



EPSRC Network+: Social Justice through the Digital Economy

Call for Collaborative Proposals: Application Form

We are seeking to fund proposals for Not-Equal’s second call for collaborative proposals. For full guidance please see details of the call on the Not-Equal [website](#).

Pilot research projects can be between 6-8 months in length. We expect to fund up to 7 projects of up to £40k (80% FEC) for this funding call (will consider shorter projects with smaller budgets).

Please submit this form before the deadline of **5pm, 29th May 2020** to notequal@newcastle.ac.uk, with the subject line ‘Application Submission’.

Applicants will be advised on the outcome of their proposal by the 30th July 2020.

GENERAL INFORMATION	
Lead Applicant (PI): Dr Jamie Woodcock Email address: jamie.woodcock@open.ac.uk Job Title: Senior Lecturer Department: People and Organisation Organisation: The Open University	Co-Investigators (names and organisations): Email address: Collaborative Partner(s): M. Six Silberman, IG Metall, michael.silberman@igmetall.de Project Title: Crowdsourcing Wage Pledge Project Tagline: Improving pay for microworkers

WHICH CHALLENGE AREA AND TOPICS DOES YOUR PROPOSAL RESPOND TO?			
CHALLENGE AREA	X	TOPIC	X
Algorithmic Social Justice		Recognition	X
Digital Security for All		Re-distribution	X
Fairer Futures for Business and Workforce	X	Enablement & Radical Trust	X
Topics across challenge areas		Proactive Resilience & Reparation	



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1. SUMMARY

Please provide a summary of your proposed research project. Please include an overview of the aims, impact, innovations, method, team and how it aligns with Not-Equal. This section should be understandable to the general public (<400 words).

Crowdwork platforms (such as Amazon Mechanical Turk [US] and Prolific Academic [UK]) allow academic researchers to post surveys and other research tasks (such as transcription, data entry, etc.) online. Workers on the platforms do these tasks and (ideally) receive payment. However, recent research by [Hara et al. 2018](#) found that on average, workers earn around two dollars (USD) per hour doing crowdwork and most requesters pay less than five dollars (USD) per hour. Despite these low wages, findings from a 2018 survey conducted by our research team found that many academic requesters currently set wage targets and would be willing to commit to them publicly.

This project will **formally institute a ‘Crowdsourcing Wage Pledge’ for the purpose of improving wages for crowdworkers**, thus ensuring fairer futures for digital workers in the platform economy. Given the transnational nature of crowdwork, working conditions and pay are difficult to regulate. Voluntary yet enforceable regulation has proven effective to improve crowdwork working conditions (see [Crowdsourcing Code of Conduct 2017](#)); this project seeks to extend such improvements to wages. Outcomes of the project improve the recognition of poor compensation on digital labour platforms, redistribute economic resources more fairly, empowering crowdworkers to make more informed labour market decisions, and improving accountability in online labour markets.

The project will be carried out in three phases. First, we will conduct a survey to better understand how the pledge could be instituted internationally and to discover the needs and concerns of requesters. This information will be used to draft the wage pledge. Second, we will design and develop an online mechanism for requesters to sign the wage pledge. This will be capable of accommodating the variable financial and administrative needs of requesters and will be readily accessible by workers so that they can easily see (while choosing tasks) which requesters have signed the pledge. Finally, we will develop an enforcement mechanism for the wage pledge. This will include internal enforcement protocols and will also engage with stakeholders (grant funders and university ethics boards) to review possible collaboration for the purpose of enforcement.

The project will be hosted by Open University and will be carried out in collaboration with the German trade union, IG Metall. Led by Jamie Woodcock (OU), Six Silberman (IG Metall), and Hannah Johnston (independent), the project boasts an [international advisory board](#) comprised of academics (in the USA, Canada, Japan and the UK), crowdworkers, and ILO.

