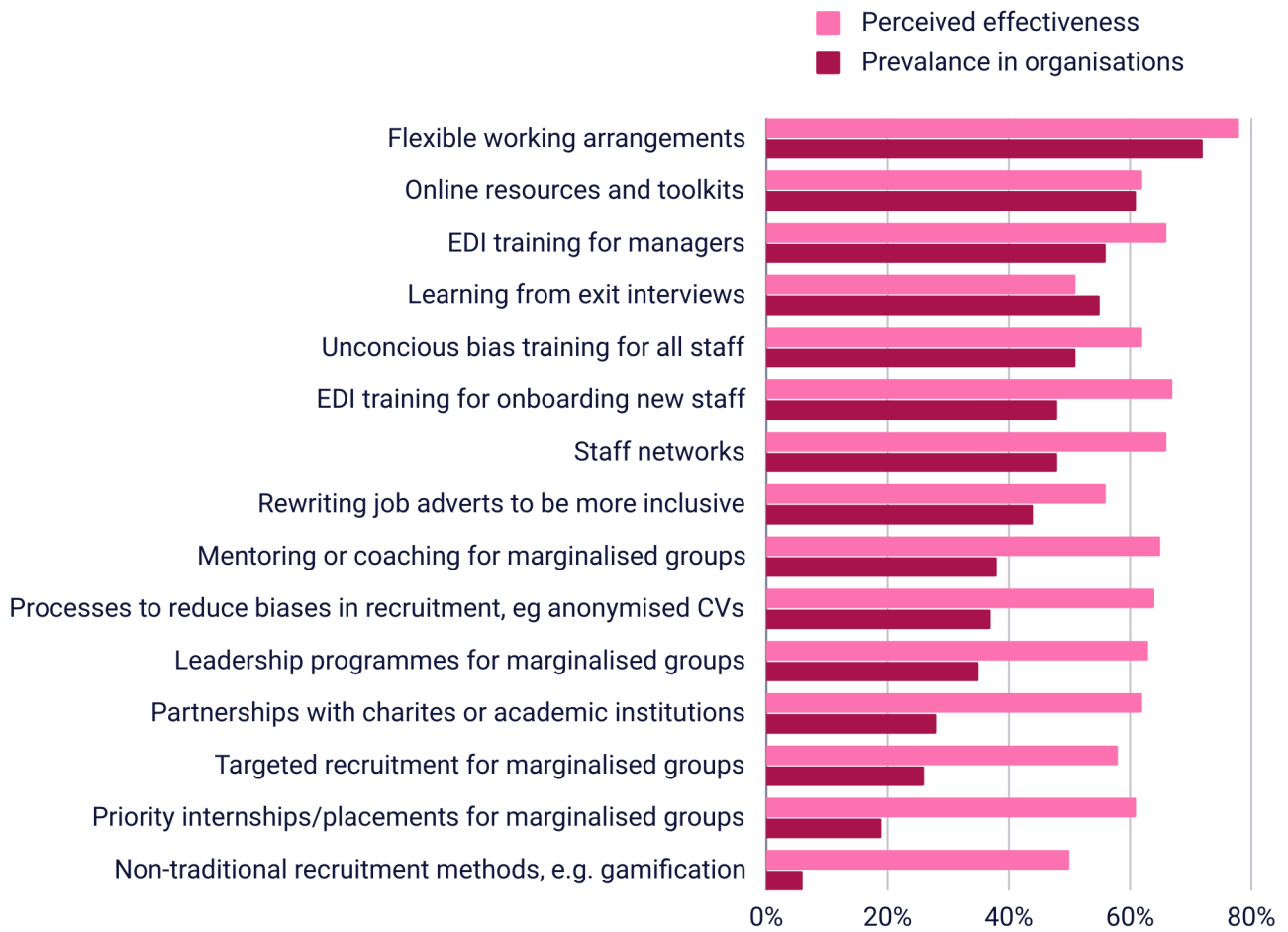
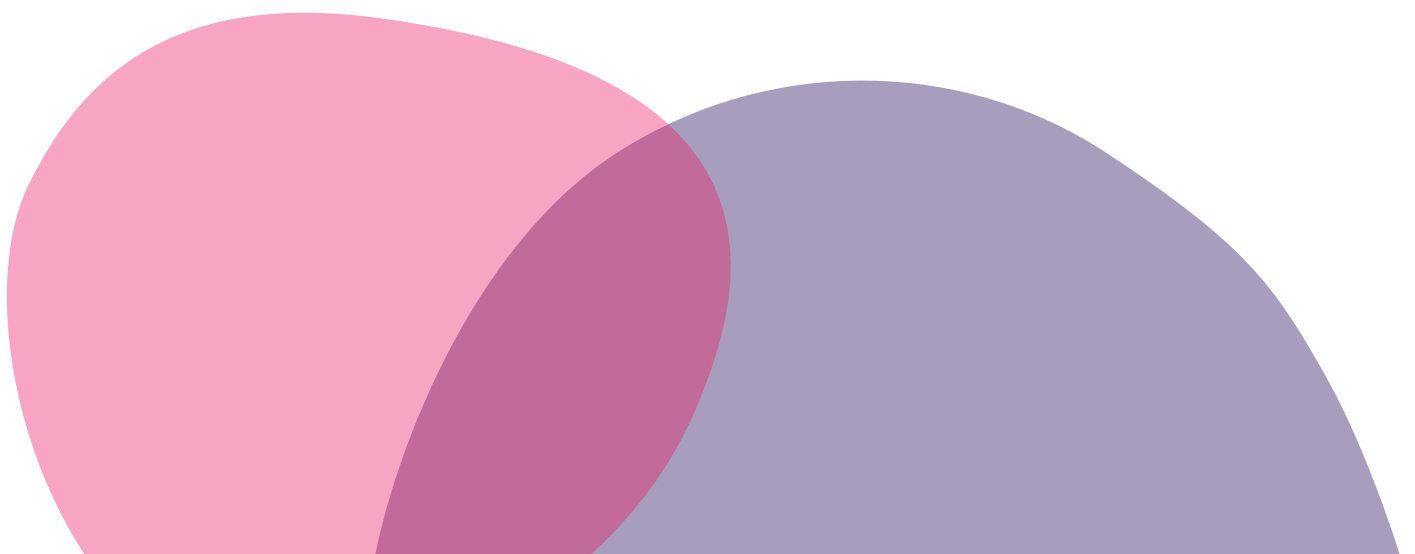


