

Ladders4Action

Working for an ethical, inclusive, and collaborative research landscape

Ladders4Action is a nonprofit organisation which works to radically enhance the equality and inclusivity of the UK's research spaces. It seeks to protect and nurture marginalised voices who might otherwise feel excluded from these spaces, fostering a community of researchers from a diverse array of backgrounds. The organisation recognises that only by translating theory into meaningful action will we create a lasting impact, opening the door to a research landscape which has remained exclusionary for far too long. Research Outreach was privileged to interview Dr Addy Adelaine, the founder of Ladders4Action, about her work.

Could you give us a brief introduction to your research and your broader social work?

I actually started off in STEM. I was an engineer working in disaster and humanitarian contexts, predominately internationally in Africa and East Asia. I studied engineering, and worked in that area for a couple of years doing project management for disasters and community-based disaster-management initiatives. With my own identity as a mixed-heritage, working-class woman in engineering, I very quickly became aware of how certain voices were marginalised. I don't come from the majority world, so I was very aware of the inequality in the sector and the voicelessness of certain individuals.

I became kind of obsessed with the idea of accountability. My PhD is on the subject of inclusive accountability: how you decide what is responsible action, how you measure it, how you ensure it, and who gets to decide what is responsible when it comes to engineering design, aid work, or the humanitarian sector.

Partly because of my own ethical dilemma of doing international aid work while being a British-born person, I stepped away from international development and decided to work more from a point of my own identity and with my own communities in the UK. Following that, I became more engaged in looking at gender, race, and racialised issues. Being somebody with ADHD and dyslexia, I have an increasing interest in disability research and how neurodiversity is an important aspect. I guess what I'm really

obsessed with is the theory–practice gap: how we go from scientific research and these theories and concepts to the reality of what creates change in the world, and how things are translated on the ground to create an impact on social issues.

There have been numerous damning reports on the lack of diversity when it comes to research funding allocation in the UK. Could you tell us a little more about the lack of representation across the research landscape?

A lot of my work is informed by my own lived experience and identity. When I came back to the UK, after my PhD, I did a lot of work looking at inclusive leadership and diversity in the NHS. I just finished that series of work when COVID-19 happened; I felt the impact on my own community. The people dying and the disproportionate impact of burnout in the NHS. After years of hard work and my own struggles of attaining a PhD, I really felt passionate about wanting to use my knowledge and expertise in understanding disasters, how pandemics work, about inclusive leadership and accountability, during the pandemic.

With several other highly skilled researchers and academics I know, I applied for the NIHR UKRI funding to look at the disproportional impact of COVID. I didn't get a positive response; I didn't get any feedback beyond saying 'you weren't successful'. But what I started to realise was that nobody I knew got a positive response either. None of these experts in their fields, or people I knew working in this area, were given any funding to explore the disproportionate

impact, which I found really concerning. I felt it was really important that the issues affecting my community were addressed and those leading experts had a role in that work. I started to look into this, and what I realised was that even with NIHR funding of £4.3 million, not a single Black academic lead was given any funding.

We also recognised that one of the people who sat on the assessment panel was co-investigator for three of the six successful awards, that all of them had worked together previously, and that most of the research that was funded was looking at genetic-related issues.

When I realised that nobody got research funding from the Black community, I started to look into this. You can go to YouTube to see some of the stats here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfMlCf274U&t=9s.

Black academics have a much lower success rate on applications; we're far less likely to get successful research funding. And that obviously impacts our ability to progress as academics and to reach professor status in the UK. So, for over 25,000 professors in the UK, we have only 37 Black women in the position. We quite often put America up as the boogeyman of racial inequality, but when you look at higher education and research, what's happening in the UK is dramatic.

I think that really highlights complex issues on identity stereotypes, how the funding systems and processes work. I worked with nine other Black women – Dr Chisomo Kalinga, Dr Furaha Asani,



Ladders4Action run a multitude of courses offering intersectional considerations of race and heritage.