2. HOW DOES YOUR PROPOSAL ALIGN WITH THE THEMES AND OBJECTIVES OF NOT-EQUAL?

Please describe how your proposal responds to the second call for collaborations and how does your proposal enhance a cross-disciplinary way of working. (<300 words).

The Crowdsourcing Wage Pledge focuses on the challenge area of *Fairer Futures for Businesses and Workforces* and responds by:



- *Recognizing* the issue of poor compensation on digital labour platforms and understanding the complicity of academic requesters
- Creating a socio-technical system that will help to *redistribute* economic resources and more fairly compensate crowdworkers for their time
- *Enabling and empowering workers* by improving transparency in online labour markets, thus allowing workers to make more informed decisions about their labour market participation; and
- *Improving accountability in online labour markets* by creating a Wage Pledge enforcement mechanism that is characterized by meaningful stakeholder involvement and participation

Our approach builds on successful past projects spearheaded by team members which have improved the economic well-being of platform workers. We view the practical needs of workers and requesters as fundamental for the development of viable digital tools capable of addressing decent work deficits in the platform economy. We believe that success can be achieved through a multi-disciplinary approach that draws on fields including computer programming, industrial relations, and the sociology of work.

This project will aggregate feedback from academic requesters using qualitative surveys. These surveys will help us, as researchers, to *recognize and identify* the root causes of academic requesters' poor compensation of crowdworkers. We will use survey findings complementarily with existing literature on platform workers' wages and working conditions. This information will allow us to develop, in consultation with stakeholders, a sociotechnical system and digital tools that will improve *transparency and accountability* by making requesters compensation commitments known to workers. We believe that increased transparency will also have a *redistributive* function by 1) *empowering* workers to make informed decisions about their labour market participation and 2) encouraging requesters to commit to compensating workers at higher rates.

3. CASE FOR SUPPORT

Please describe your proposed project. This should include your aims and objectives, the design and method of your project, context, background literature and data to be collected. Please also indicate why this research is important and for whom (<1000 words).

Aims: To improve wages for crowdworkers by instituting a Crowdsourcing Wage Pledge

Background: Crowdwork is an important source of income for individuals in developed and developing countries. Crowdwork can provide labour market opportunities to those unable to participate in more traditional forms of employment because of caretaking responsibilities or health reasons ([Berg et al. 2018](#)). However, a paper by [Hara et al. 2018](#) found that on average, crowdworkers – many of whom live in developed countries – earn around two dollars (USD) per hour, and most requesters pay less than five dollars (USD) per hour.

Academic researchers constitute a significant portion of requesters on crowdworking sites. We conducted a survey in 2018 to assess the willingness of academic requesters to commit to paying crowdworkers higher wages. We found that in general, respondents were willing to publicly commit to wage targets and felt that doing so was the 'ethical', 'right' or 'moral' thing to do.

Design:

Phase 1: Drafting the pledge



The project will begin with an international survey of academic requesters. Building off of the 2018 survey of researchers, the purpose of this survey is to better understand how the pledge could be instituted internationally. Additionally, this survey will ask what wages academic requesters would be willing to publicly commit to paying. Over 400 academic requesters who have recently (2019/2020) posted tasks on crowdsourcing platforms have been identified as potential respondents. We will analyse findings alongside the 2018 survey findings. These findings will inform the text and standards included in the Crowdsourcing Wage Pledge. Stakeholders will be consulted throughout the drafting of this text.

Phase 2: Building digital tools that make information about which requesters have signed the pledge available to workers

We will build a system consisting of two pieces of software, an application programming interface and a user script or browser extension in order to make information about which requesters have signed the pledge (and which wage commitments they have made for which tasks) easily available to workers while they are choosing crowdworking tasks. For readers familiar with the design of Turkopticon and other Mechanical Turk worker tools: this is the same design. A brief summary is provided below:

- **Application programming interface.** The first piece of software is part of the same website that requesters use to sign the pledge. This is an application programming interface (API). Users can “ask” the API if a given requester has signed the pledge by accessing a URL with the requester’s identifying information.
- **Downloadable user script or browser extension.** The second piece of software is a user script or browser extension. This is a relatively small piece of code that workers download onto their computer(s) and install in the browser(s) they use to complete tasks. In the text below, this code is called the script.