Figure 30: Proportion of professionals surveyed who report the above EDI initiatives and interventions in place at their organisation and, among this group, the proportion that feel these are effective.



**Self-reported outcomes of EDI efforts over the last 5 years**

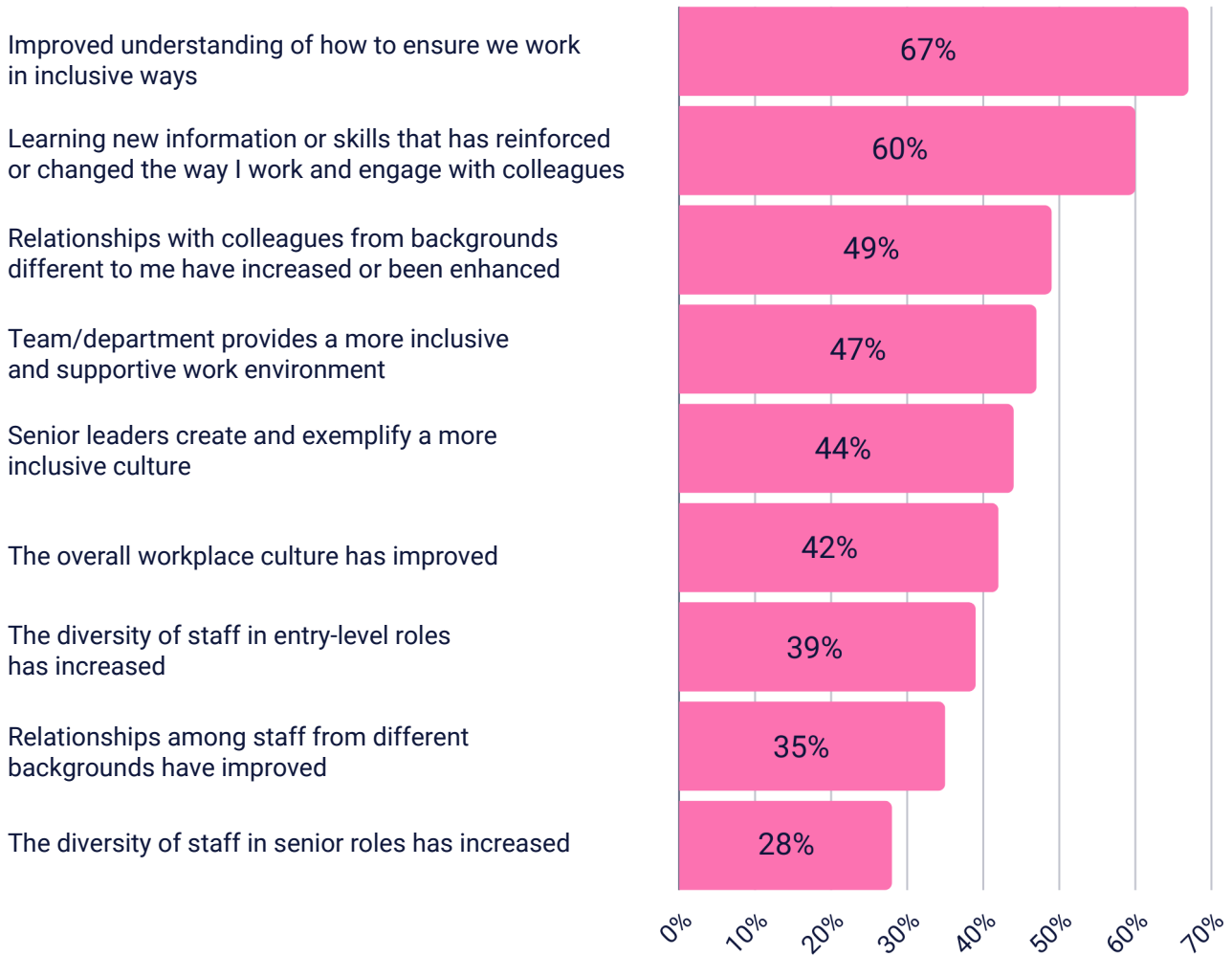


Figure 31: Proportion of professionals surveyed who agree actions on EDI in the past 5 years have had the above effects – both personally and within their organisation.

This situation exemplifies how difficult it is to enact the meaningful changes professionals want to see through EDI initiatives. ‘What works’ becomes dependent on the ways in which numerous factors are negotiated – and striking the right balance requires a brave approach to confronting the nuances and complexities of the issues at hand. Through discussing professionals’ perceptions of EDI, and exploring the perspectives of those working on initiatives to drive change, this research highlights three key tensions to navigate in this process.