Dr Addy Adelaine

Dr Ruth Ngozika Agbakoba, Natasha Smith, Dr Olumide Adisa, Janine Francois, Dr Michelle King-Okoye, Paulette Williams and Dr Ruby Zelzerto – to write an open letter to UKRI about these issues. There was quite a lot of social media traction about this, but it took UKRI over a year to respond to our open letter even though the standard length of response is approximately 48 days. I had to register a complaint, which was partially upheld, and I also put in various Freedom of Information Act requests to get more detailed data in relation to this.

Could you introduce our readers to the origins of Ladders4Action?

I established Ladders4Action in my final year of my PhD. Following my PhD, I tended to work part-time on casual and zero-hour contracts with various

Ladders4Action is all about connecting knowledge and action; it is all about that practice–theory gap.

universities – as do most Black and BAME academics, who are disproportionately represented on temporary and part-time contracts. So, I started up Ladders4Action as a way of facilitating consultancy work and attaining contracts for universities that I couldn't secure as an independent researcher. But it was also a way of maintaining my sanity and self-care, and actually being able to do the research that I wanted to do in the manner that I wished to do it.

Ladders4Action is all about connecting knowledge and action. So again, it's all about that practice–theory gap. We predominantly use action research methodologies: identifying issues, collaboratively exploring them, taking action, and then reflecting and starting again. We help organisations and

individuals to do this in a number of ways: by sharing knowledge, by inviting people into the research process, by delivering training courses, and by delivering action research, and creating collaborative participatory knowledge.

What are some of the courses and workshops currently being run by Ladders4Action?

Previously, we've run a number of courses on allyship and anti-racism. We haven't released this year's courses yet, but we're hoping to repeat some of those that we've done previously. I want to look at race and complexity, mixed-heritage identity, and intersectional considerations of race. I want to do more work on inclusive accountability, what is meant by that, and how we hold organisations like UKRI to account.



The training is one part of it, but we're also going to be doing a radical methodology course (the name has yet to be decided). With expert academics, we're looking at how the research process can be ethical, inclusive, collaborative, decolonised, and can really push the boundaries of methodology.

We're also hoping to do a retreat for Black scholars or individuals of African heritage. The past couple of years has been particularly traumatic for Black academics or scholars working outside of academia. So, the retreat is really about bringing together individuals, who are quite often very, very isolated in the UK and their institutions. Higher education is a particularly hostile environment to work in when you're an extremely marginalised individual. But also, to have a bit of joy and celebration over what we achieve, who we are, and our identity, creating networks and social relations. So that will be the summer school we're planning on developing at the moment and also an equity summer school. Whereas the retreat is particularly for individuals of a certain identity – this year Black and individuals of African heritage – in future years it might be disabled academics or another kind of other ethnic minority groups, etc.

Ladders4Action is a nonprofit organisation. Commissioned work pays for a lot of the advocacy work we do, such as mentoring and coaching for PhD students, which is underfunded or unpaid for. I would say in the past two years there's been a huge increase in people wanting this type of work that we offer. Quite often it's Black and minority ethnic scholars who have been working on these issues for years – but we're much less likely to get research funding to explore these issues. So, very often, we're expected to work for free, while our white colleagues are paid to do so.

How do the Knowledge and Insight Hubs run by Ladders4Action work?

The Knowledge Hubs are about different kinds of disciplinary areas. So, we might be looking at homelessness and intersectional issues of disability, race, sexuality, gender identity, or it could be looking at food poverty, environmentalism and sustainability, engineering, or the STEM sector. The Insight Hub is a term that I've used for looking at specific identities in relation to any discipline, so looking at race and racialised issues, disability issues, faith-based issues, sexuality, gender identity, etc. Identity is very much the focus for Insight Hub.