When the user is looking at the relevant website (for example, <http://worker.mturk.com>), the user’s browser automatically activates the script. The script reads the webpage and collects any requester IDs that it sees. It then asks the API if those requesters have signed the pledge. It then adds the information that it receives from the API to the user’s view of the webpage.

Expert crowdworkers already use many scripts. For this reason, the pledge API should be public and well-documented, so makers and maintainers of other worker tools can integrate the data it provides into their tools. Workers can then access the pledge data without having to install a new script if they don’t want to.

These two pieces of software will interface with a third piece of code that allows requesters to be automatically added to the system as signatories once they have signed on to the Wage Pledge.

Phase 3: Enforcing the pledge

A form on the same website where requesters sign the pledge should allow workers to report violations of the pledge. Enforcing the pledge fairly and accurately is important.

We envision that the enforcement process will be modelled on the [Ombuds Office of the Crowdsourcing Code of Conduct](#). Under this system, complaints are initiated by a worker via a web form, managed by an independent secretariat, and mediated as needed by a bilateral panel composed of members representing workers, requesters, and an independent neutral chair. As practiced by the Ombuds Office, upon receipt of a complaint, the secretariat could first contact the requester in question and attempt to facilitate a direct solution between the worker and the requester. Should the requester fail to reply, the secretariat could remove the requester from the list of

pledging requesters. In the event of a legitimate difference of opinion, the “full” dispute mediation process involving the entire panel could be invoked.

The panel could establish preliminary working standards of evidence, processes for estimating working time, and other technical and procedural standards and rules as needed. These should be set forth in a rules document posted on the pledge website. Members of our established [advisory group](#) have indicated a willingness to participate in establishing this enforcement body.

Impact, potential future development and institutionalization

We anticipate that the creation of a Wage Pledge will encourage academic requesters to better compensate crowdworkers. While this will provide immediate benefit to workers by improving their wages and redistributing wealth more equitably, it will also contribute to more ethical research standards in academia. We believe that all workers should have access to a dispute resolution mechanism and that by implementing this on a voluntary basis, we can improve accountability in online labour markets.

If successful, the pledge could be expanded to a range of crowdworking platforms and the panel could be formally institutionalized. With aim to ensure the long-term sustainability of this project, we are committed to engaging faculty unions, university ethics review boards, funding agencies, and other relevant stakeholders committed to worker rights and ethical research standards. At present only the [Russell Sage Foundation](#) requires that grant recipients to pay crowdworkers a minimum wage. Our long-term vision is to mainstream this practice.

4. RESILIENCE PLAN

Please describe how you would carry out your project with social distance measures in place. For example, deliver workshops via Zoom instead of in person (<300 words).

Social distancing measures will have no adverse effect on this project.

In anticipation of launching step one of this project (the survey of academic requesters) members of the team have worked on crowdwork platforms in order to collect contact information for over 400 academic requesters. We observe that crowdworking (and academics’ use of crowdworking platforms to recruit participants and fulfil academic tasks) continues during the COVID-19 lockdown. This is unsurprising because crowdworking is compatible with social distancing guidelines.

Crowdwork is digitally mediated and workers and requesters are geographically dispersed; the sole requirement for participation is having access to the internet and to a computer. Academic requesters and crowdworkers are intimately familiar with the digital tools that will be utilized in this project including online survey methods and browser plug-ins. Our international group of advisers are also accustomed to providing feedback to the project via video conference calls, emails, and other digital means.

