# A CASE STUDY ON ED&I IN HIGHER EDUCATION

## PART TWO: ON ED&I

This is part two of a three-part conversation where Mehrunnisa Lalani and Akhil Yerneni discuss race, ED&I and the University of Manchester. In this section they explore how institutions can show their commitment to ED&I, how to attract and then retain diverse talent and necessary skillsets to be an ED&I practitioner.

**Mehrunnisa Lalani** served as the Interim Director of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion at Manchester University 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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An ED&I vision, together with a clear transparent strategy, investment, leadership and a measurement matrix based on complete evidence is key to demonstrating a commitment to ED&I. One of the key aspects is leadership becoming allies in the progression of ED&I. Leaders need to reflect on their own understanding and commitments to ED&I, humble and visible by listening to their staff and students, and acting on what they hear.

"**The culture must be centered around proactivity: reviewing and refreshing its practices, performing periodic health checks, and performing these checks university-wide every year to gather information and feedback.**"

Staff networks need to become key partners to the organisation in transforming and delivering on ED&I. They have a role in providing psychological safety for individuals to share their concern and seek support. The networks also have a role in developing solutions to key issues by working in partnership with the organisation leadership in supporting the delivery of the ED&I strategy. Observing the impact of existing policies and procedures is crucial.

Organisations should be asking themselves:
- What are the implications for our community?
- What are the risks and how do we mitigate adverse impact?
- Are our leaders capable and confident in advocating and leading on the agenda?
    - What does our institution look like?
    - Is it representative of our learning population and the community within which we reside?
    - Do we have an open and transparent culture where our community feels safe and confident to raise concerns?
    - How is ED&I considered in decision making and is ED&I an add-on or integral to the success of our organisation?

ED&I objectives need to be integrated into leadership PDRS and appraisal, academic, and professional leadership. The organisation should offer opportunities for all communities to participate safely in conversations about aspects of ED&I so that there is mutual respect and learning for all. Finally, there must be clear accountability for delivery, review, and evaluation.

> **How does a university balance attracting new and diverse talent with ensuring that once onboard, these employees feel included and retained? And the follow up is, what sort of role does senior management have in recruitment and retention strategies, aside from purely HR and Talent Acquisition? Do you think there's a role of Deans and Vice Chancellors in getting more involved in retaining staff?**

Many young people are making decisions based on what they think the organisation offers them in terms of belonging, learning, and having a space to grow. The culture and tone of an organisation is set by its leadership. Senior management, including Deans and the Vice Chancellor, have a crucial role in leading and advocating for ED&I. They need to ensure the organisation's recruitment, development, and retention actively promote the value that diversity brings to the University and they need to engage with their diverse community to get feedback about their experience as employees. There needs to be a contract based on trust and confidence so that all who work there feel a sense of belonging, and this comes from each employee feeling able to be themself.

Issues such as bullying and harassment need to be tackled effectively and swiftly, and this requires moving away from what I see is a very legalistic, formal and adversarial process. Organisations must try and resolve concerns early on and work towards a more conflict resolution approach. They should set up a talent pipeline, and it's not always about attracting talent from the outside - it's about getting your existing pipeline right and then retaining these individuals by creating equal opportunities for shadowing, project work and secondments.

Deans have a key role to play in improving diversity within their faculties, and where a Dean is visible, they should model proactive and compassionate leadership together with championing ED&I. You will then get more innovation, creativity, and diversity of background and perspective. This is true for the organisation as a whole.

Therefore, ED&I cannot be the responsibility of professional services or ED&I: it must be integrated into leadership performance objectives and accountability.

**Organisations and people have never been more impassioned about ED&I than now, arguably. There's a lot of work to be done, but what skill sets, characteristics, and experiences are important for someone in your position? What makes an effective ED&I practitioner?**

I have worked in diverse public sectors - with the exception of the HE sector - and Manchester was my first experience as an employee in the sector. You persuaded me; it was the curiosity and the challenge of becoming a practitioner in an institution of learning that appealed to me. You have got to be agile and adaptable to a new environment. This means having confidence in your skills and the ability to be credible and successful. The primary skill sets involved are being authentic and an excellent positive communicator. This will enable you to build relationships across all levels of the organisation as well as engender trust and confidence.

The other skills are being resilient and being a good listener. Working in ED&I can be challenging and lonely at times, so you need to be able to navigate through various barriers and not be demotivated by setbacks. For me, it's also about being authentic and having integrity. Do not over promise and deliver what you promise to deliver. At my level, it is about empowering others by developing and supporting. I see myself as learning all the time and delivering through partnership and collaboration.

**One of the key things I've picked up from our conversation today is that being an effective ED&I practitioner isn't necessarily about going in, being antagonistic and coming at it from a very binary opposite point of view.**

Yes, but there's more to it and being antagonist or confrontational isn't it! ED&I is not rocket science: it is about us as human beings who look and think differently. What I find is people fear 'difference' and it is important that as an ED&I practitioner you do not feed into that fear. Therefore, being effective requires humility, patience and resilience. It also requires confidence and being able to navigate your way through an organisation's culture.

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**"Other key things are: be true to yourself but unafraid to challenge and to know when and how to do it. You can't be combative, but you also can't lose yourself and your integrity. You can't become institutionalised - keep yourself outside. This doesn't mean being confrontational."**

It is about honesty and effectively challenging to enable people to pause and examine their own behaviour. An ED&I practitioner must be able to listen to people - even those who are not committed to the agenda. This is essential to understanding their context so that you can work with them to enable transformation. The key is building relationships and building allies, which requires humility and not thinking your view is the right one all the time.

**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 at (0)7808 649556, or akhil@andersonquigley.com, or connect with him on LinkedIn.**

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