## Tension 1: Demonstrating change through time

While it is becoming expected that all organisations act on EDI in some way, professionals say they are fed up with the idea of 'quick fixes' and short-term campaigns that do not appear to have lasting relevance. However, the outcomes of those efforts geared towards longer-term systemic change require greater resource, and it can often be difficult to capture the subtle ways in which this work is making a difference – particularly as there may be significant time lags to see the effects of culture changes. While changes to processes and procedures behind the scenes have the potential to make a significant impact, this must be coupled with appropriate efforts to demonstrate the relevance of this work. This is important, not only to make the case for continued investment; but because professionals want to see that their employers and representative bodies are committed to the principles of EDI. Nonetheless, there is a difficult line to tread as the ways efforts are spoken about must be felt to be genuine and aligned with the changes people see in their day-to-day experiences in the professions.



George Floyd sparked more data, more things published, us talking about it. It was reactive, and now you can see it's dropping off because it was never fully understood, the real reason why we are supposed to be doing these things – because, if so, it wouldn't drop it off, it will continue, if anything, it will grow.

Expert interviewee

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Culture is one of the hardest things to change. ... You have to keep chipping away at it and always be ready to speak up when you see something that isn't right or at least in your opinion isn't right.

Focus group participant (IET member)

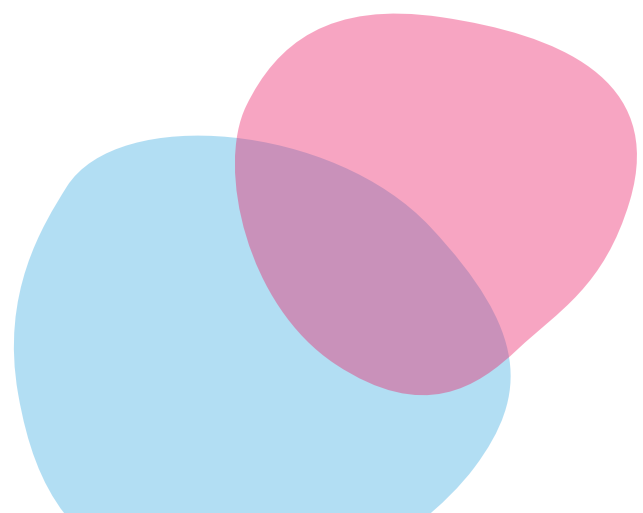
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The reality of the small company I work in is that it's made of people and that people don't change because someone above asks for change ... Obviously, leadership matters, but it's not easy – it takes a long time and probably some form of generational change for those values to permeate properly, I think.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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## Tension 2: Involving those with lived experience of marginalisation

There are several reasons why it is beneficial to involve those with lived experience of marginalisation in EDI efforts. First, their experiential expertise can be invaluable in shaping effective EDI strategies. Second, visible role models, and opportunities for people to learn from those that are different from them, can be important for shifting attitudes. Third, there is a risk of alienating people when they are not consulted on initiatives targeted at those with similar characteristics to them. Yet, despite these many benefits, there can also be challenges in how to involve these groups appropriately within EDI efforts. Those who have been involved in efforts previously have all too often felt let down by the process. They may feel pressured to represent their entire community, in all its diversity, or a 'poster child' for the cause. Others are unfairly burdened with the emotional labour required to enact change, and feel particularly frustrated when their efforts have not been acknowledged by those that hold the power to action change. In addition, fear about how to broach these difficult topics may prevent people with lived experience being consulted all together. Developing appropriate fora to enable these conversations is crucial in order to strike the right balance in who takes responsibility for driving change.



[My organisation] have decided to go to Pride this year ... They didn't do it in conjunction with our EDI working group, they just decided it as an organisation that they were going to do it, which is interesting because I would've perhaps preferred to be consulted on about that.

Focus group participant (CIPFA member)

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Within our own network of colleagues, people just feel quite fed up, quite tired, quite exhausted, quite dejected. Just feel like, oh, they're not bothered about us again, because they don't feel like leaders are actually leading on it, and that we're always the one that has to keep it on the agenda and bring it up. I would certainly say that the intensity of it isn't there.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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People sometimes don't feel brave enough to talk about it. Management are not going to come up to me and often ask the things that they want to because they feel too worried about upsetting me.

Focus group participant (CIPR member)

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## Tension 3: Recognising differences and forming alliances

While achieving equality would mean treating everybody the same, achieving the same outcomes requires equitable systems to recognise that people have different starting points. Some question whether pursuing the same outcomes, and fitting into the existing system, should be the ambition after all – as our differences are shown to bring value and demonstrate how things can be done differently. Among these debates about difference are different agendas. Sometimes people feel this has unhelpfully pitted the interests of different groups against each other. In order to effectively make progress and champion EDI, there is a need to support each other across these differences and develop empathy for different experiences. Nonetheless, forming alliances or coalitions, and grouping people based on shared experiences, still requires care to reflect the nuances and complexities of people's differences – avoiding homogenising experiences or failing to effectively address different needs in approaches for change.



A lot of the initiatives to try and improve EDI in the workplace at the minute seem to put the onus on what that person can do to fit into the organisation better rather than looking at how can the organisation change or work through their discomfort at having somebody who thinks differently or does things differently.

Focus group participant (IET member)

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Up until 2019, we were still being told by people that the gender conversation is the only one that really needs to be had ... the gender diversity conversation has been itself a very tough, challenging advance to make. The little advances it has made, I believe, is because we've got people in those positions who have people in their actual world who identify with certain experiences. They have wives, they have sisters, they have female friends. They've got people in the actual world they've got that proximity and they've generated real empathy from that. When it comes to things like race, it's quite possible to live your actual life, not having to engage really meaningfully with anyone who's different from you.