Ultimately, we seek to create a global Crowdsourcing Wage Pledge. Under all circumstances, this requires an outreach and knowledge dissemination strategy that is inclusive of crowdworkers and academics irrespective of their location. For the purpose we intend all Wage Pledge workshops to be virtual irrespective of social distancing measures that may or may not be in place.



5. INNOVATION

Please explain the innovative aspects of the proposed research project (<150 words).

The Crowdsourcing Wage Pledge will help to introduce wage standards to a type of work that at present remains wholly unregulated and underpaid. Operationalizing the Wage Pledge will rely on the development of a web browser plug-in that allows workers to easily access a requesters' wage pledge status. This technical innovation will interface directly with the tasks available to workers, thus helping them to make informed labour market decisions. The OU will own the IP for the browser plug-in but we intend to make it freely available through an open-source licence.

Additionally, the development of an enforcement and dispute resolution mechanism for wage pledge compliance will provide an innovation on the Ombuds Office model by creating a dispute resolution mechanism to address non-compliance with wage commitments. Currently, the Ombuds Office mediates disputes between crowdworkers and platforms who have agreed upon a voluntary Code of Conduct pertaining to crowdwork working conditions.

6. NON-ACADEMIC PARTNERS

Please explain how your non-academic partners will engage with the project e.g. in-kind time, use of facilities, etc. (<150 words).

The non-academic partner for this project is Dr. M. Six Silberman of IG Metall who will contribute in-kind time to the project. IG Metall has an extensive program on platform work that has measurably improved working conditions on crowdwork platforms. IG Metall will serve as a consultant and advisor on the project, particularly as it relates to the development of the Wage Pledge enforcement mechanism. As the co-founder and lead developer of Turkopticon, Dr. Silberman is also well positioned to provide input to the Step 2 of the project, the building of digital tools to support the project.

This collaboration will be formalized by establishing collaboration and IP agreements between the Open University and IG Metall.

7. SOCIAL IMPACT

Please describe the expected social impact of your project (<300 words). This should be understandable to the general public. Please note that the community panel will consider and assess this section against the following criteria. To what extent does the proposal:

- 1) Consider and respond to the needs of a community (e.g. provide an example of the beneficiaries of your project and the value it would generate for them);*
- 2) Help to overcome/reduce/avoid barriers to access and participation in technology and services (e.g. provide an example of the barriers and how your project addresses such barriers);*
- 3) Support new connections between communities of interest (e.g. provide an example of how the project creates opportunities for new connections between people and/or fosters community building).*

The goal is to raise wages on online crowdwork platforms.



The project is a direct response to the needs of the community of crowdworkers who complete tasks for academics.

Following the publication of research showing that crowdworkers on Mechanical Turk earn on average around USD 2 per hour (less than one third of minimum wage), many crowdworkers expressed their dissatisfaction with low rates of pay. Many of the customers responsible for low pay are academics.

The project aims to improve accountability on online labour platforms. Presently there are few formal procedures by which crowdworkers can address problems with tasks posted by academics. Currently, workers who believe their rights as established by university requirements have been violated can contact university ethics boards. However, these mechanisms are both 'too much' and 'not enough': Filing a complaint with an ethics board is often a major allegation. This is concerning because it is well known that many problems with crowdwork arise from the researchers simply not being familiar with the technology or with market norms. At the same time, ethics boards have often approved low-wage tasks. This may be because crowdworkers do not have a legal right to minimum wages; alternatively, it may be because ethics review boards are unfamiliar with the research documenting the adverse effects of low wages on crowdworkers.

The project's main method for raising wages is to "support new connections between communities of interest" - between crowdworkers who complete online tasks and the academics who post them. Creating formal procedures by which academics can register this intent, rewarding them for doing so by allowing skilled workers to find their tasks more easily, and providing formal but non-threatening procedures for enforcement and dispute resolution, will improve relationships between these communities.

8. WORK PLAN

Please outline the work-plan for your proposed research/activity (<200 words).