The Toolkit is where also where we put a lot of the practicalities. For example, I mentioned I'm a dyslexic, and I may have ADHD. I am neuroatypical, but I also have a PhD. So, quite often, there's this mistake made in thinking that people who are neurodiverse aren't capable of studying or researching. We absolutely can. I think there's a huge benefit to having ADHD and dyslexia: the interconnectivity of our thought, the speed of our processing, and our problem-solving ability is phenomenal.

But there are challenges that have to be overcome. There are tricks and tips that I use quite a lot in my work, so the Toolkit is where I teach people how to do things such as using Twitter lists and how to do auto-captioning – those kinds of real practical research tips that actually help with inclusivity and connecting and reaching out to audiences. We know that marginalised scholars, particularly Black scholars, have their work frequently plagiarised or not recognised, cited, or referenced. Something small like this can actually help make sure that your knowledge is recognised, referenced, and cited. So, small practical tips, but quite useful at the same time.

What can our readers do to support the work of the organisation?

There are lots of ways that you can donate and support the organisation. We do commissioned research training workshops. By working with us and paying for us, you are supporting pro bono activities. You can make a small donation for a cup of coffee, or a larger donation on our website. You can also make a direct debit if you wish to make an ongoing payment to our nonprofit organisation.

I think one of the most important things is always to ensure that you maintain fair and ethical tendering processes. So, quite often in research, things don't go out for tender and it tends to be who you know – all about inner circles and connectivities. The way it's done in research in higher education is really harmful and discriminatory for individuals who aren't part of, and don't have, those social networks.

I've mentioned briefly before the importance of citing and referencing our work. So #citeblackwomen when you're doing your work, make sure that you cite and reference the knowledge of marginalised scholars, but also that you check your approach and make sure

that you're considering marginalised scholars. Look at your reference lists: if they only contains white men from America, that's a problem.

Make sure that you look outside of who you normally go to, and you challenge yourself and what you do. Just citing and referencing Ladders4Action really helps me; referencing my name helps

increase diversity in STEM are trying to help, but they are ignoring the ongoing activism of marginalised scholars who are experts in this field, the thousands of journal articles, books, and documents on how to do this and how to do it well.

Organisations like TIGERSTEMM, Leading Routes, and people like Erinma Ochu, Hannah Robbins, Arun Verma, Maria

I feel there is a growing movement of individuals who are working together to create change.

me. But also, even by following us on social media, or sharing our tweets, copying us into things – that really helps. Coming up in the future, we're going to be having more training workshops as well as documents and articles that you can purchase online. We will always make sure ethically there's places for people who can't afford to pay.

How hopeful do you feel about the future prospect of a truly diverse and inclusive research landscape in the UK?

Some days it feels like you're shouting into the void and that none of your work is having any impact. We are told that this work is complex and takes time, but sometimes I feel like that's just an excuse not to do anything. That being said, things are moving forward.

I think marginalised scholars and academics should be involved in these conversations. Because we are underrepresented at the senior level it's often those higher-level discussions that we are never invited to take part in. While I think there's been awareness-raising of the issues of inequality and higher education and research, what I'm really concerned about is people with no lived experience, training, or expertise in the issue dominating the space. This actually takes a voice away from people with lived experience or from people who've done years of studying in this area.

What I'm finding is that very kind and compassionate individuals who want to

Augusta Arruda, and the nine women who wrote the open letter, have offered me ongoing strength and support: we've maintained these connections.

We're working together collaboratively with disabled activists and LGBTQ+ activists. I feel there is a growing movement of individuals who are working together to create change. There is some amazing scholarship on the subject from people like Jason Arday, Remi Joseph-Salisbury, Azeezat Johnson, Beth Kamunge, Heidi Safia Mirza, Nicola Rollock, and Kalwant Bohpal.

I think without that solidarity of particularly my sisters, fellow Black women in academia, I would have given up by now – it's really them and their amazing skills, expertise, knowledge, endurance, and resilience to create change that keeps me going. So in that, I have huge hope.



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