Expert interviewee

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## Context matters

How best to negotiate these tensions is clearly dependent on the context. There is no 'one size fits all' solution as the nature of the challenges vary subtly, both within and between the professions.<sup>16</sup>

As discussed in part 1, the make-up of professions and organisations varies: who is part of the workforce, and extent of progress on EDI, ultimately influence the types of issues that need to be addressed. In addition, the nature of work in different professions can also introduce different expectations for professionals. For example:

- some professions are expected to do manual labour, or work irregular or long hours – and the capacity to do so interacts with certain characteristics such as caring responsibilities and health conditions;
- specifically for HR and management roles, professionals tend to hold explicit responsibility for EDI, which can influence one's own experiences.



Right from the beginning when you step into law school, they tell you it's going to be a very busy profession ... why should we have to be at constant risk of burnout all the time in order to succeed in the profession?

Focus group participant  
(CRL regulated member)

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In HR, there is this need to be professional, ... very much on the fence because you have to support both sides, and sometimes that can be really difficult. ... I think quite often we're dehumanised in HR, so trying to be your authentic self can be quite difficult.

Focus group participant (CIPD member)

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Roles also vary within a profession – with some highlighting patterns of segregation between different specialisms. In some professions, there is also a split between frontline 'blue collar' and office-based 'white collar' roles – with expectations, cultures, and demographics in each of these environments.



Minorities are often found in the less favourable areas of accounting like audit. The more lucrative areas like consulting and deals have more of the classic white middle- or upper-class males from elite educational backgrounds and it is in these teams that there is a real diversity problem.

Survey respondent (ICAS member)

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<sup>16</sup> Appendix 2 summaries key actions suggested by members and learners of each professional body.

While professions also cut across different sectors (figure 32), there do not seem to be consistent significant differences between sectors in quantitative measures of key experiences (such as barriers to access and progression, feelings of belonging, and experiences of discrimination and exclusion). Yet the levers available to enact change in each of these sectors will vary. Likewise, the industry and size of organisation can have an impact. For instance, the types of action large organisations are able to commit to will be different to smaller organisations with less resource.

**Breakdown of survey respondents by sector**

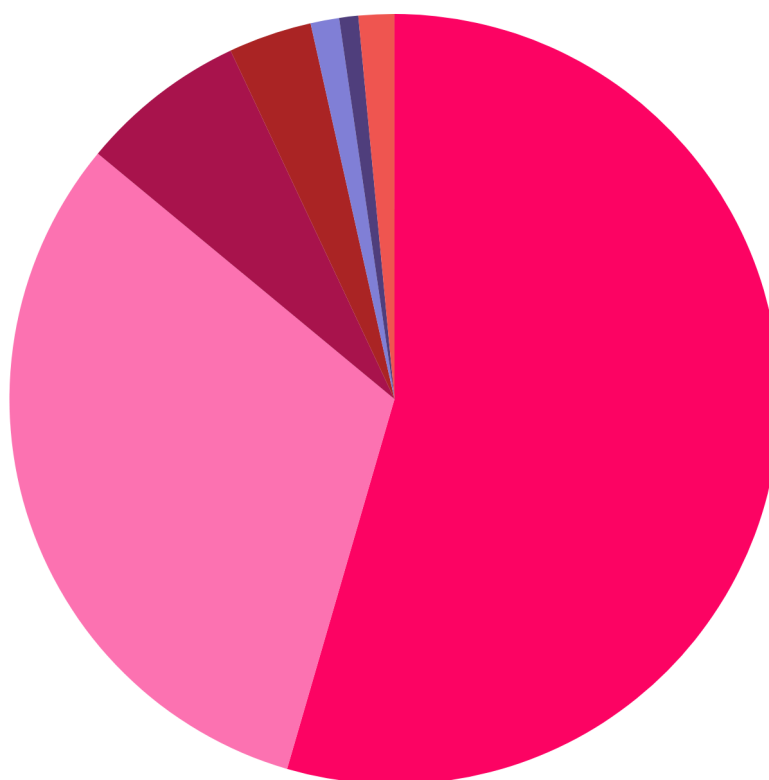
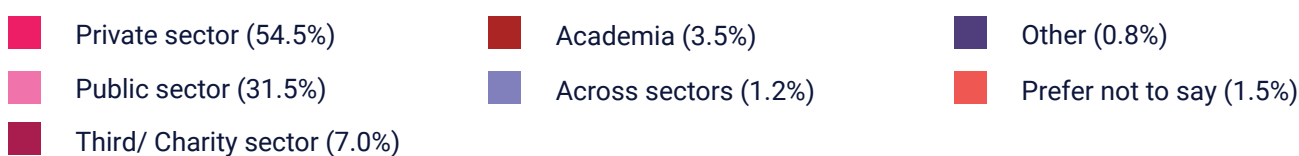


Figure 32: Proportion of professionals surveyed who currently work in each sector.

# Conclusions and recommendations



## Reframing EDI

Ten years ago, government research on the 'business case' for EDI warned that 'gestures cost money: to achieve benefits and avoid costs, businesses need to see diversity as a strategic resource' (BIS, 2013: vi). The uncomfortable reality of continued experiences of exclusion (Part 1), coupled with widespread concerns raised about EDI efforts (Part 2a), suggest the existing interventions (Part 2b) regularly fail to heed this advice. As the \$9bn global market for EDI continues to grow (Fact.MR, 2023), some go as far to say that an EDI 'industrial complex' is profiteering off a system invested in maintaining structures of marginalisation and inequality (Zheng, 2022).