Our monthly work plan for the Crowdsourcing Wage Pledge is as follows:

Month 1 & 2: Phase 1 of the project, academic requester survey

- Develop and program the academic requester survey
- Recruit survey participants
- Implement the survey
- Data analysis

Month 3: Phase 1 of the project, Wage Pledge design and development

- Develop language for the Wage Pledge (iterative, in collaboration with survey respondents and other stakeholders)
- Wage Pledge website development
- Hire a software developer consultant

Month 4, 5 & 6: Phase 2 of the project, establishing procedures and digital tools

- Visual and interaction design, and implementation
- Developing the wage pledge signup process and website



- Development of digital support tools for the enforcement and dispute resolution process
- Recruiting academic researchers to sign the pledge and outreach with University Ethics Boards, Faculty Unions, and Funding Agencies

Month 6: Phase 3 of the project, enforcement mechanism design and implementation

- Establish enforcement mechanism
- Browser extension testing and refinement

Month 7 and 8: Phase 3 of the project, knowledge dissemination

- Stakeholder meetings
- Online outreach to crowdworkers via worker forums
- Drafting academic papers and articles
- Conducting virtual workshops

9. HOW WILL YOU COMMUNICATE THE FINDINGS OF YOUR RESEARCH TO THE PUBLIC?

Please outline your dissemination plans e.g. events, networking with local support groups, creating vlogs, writing blogs, etc. (<200 words).

This dissemination strategy for this project will engage multiple audiences including academic requesters, crowdworkers, and other stakeholders engaged in workers' rights and academic research (i.e. trade unions, funding agencies, and ethics review boards).

We will submit two to three academic papers to high-quality peer reviewed venues in relevant disciplines/fields (e.g., computer science, industrial relations, research ethics). For broader audiences, we will produce one or two short, less technical articles (possible venues include IG Metall's Faircrowd.work blog or the University and College Union website).

In month three of the project, we will develop a website that hosts information about the project. This will serve as another avenue for knowledge dissemination. Currently many crowdworkers use online forums to share information about their work experiences and working strategies; we will additionally use these forums to increase awareness about the Wage Pledge and to refer crowdworkers to the project website.

Finally, we will hold two virtual workshops for various audiences to explain the project, promote the pledge, and provide instruction on how individuals can participate. Targeted participants will include researchers who use Mechanical Turk and other crowdworking sites, crowdworkers, ethics review board members, funding agencies and other interested parties.

10. EXISTING FUNDING



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Will any existing funding be used on this project (e.g. PhD funding)? If so, please provide information about these and how they will be used for the project (<150 words).

No additional funding will be used for this project.

11. EXPERIENCE & INTERACTION OF TEAM

Please indicate any previous relevant experience, qualifications and publications of the lead applicant and team. If applicable, please detail how the PI-postdoctoral partnership will be beneficial (<300 words).

Dr Jamie Woodcock of Open University – Principal Investigator. Dr. Woodcock is a Senior Lecturer at the Open University and the author of *The Gig Economy* (Polity, 2019), *Marx at the Arcade* (Haymarket, 2019), and *Working The Phones* (Pluto, 2017). His research focuses on labour, work, the gig economy, platforms, resistance, organising, and videogames. He is on the editorial board of *Notes from Below* and *Historical Materialism* and his research has been published in various high-quality peer reviewed journals including *Information, Communication and Society*, *The Sociological Review*, *Media, Culture and Society*, and others.

Dr. M. Six Silberman of IG Metall – Technical Adviser. Dr. Silberman is responsible for the program on platform-based work at IG Metall, the largest trade union in Europe. This includes worker outreach and managing complaints related to the Ombuds Office (see above). Prior to joining IG Metall, Dr. Silberman co-founded and developed Turkopticon, a platform that allows Amazon Mechanical Turk Workers to rate their requesters. Silberman has a PhD in Information and Computer Sciences from the University of California, Irvine, and has published on labor platform working conditions in *Communications of the ACM*, *First Monday*, *Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, computing conferences, and other venues.

