

A CASE STUDY ON ED&I IN HIGHER EDUCATION

PART ONE: ON RACE

This is part one of a three-part conversation where Mehrunnisa Lalani and Akhil Yerneni discuss race, ED&I and her time at the University of Manchester. In this section they explore how organisations can be anti-racist, the pandemic's impact on practicing ED&I in Higher Education and the government's Race and Ethnic Disparities report.

Mehrunnisa Lalani served as the Interim Director of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion at the University of Manchester in 2021, where she led and facilitated a cultural transformation of ED&I within the University through developing a cohesive strategic approach to ED&I. She set a foundation of positive change through a process of engagement, safe conversations, challenge, accountability and empowerment and still consults with the University today.



Akhil Yerneni is Anderson Quigley's Senior Consultant specialising in Higher Education leadership and executive recruitment. He worked with Mehrunnisa to secure her placement as ED&I Director at the University of Manchester and conducted this interview to learn about her experience. If you are interested in having an ED&I Director transform your organisation or you are an ED&I Director looking for your next placement, contact Akhil to learn more.

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Over the past few years, there has been an increasing amount of discussion around racial equity and inclusion, with a particular focus on more actively fighting racism. How can institutions pivot from the more passive 'not racist' to actively engaging in anti-racist debate and action?

The BLM campaign has resulted in organisations rethinking their approach towards equity, race and ED&I. There been a reactive response to race not only at universities but across the public and private sector. We have to remember that tackling racism cannot be done through an 'initiative-laden approach'. It needs a root and branch review and action which addresses the very systems and practices giving rise to racial inequity and discrimination.

Therefore, in my view, what the BLM campaign did was reignite the conversation about race and expose the lack of progress on racial equality. To be honest, I am not convinced that the current reactive action on part of organisations will result in long term sustained and meaningful change on race.

"The key to moving the dial on race is to have a root and branch review because there needs to be a systematic approach to addressing racism and promoting racial equality."

This means transforming the culture of an organisation and ensuring that the very system which acts as a barrier is disrupted and reconstructed to enable racial equality and inclusion to have a real and meaningful footing. We also need to have an open and honest conversation about 'race' that involves creating safe spaces for BAME and white staff and students. In order to shift the culture, you have to promote a positive narrative based on an anti-discriminatory approach which is what I was keen to promote at Manchester.

At Manchester, the leadership have had to deal with some difficult truths from the experience of some of their BAME staff and student community who did not feel a sense of belonging and were calling out for change. My appointment was a clear signal by the leadership that they were listening and ready for change in relation to the race agenda across the spectrum of ED&I.

I believe in the power of a collective voice to bring about change, and at an HE level, the BAME staff support network can play a critical role in challenging and holding the organisation accountable while working with the organisation to deliver the solutions toward positive change. This dual role can be challenging - but not impossible - with the right development and partnership model.

Any strategy needs to be developed through 'co-production' which involves proactive engagement with students and staff on the creation of the vision and priorities. This puts transparency and collective ownership for the strategy at the forefront of a transformation journey. This needs to be supported by clear governance, investment, and leadership.

"Race needs to be a clear priority in any ED&I strategy with actions and KPIs."

What are your thoughts on the report from the government on Race and Ethnic Disparities? To what extent, if any, do you agree with the report's conclusion of socioeconomic limiters being the driving cause of disparity, rather than institutional, structural, or systemic inequality?

I have read the report and see it as offering an interesting perspective on the state of race in the UK which should be debated openly and honestly. Their own evidence clearly shows that institutional racism is real and therefore their conclusion does not take away from this fact! I was disappointed by the polarised views and would have liked to have seen a more intelligent debate about the report.

I find it frustrating that academics and campaigners seem to be overly focused on changing the term 'BAME' rather than recognising the steep hill we still have to climb to make racial equality a reality. If not BAME, then what?

Does this term in any way provide the answer to any of the issues we are talking about? The BAME community and activists need to be more strategic about their direction because choosing to focus on this term distracts from holding organisations and the political leaders accountable on race.

I would like to see the conversation moving forward because there is a recognition across the HE sector and the wider public sector that addressing systemic inequalities is key to making progress. Therefore, we should stop focussing on this one conclusion and consider the rest of the report and recommendations which are sensible, such as disaggregating the ethnicity data so there can be more focussed interventions to build trust and transparency.

The last few years have been difficult to say the least. What challenges has the pandemic presented for practicing ED&I, and are any of these challenges unique to the Higher Education sector?

The pandemic has only exposed the uncomfortable truths about long standing inequalities that under-served groups like BAME communities, those who are disabled, and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds continue to experience.

These communities were the ones who experienced more loss of loved ones and hardship during the pandemic. Therefore, ED&I practitioners need to use the evidence to challenge and bring about the change that is so overdue.

The pandemic also brought to the forefront the need for organisations to begin tackling inequalities using an intersectional lens because disparity can be compounded if, for example, you are from a BAME community, female, and live in a deprived area. It is important for organisations not to hide behind this intersectional lens and delay progress on tackling racism, disablism, etc.

The key challenges for the HE sector, although not unique, are around staff and student wellbeing impacted by continued lack of tackling the issues of bullying, harassment and discrimination.

The pandemic has really been tough on students, particularly on university students and their psychological wellbeing. The way that learning has now moved towards hybrid models needs further reflection as the fee students pay is for an experience which is more social and classroom based. Therefore, I am not surprised by their **frustration!**

"I think the pandemic caught everyone off guard including the HE sector. In making the decision to move to online learning, the sector has probably done its best in supporting students, though the students may disagree."

I am not sure its leaders really understood the impact and their role in supporting students, including international students who were not able to see their families for a considerable amount of time. The pandemic has taken a toll on their mental health alongside worsening financial hardship, as we know many students work to support themselves through university. The move towards home working and the online world has undoubtedly impacted staff too.

An example of this is the impact on the career of women in academia, as we know that care for children and the family fall significantly on the shoulders of women. The other areas would concern digital inclusion, access, and financial hardship.

Post pandemic, universities will need to evaluate their contract with students who have become disillusioned and feel that they are not getting value for money.

Then there is the challenge posed by continuous external interference into what academic institutions need to do in areas such as 'freedom of speech'. Issues of sexual misconduct and tackling racism on and off campus are other key challenges for the HE sector. This hugely complex agenda requires clear solutions, and ED&I practitioners need to be empowered and supported in bringing about change. The role of leadership is instrumental in transforming towards a more fair and equal society.

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