A different approach is needed to catalyse further progress, and to realise the meaningful changes professionals want in their everyday lived experiences. Rather than focusing on isolated initiatives, this requires reframing how EDI is understood:

- Equality, diversity and inclusion must be guiding principles for all decision-making – not just for specific initiatives
- Interventions must focus on changing the systems that underpin marginalisation



Top diversity professionals understand how to make a difference in business processes. They don't spend their time fixing the people: 'The women need to be more assertive, the black people need mentors, the disabled people, we can't get them in the building, so let them work remotely, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.' ... The top diversity professionals change the system, the evaluation methodology, the psychological nudges that you get around places, the technical construction of how you do things. ... The diversity profession has a problem. They're not professional.

Expert interviewee

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We think of [EDI] as one of those 'other things' we do to show ourselves to be a socially responsible employer. ... What we ought to be doing is think about it in the way that we think about safety. With safety, they think of the seriousness of it, they think of how it's not a charitable event, it's something that they need to exist as an organisation and as a company.

Expert interviewee

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EDI jobs are seen as fluffy, nebulous, money-wasting roles ... a lot of lovelies who are all very woke and all that kind of stuff. I think it needs to go through a complete change of what it is, what it's branded as, what it means. It needs to be done on a systems level, not just a tick box. The whole thing needs to be done root to branch, not just stuck up as a value that nobody actually looks at apart from it comes to their appraisal. It needs to be something that's actually ingrained as a part of a big culture change program and not just a one-and-done.

Focus group participant (CIPD member)

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## Fostering a 'race to the top'

As stalling progress risks EDI efforts becoming a disingenuous 'race to the bottom', we suggest professional membership and regulatory bodies hold a key lever for positive action and lasting change. They have the capacity to 'raise the bar' for what it means to be a professional, in relation to the values of EDI. While there is no formal relationship between employers and professional bodies, this standard-setting role can help influence action and behaviours across organisations and among individual professionals.

Professional membership and regulatory bodies **set the standards** of what it means to be a professional

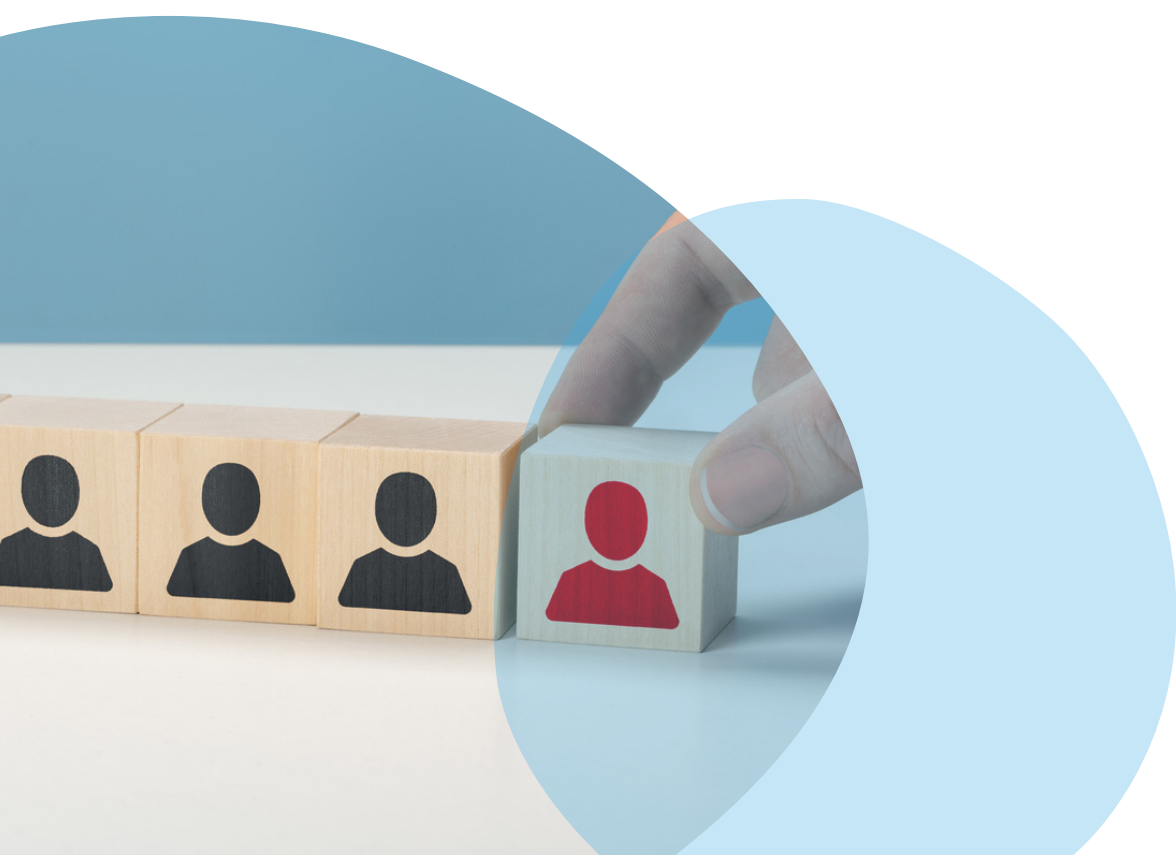
Employers **operationalise these standards** in hiring and promotion decisions, and across its policies and practices

Professionals **enact these standards** to foster more inclusive cultures



Each of those people want to get chartered, ... each of those people attend courses run by these organisations, each of those people may want to become a fellow at some point. Professional institutions have a real role to play in terms of how we define competence ... For example, unsafe [or] ... unethical behaviours would be seen as incompetent behaviours, perhaps un-inclusive behaviours need to start to be seen as incompetent behaviours.

