

A CASE STUDY ON ED&I IN HIGHER EDUCATION

PART THREE: ON THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

This is part three 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 Mehrunnisa's role at the University of Manchester and the objectives and initiatives she worked on and how organisations can create a physiologically safe culture that empowers people to speak up.

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.

Follow [Mehrunnisa Lalani](#)

Follow [Akhil Yerneni](#)

Follow [Anderson Quigley](#)



**ANDERSON
QUIGLEY**

When you were at the University of Manchester as their interim Director of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I), what were your main objectives? Could you share any particularly valuable initiatives you have worked on?

The objective was to reframe the conversation about ED&I (particularly around addressing racism and racial inequalities, as well as other protected characteristics such as disability or sexual orientation) and to give greater confidence to all stakeholders that the university was serious about shifting the dial on ED&I.

The challenge and objective was how to turn this into a positive narrative while reframing the conversation so that people don't feel you're accusing them, and at the same time, not letting them off the hook. On the other hand, it was about working with leaders, mentoring and challenging their thought process and giving them the confidence to lead on ED&I.

"If you've got uncomfortable or difficult questions to ask or you disagree with aspects of ED&I, then you should share and be open about it without anyone saying, 'you can't say that!'"

There was a time when we had to learn, for example, that language changes and evolves and in it is a journey of self-reflection as well. For staff and students, it was about giving them the space and safety to voice their concerns - not to judge and just listen. It was then my job to communicate this to the leadership. Moreover, it was about giving the staff and students confidence in speaking out and becoming partners in the change process. I wanted to take the 'adversary' out of the narrative and instead take people with me on a road towards reflective practice and learning, and I chose this approach based on my 25 years' experience as an ED&I practitioner.

You have a choice to confront but that can cause people to become defensive and put walls up, or you can go in to facilitate constructive conversation and challenge in a manner which promotes mutual respect and learning. This approach is even more difficult because you still have to be true to yourself while challenging behaviour and processes or when someone just refuses to have an open mind.

What I focused on was developing some certainty and cohesion around ED&I.

Universities are made up of lots of faculties and there is quite an activity overdrive around ED&I, which can create duplication and overlap. What was needed was a cohesive central strategy and action plan which everyone bought into and delivered. My approach was one of engagement and co-production in that I engaged at an early stage with staff and students to get their views on an ED&I vision and key priorities. The interim one-year strategy set out two key priorities of race and disability, giving the University a clear focus to begin making progress and getting a baseline from which to measure success.

The incoming director will need to develop an ED&I strategy aligned to the University strategy and work to integrate ED&I within the fabric of the University's business and decision making. They must be engaged and focus on building relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

I got involved in partnership working with key leaders, including the Director of Teaching and Learning to develop an inclusive curriculum approach and learning, as well as provide expertise and advice in dealing with key challenges such as complaints and external stakeholder relationships. Developing the staff networks was an area I prioritised as they could be powerful partners and critical friends on ED&I.

Some key work involved solidifying the ED&I governance and providing assurance to the board around ED&I, along with trying to clarify the roles of key ED&I academic leaders and how their role would support the work of the incoming ED&I Director. The University had a central ED&I team and it was about supporting them and offering a new perspective in relation to ways of working and raising their profile and confidence in facilitating change.

How do we help people speak up? And for those in a vulnerable position how can universities help them voice their thoughts and opinions with leadership if they don't feel psychologically safe?

You need to have the right culture and environment in which staff and students feel safe and confident to have a voice and are able to raise concerns. Staff and student networks can provide a safe space for individuals and groups to get support for colleagues who may be going through similar experiences. It provides a forum for raising concerns and communicating them to those in leadership positions.

At Manchester, I was keen for the staff networks to have a stronger voice to work with the University leadership in the delivery of the ED&I strategy and enable a more positive and empowering culture.

I also believe strongly in network collaboration and therefore commissioned specific development for the networks to gain skills and an insight on how it could become a key voice in the ED&I space. The positive shift for networks at Manchester came when the Vice Chancellor and some of the key leaders attended the networks to listen to the concerns of staff and to get feedback from their community on what mattered to them as employees. These sessions provided the leaders with an opportunity to be visible and demonstrate a willingness to listen, even if it's uncomfortable.

For those attending, the sessions gave them the opportunity to have a voice and confidence to express themselves in a safe environment. For me, each leader (which includes the Deans) should attend the networks periodically and even act as a sponsor. There needs to be both informal and formal avenues for staff and students to provide feedback and also for raising complaints. Periodic surveys can provide a useful tool for capturing how staff and students are feeling, particularly if they are anonymous. These 'health' checks need to be integrated into an annual cycle to become meaningful. There then needs to be an action-based approach which demonstrates action based on that feedback. This engenders trust and confidence, and will also increase engagement.

"Psychological safety also needs to be created for people who are uncomfortable with ED&I. I think people sometimes genuinely have questions and don't understand certain issues, such as language, which can be offensive."

These spaces - if handled properly by involving those with lived experiences and those who engage and learn more - provide an opportunity for mutual learning and understanding. It can result in allies who can be key to unlocking barriers and making progress on ED&I.

© Anderson Quigley and Mehrunnisa Lalani.

To reproduce, please contact: welcome@andersonquigley.com

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](#).