Hannah Johnston, Independent – Implementation Lead. For the past three years Hannah Johnston has worked at the International Labour Organization on topics related to digital labour platforms, working conditions, and worker organising. Prior to the ILO she worked with public sector and faculty trade unions in Canada and the United States. She will complete her PhD thesis in July 2020 in the field of Economic and Labour Geography. Her published research on worker organizing and digital labour platforms can be found in the *Industrial and Labour Relations Review*, *Labour Studies Journal*, and the *International Labour Review*.

12. BUDGET BREAKDOWN



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Please provide a detailed budget breakdown and justification for your budget - for example: salary grade, point, duration and %FTE: specified journeys or conferences; identified items and quantities of consumables (<300 words).

Staff costs:

Jamie Woodcock, PI and Lecturer at Open University: £7999.8, 25 days

- Oversight and guidance on all aspects of the project

Hannah Johnston, Research Assistant: £24,000, 75 days plus project deliverables

- Administrative costs - £6000
- Survey development and recruitment
- Survey programming and data analysis
- Wage pledge design and development (iterative, in collaboration with survey respondents and other stakeholders)
- Enforcement mechanism design and implementation
- Digital tool development (including wage pledge signup process and website, digital support tools for enforcement and dispute resolution, recruiting wage pledge signatories, management and enforcement of dispute resolution processes)
- Website development and hosting
- Zoom workshops
- Academic paper drafting

Non-staff costs, consumables:

Contracted software developer: £4,950

- Browser extension development and refinement
- Browser extension testing

13. TOTAL PROJECT COST

Please list in GBP under the headings – Overall Cost, Staff, Travel and Other

	Directly incurred costs (80%)	Directly incurred costs (100%)
Staff	£25,599.84	£31,999.80
Non-Staff Costs: Consumables	Programming £3,960	Programming £4,950
Non-Staff Costs: Facilities/Equipment	0	0
Non-Staff Costs: Travel	0	0
Non-Staff Costs: Estates (RA's only)	0	0
Non-Staff Costs: Indirect (RA's only)	0	0



Overall Cost*	Total Not-Equal Funding Requested: £29,559.84	Total for information only: £36,949.8
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Directly Incurred Posts

Role	Post	Start Date	Period on Project (months)	% of Full Time	Scale	Increment Date	Basic Starting Salary	Super-Annuation and NI (£)	Total cost on grant-80% FEC (£)	Total cost on grant-100% FEC (£)
PI	Senior Lecturer	01.09.20	8	17%	AC4/45	01.10.20	52,560	2,412.14	7,999.80	6,399.84

**Please note you are able to claim for RA time and RA relevant FTE related costs, PI/Co-I time and other non-staff costs. You are not able to claim for FTE related costs attributed to PI/Co-I time.*

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this call for proposals, please contact notequal@newcastle.ac.uk or Rachel Sparks (Not-Equal Project Manager) on 0191 2088268.

Privacy Notice

Not-Equal is collecting your data to record submission of your application, and we will only contact you to provide you with information about the application and related Not-Equal activities.

You have provided your consent for the University to process your personal data for the purposes detailed above. You have the right to request that the University deletes this personal data at any time, noting if you do so, the University will be unable to provide you with information relating to Not-Equal. On an annual basis we will ask you to confirm that you wish to continue to receive this information: if you don't or you do not respond, we will delete your personal details within one calendar month.

We won't share your data with anyone outside the University, unless required to by law, and it will be stored securely within Open Lab at Newcastle University.

If you would like to discuss this further, please contact rec-man@newcastle.ac.uk

If you would like more information about how we manage personal data more generally, including your rights under law, and the contact details of the University's Data Protection Officer, please see our website: <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/data.protection/PrivacyNotice.htm>



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