Expert interviewee





## Recommended action plan for professional membership and regulatory bodies:

### 1 Put EDI at the heart of what it means to be a professional by committing to:

- updating codes of ethics/ conduct, with corresponding reviews of professional standards, in order to embed the values and principles of equality, diversity and inclusion in the core meaning of what it means to be a professional
- critically reviewing communications around EDI to emphasise that efforts to improve professionals' experiences are non-negotiable, and integral to all decision-making.

### 2 Set higher standards for professionals by committing to:

- reviewing and continuously updating and developing all modules of training and CPD courses to ensure the values and principles of EDI are embedded across all learning and development opportunities
- ensuring qualifications and accreditation processes reflect updated professional standards, to ensure members are not granted with the highest levels of chartership or accreditation without core competencies around the values and principles of EDI.

### 3 Actively involve professionals in change by providing meaningful opportunities for members, learners and employers to shape action around EDI in your profession – including:

- creating working groups for professionals to be involved in reviewing key actions, such as updates to codes of conduct and qualifications, and progression pathways
- ensuring accountability mechanisms in which professionals' feedback about activities and communications is acted upon.

### 4 Become role models for good practice by:

- ensuring all strategies, policies, procedures and practices are approached with an EDI lens
- continuously monitoring progress.

Moreover, working as a collaborative provides a significant opportunity to drive change across the diverse industries and sectors that make up the UK economy. The bodies involved in the collaborative represent an ecosystem of different professions who all co-exist in workplaces, and whose practices can influence the work and working culture of others. Beyond HR and management, each profession can influence EDI efforts through its activities – for example:

- How can accountancy practices influence the resources dedicated to EDI?
- How can workplace and facilities management practices ensure inclusive workplaces?
- How can procurement practices influence EDI in contractor organisations?

This requires finding meaningful ways for professions to work together to collaboratively effect change on EDI, without duplicating existing efforts.

## Suggestions for the collaborative:

- 1** Benchmark progress against the recommendations of this and the Milburn report on a regular basis (eg, every three years).
- 2** Consider whether cross-profession development programmes can be offered (such as management skills) to assist those who are leaders to appreciate EDI issues and develop appropriate approaches.
- 3** Hold each other to account: commit to a bi-annual meeting across the collaborative to monitor key performance indicators on a regular basis to identify areas of progress and action and share best practice.

Nonetheless, the 'tensions' explored in Part 2b go some way to highlighting how challenging it is to shift entrenched systems of inequality and marginalisation. This requires working across these systems, and not all issues highlighted in this research are within the influence and control of individual organisations and professional bodies. Everybody must play a role in enabling systemic change. The inconsistent patchwork of positive action, from some organisations and professionals, must be matched by commitments from all actors across the system, including (local and national) policymakers.

## Recommendations for policymakers:

- 1** Develop systemic structures across education, welfare, health and housing provisions, which promote the fairer distribution of opportunity and support for all to enter, remain and thrive within the professions.
- 2** Ensure legal frameworks regarding equal opportunities, discrimination, harassment, and the statutory commitments of employers (eg, pay gap reporting), effectively protect the rights of workers with diverse characteristics.
- 3** Commit to participatory modes of policymaking that centre the lived experiences of those with marginalised characteristics in policy and service design.
- 4** Commit to working with the professions to review progress and promote action on EDI, as has been done previously by the Social Mobility Commission.

## Recommendations for employers:

- 1** Ensure EDI guiding principles are included in all aspects of decision-making. Appoint an EDI champion at executive level, and link EDI to manager and leader development, performance appraisals, promotions and bonuses.
- 2** Ensure implementation of inclusive recruitment and promotion practices. This should include best practice consideration around role design and adverts, attracting diverse candidates, and salary transparency.
- 3** Encourage a 'speak up' culture to nip poor behaviours and practices in the bud. Ensure policies and procedures can respond and react to subtle as well as overt forms of discrimination and exclusion in the workplace.
- 4** Use data, such as staff surveys and exit interviews, to identify examples of discriminatory or exclusionary activities and implement lessons learned.
- 5** Clearly communicate inclusive initiatives/policies and appropriately involve staff in interventions.

## Recommendations for individual professionals:

- 1** Challenge yourself to recognise how colleagues' experiences may be different to your own, and reflect on the personal biases you hold.
- 2** Actively work to minimise the impact of these biases on your decision-making and relationships with colleagues.
- 3** Contribute to positive change, working jointly with colleagues and making the most of learning and development opportunities.
- 4** Reflect on your personal progress and admit when you still have more to learn.

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# **Appendix 1: Detailed methodology**



## Overview

Informed by a rapid review of existing research and literature, an online survey (conducted between October 2022 and January 2023) gauged 7,290 member's perceptions and experiences of EDI in their professions and organisations. This was followed by 18 focus group discussions in April 2023, to develop a deeper understanding of the issues highlighted. Involving 99 members overall, the groups brought together people across different professions who have similar demographic characteristics and are at a similar level of seniority. Finally, insights from members were supported by a series of in-depth interviews with individuals who have expertise in implementing EDI initiatives, in order to learn from good practices and explore the barriers and enablers of change.

## Sampling approach

A bespoke survey link for each professional membership and regulatory body was sent on an individual basis for each body, to a sample of their mailing list for UK members and learners. The timing depended on other planned communications from the bodies. The size of the sample depended on the size of their membership and expected response rates. Where possible, communications were targeted based on demographic data on databases, but sampling was largely random. Several organisations further supplemented the sample by sharing the survey link online and on social media.

While it is not possible in the scope of this study to provide a benchmark of diversity in the twelve professional membership and regulatory bodies, those who took part in the research represented a range of demographic characteristics and backgrounds, which varied between professions. The survey incorporated responses from members with the following demographic make-up. The different sample sizes between bodies – and lack of equivalent benchmarking data to weight responses – is a limitation; but this still presents a robust sample of professionals across the collaborative. The small numbers of trans (n= 23) and non-binary (n= 26) respondents mean the scope for statistical analysis among these groups is limited.



Professional membership or regulatory body		
Professional body	%	n=
ACCA	12%	847
CII	11%	831
CRL	9%	631
CIPD	8%	552
CIPFA	9%	651
CIPR	2%	143
CIPS	6%	448
CMI	15%	1082
ICAS	5%	354
IET	5%	350
IOSH	17%	1216
IWFM	3%	185

Age		
Age group	%	n=
29 or younger	8%	611
30-39	18%	1292
40-49	25%	1809
50-59	33%	2372
60+	16%	1133
Prefer not to say	1%	73

### Gender identity

Gender	%	n=
Female	51%	3697
Male	48%	3481
Non-binary / Other identity	0%	26
Prefer not to say	1%	86

### Transgender

Gender identity	%	n=
Transgender	0%	23
Cisgender	99%	7192
Prefer not to say	1%	75

### Ethnicity

Ethnic group	%	n=
White	85%	6210
Asian	5%	400
Black	5%	357
Mixed	2%	148
Other	1%	53
Prefer not to say	1%	104

## Employment status

Status	%	n=
Full-time employee	78%	5717
Part-time employee	9%	620
Self-employed	8%	596
Job seeking	2%	112
Student, not in work	1%	42
Other	22%	144
Prefer not to say	1%	59

## Sector

Status	%	n=
Private	55%	2876
Public	32%	1663
Third	7%	369
Academic	3%	182
Multiple	1%	63
Other	1%	42
Prefer not to say	1%	78

Seniority		
Role	%	n=
Entry-level	5%	274
Intermediate level	20%	1214
Mid-manager	35%	2105
Senior management	25%	1475
Board/ Executive/ Partner	12%	723
Prefer not to say	3%	153

Geography		
Region	%	n=
North East	3%	208
North West	10%	566
Yorkshire and Humber	7%	423
East Midlands	6%	363
West Midlands	7%	439
East of England	7%	399
Greater London	16%	969
South East	16%	931
South West	11%	635
Northern Ireland	1%	89
Scotland	10%	612
Wales	3%	194
Prefer not to say	2%	116

### Caring responsibilities

Responsibility	%	n=
Primary / sole carer	10%	571
Joint carer	27%	1633
None	60%	3546
Other	2%	92
Prefer not to say	2%	101

### Religion

Religion	%	n=
No religion	39%	2345
Buddhist	1%	40
Christian	48%	2859
Hindu	1%	70
Jewish	1%	30
Muslim	2%	128
Sikh	1%	38
Other	1%	86
Prefer not to say	6%	341

Sexuality		
Sexuality	%	n=
Bisexual	3%	162
Gay or lesbian	4%	238
Heterosexual	87%	5185
Other	1%	38
Prefer not to say	5%	313

Disability, health conditions and neurodiversity		
Type	%	n=
Physical health condition	32%	1890
Mental health condition	14%	815
Neurodivergent	10%	592
None	52%	3097
Prefer not to say	4%	255

Occupation of main household earner aged 14		
Socioeconomic grade	%	n=
Lower	36%	2147
Intermediate	13%	773
Professional	46%	2780
Other	1%	88
Don't know	1%	59
Prefer not to say	2%	137

**Focus groups** sampling was purposive – to develop groups that would bring together people across different professions who have similar demographic characteristics and are at a similar level of seniority. Designed to enhance the survey findings, this enabled focused discussion on experiences in relation to specific characteristics, considering the potential power dynamics between participants.

We invited people to the following groups based on responses to the survey<sup>17</sup>:

- Three groups with women
- Three groups with people from a minoritised ethnic group (Black, Asian, mixed or other ethnicities and/or non-Christian religions)
- Three groups with people with LGBTQ+ identities
- Three groups with people with a disability and/or physical health condition and/or mental health condition and/or neurodivergence
- Three groups with people from a lower socioeconomic background (based on parental occupation aged 14)
- Three groups with people who have no 'marginalised characteristics' (based on the quantitative intersectionality proxy, discussed further below)

For each set of three groups...

- One group was for 'senior leaders' (who selected 'Senior Management' or 'Board/ Executive/ Partner level' in the survey)
- Two groups were for 'employees' (who selected 'Entry-level' or 'Intermediate' or 'Mid-manger' in the survey)

<sup>17</sup> For one professional body, there was an additional call out in order to comply with specific GDPR requirements. Those that were invited filled in a short survey with demographic information to be invited to the relevant group(s).

The intersectional nature of people's identities meant that some people are likely to be able to attend multiple of these groups, and the discussions in these groups were intended to stretch beyond the characteristics identified. This meant that factors that were not included here (such as age, nationality, and caring responsibilities) were still able to emerge in discussions, as they related to people's experiences.

The demographics make-up of the 99 participants was as follows:

Professional membership or regulatory body		
Professional body	%	n=
ACCA	11%	11
CII	9%	9
CRL	4%	4
CIPD	9%	9
CIPFA	7%	7
CIPR	4%	4
CIPS	7%	7
CMI	6%	6
ICAS	3%	3
IET	24%	24
IOSH	10%	10
IWFM	5%	5



Age		
Age group	%	n=
29 or younger	7%	7
30-39	19%	19
40-49	39%	39
50-59	21%	21
60+	12%	12
Prefer not to say	1%	1

Gender identity		
Gender	%	n=
Female	52%	51
Male	45%	45
Non-binary / Other identity	3%	3
Prefer not to say	0%	0

Transgender		
Gender identity	%	n=
Transgender	1%	1
Cisgender	97%	96
Prefer not to say	2%	2

Ethnicity		
Ethnic group	%	n=
White	64%	63
Asian	14%	14
Black	17%	17
Mixed	3%	3
Other	1%	1
Prefer not to say	1%	1

Employment status		
Status	%	n=
Full-time employee	81%	80
Part-time employee	7%	7
Self-employed	8%	8
Job seeking	2%	2
Student, not in work	1%	1
Other	1%	1
Prefer not to say	0%	0

Seniority		
Role	%	n=
Entry-level	5%	5
Intermediate level	22%	22
Mid-manager	38%	38
Senior management	25%	25
Board/ Executive/ Partner	9%	9
Prefer not to say	0%	0

Caring responsibilities		
Responsibility	%	n=
Primary / sole carer	10%	10
Joint carer	29%	29
None	56%	55
Other	2%	2
Prefer not to say	3%	3

Religion		
Religion	%	n=
No religion	39%	39
Buddhist	1%	1
Christian	43%	43
Hindu	3%	3
Jewish	0%	0
Muslim	7%	7
Sikh	2%	2
Other	1%	1
Prefer not to say	3%	3

Sexuality		
Sexuality	%	n=
Bisexual	8%	8
Gay or lesbian	8%	8
Heterosexual	81%	80
Other	1%	1
Prefer not to say	2%	2

### Disability, health conditions and neurodiversity

Type	%	n=
Physical health condition	40%	40
Mental health condition	19%	19
Neurodivergent	41%	41
None	48%	48
Prefer not to say	1%	1

### Occupation of main household earner aged 14

Socioeconomic grade	%	n=
Lower	31%	31
Intermediate	4%	4
Professional	55%	54
Other	7%	7
Don't know	2%	2
Prefer not to say	1%	1

**Please note:** percentages in these tables are rounded, so totals may not equal 100%.

Six expert interviewees were also selected purposively – based on recommendations from the collaborative, to represent a range of points of view across professions. To maintain confidentiality, further details cannot be shared.

## Notes on analytical approach

The base for quantitative data is all survey respondents, unless otherwise indicated. Partial completes (beyond an agreed, reasonable limit) were included.

The quantitative approach to intersectionality has some limitations. It groups participants based on the *number*, rather than *type*, of characteristics which tend to be marginalised. This approach deconstructs typical analytical categories, such as gender or ethnicity, in order to reflect the 'anticategorical complexity' of intersectionality (McCall, 2005). However, this 'multiple' approach portrays 'intersectionality-as-testable', thus assumes fixed and uniform influences of characteristics (Hancock, 2012). Further analysis, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, adopt these characteristics as analytical categories in order to explore the 'intercategorical' and 'intracategorical' complexities of relationships of inequality across and within multiple and conflicting dimensions (McCall, 2005). This moves towards an 'intersectionality-as-paradigm' approach (Hancock, 2012). This approach was developed as part of The Young Foundation research conducted by Boelman V., Bell A. and Harney L. (2021) on behalf of the Social Research Association.

It is important to acknowledge that research processes and outcomes are inevitably influenced by the subjective biases related to the identity and positionality of those researchers involved. This is particularly evident on research of this kind explicitly examining experiences in relation to different identities. The author aimed to stay attuned and reflect on this throughout, and some of the risks were mitigated by involving a larger team of researchers from across The Young Foundation, and consulting closely with representatives from the collaborative, all of whom represent diverse positionalities and areas of expertise.



## **Appendix 2: Suggested actions from members and learners**

The following table summarises the key views members and learners shared in the survey about what works and what is required from their professional body.

Professional body	Examples of good EDI practice you have seen or experienced	What you want your professional body to do on EDI?
ACCA	Employer-led policies, adjustments, flexibility, and training	Promote ACCA as a qualification, work more closely with employers
CII	Introducing quotas, holding training and workshops	Some don't want a focus on EDI / others think more education, training and information is needed
CRL	Inclusive working culture (training, support groups, policies, adjustments, and access schemes)	Promote CILEx qualifications, working with employers, increasing accessibility of profession
CIPD	Current EDI too superficial, bottom-up (employee-led) & top-down (employer-led) approach works best	Understand EDI more holistically, increase accessibility and interest in profession
CIPFA	Reverse mentoring, training and events to increase awareness	CIPFA leading and promoting a cultural change, more flexible qualification options
CIPR	Training and resources, inclusive policies, adjustments, and flexibility	Understand EDI more holistically, recruiting more diverse staff (starting with promotion of the profession among young people)
CIPS	Inclusive culture through education (training, workshops) and engagement of young people from diverse backgrounds (eg, in schools)	Increase accessibility of qualification, promote CIPS, work with employers, offer more training, events, etc.
CMI	Inclusive culture through education (training, workshops)	Some say EDI is counterproductive / others want embedded EDI and representation at senior level. An evidence-based/hard facts approach is needed to convince those opposed
ICAS	Unconscious bias training	Some don't want a focus on EDI / others think more representation and an inclusive culture needs to develop
IET	Learning culture and education, having allies	Some don't want a focus on EDI / others feel more education is needed to 'win over' those opposed and/or want an improved image of profession and early promotion
IOSH	Representation at senior level, inclusive culture, meritocratic organisations	More education to 'win over' those opposed, accessible qualifications and jobs, making the profession more attractive for young people
IWFM	Inclusive culture, role models, adjustments, peer support networks	IWFM mediate between employers and employees, mentoring schemes and listening to employees/members





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