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Review: How is Equality, Diversity and Inclusion translated into business engagement practice?

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Introduction

The worldwide protests in reaction to the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 accelerated and brought to the fore acknowledgement of systemic race inequality in UK higher education. That has prompted wider questions and reflections on all aspect of equality, diversity and inclusion and how they are acknowledged and adequately addressed within our working environments. For the members of the Aspect Business Business Engagement Community of Practice (BE CoP), representing (at that time) 21 UK universities, these sector-wide conversations have encouraged an examination of their own practice through the lenses of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). The CoP commissioned Walcott Communications to conduct a small independent review with a sub section of CoP members. This study establishes a baseline of how BE Cop members translate into everyday practice considerations of equality, diversity and inclusion. It focuses on the three protected characteristics of sex/gender[1], race and disability. It is a light touch review of a what is an extremely complex and vast topic and does not delve into, for example, issues of intersectionality and how they are understood or addressed. The review concludes with suggestions of actions members can take to broaden their own understanding, knowledge and practice in relation to aspects of EDI.

Top Level Observations

1. Nearly all members who took part are well informed about their institution's EDI policy and understand how it is managed and enacted.

2. Ensuring balanced (or simply more) gender representation and encouraging participation of early career researchers (ECRs) are the foremost equality, diversity and inclusion related considerations for BE CoP members.

3. Diversity of race or disability are rarely, if ever, part of the decision-making process when identifying academics for business engagement opportunities.

4. All members stated that their overriding criteria is whether individuals have the right skills and expertise for the project.

5. EDI is not routinely part of the due diligence process for business partners as many are SMEs. The exception is large multi-national partners who will have publicly accessible EDI data and policies.

6. Applying considerations of race and disability equality to business partners is not a step members feel empowered or equipped with the appropriate skill to make.

Method

Representatives from six institutions were interviewed: University of Huddersfield, London School of Economics, University of York, Queens University Belfast, University of Essex and Cranfield University. The members all worked in some type of knowledge exchange role for their institution but the composition of their roles, breadth of responsibilities and levels of seniority varied greatly. Some worked exclusively with social scientists and others worked with academics from a wide range of disciplines that included social scientists.

Responses were collated, to identify common themes and areas of divergence. The interviews were supplemented by some desk research to identify resources that would help members to advance their learning and knowledge of EDI.

The Findings
Where we are:
Representation

The primary consideration for anyone responsible for creating and facilitating university/ business partnerships is always to 'find the right person' for the job. For all members this is guaranteed to be the overriding criteria applied to any decision. Nonetheless, within the process of identifying the 'right person', all members that took part said that they consciously apply other criteria to boost the diversity of the pool of academics from which they can choose.

Gender

Universally, the members interviewed all said that they are very conscious of ensuring equality of opportunity and representation in relation to gender in the schemes

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1. Please note that the Equalities Act 2010 refers to sex. For this study we use the term 'gender' instead of sex, to indicate how an individual chooses to identify.

Aspect

and partner projects they facilitate and manage. All were highly aware of the need to ensure, where possible, woman academics had access to opportunities for business engagement and were encouraged and supported to do so.

"My instinct would be around women faculty in particular. It is where I would start first."

A few observed that in the social science disciplines there was often a more equal gender balance among staff than some of the STEM disciplines. This means there is a more diverse pool for them to choose from and an increased chance of a woman being the 'right person for the job'. Nonetheless, members indicated that even in these circumstances, they were inclined to actively reach out a woman academics with the right expertise to encourage them to nominate themselves. This was due to an acknowledgement that women were generally less likely to put themselves forward.

Career Stage

Alongside gender, equally important for nearly all members is career stage: whether the potential partnership or scheme is an opportunity to support the career progression of an early or mid-career researcher.

"I do think career stage is very important. I don't want a room of senior academics…"

All participants will try to engage academics at all stages of their careers, and most were doing this through activities such as purposeful targeting of the ECRs in the departments with which they work, for example, to encourage them to apply for Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) funding. The drive to encourage a mix of career stages on a project is not just about career progression. Members also do it to increase the intellectual diversity available, which is a valuable asset in university/business collaborations.

Race

The race or ethnicity of the academics that are approached or engaged for business engagement opportunities is not a conscious consideration that is prominent for any of the six members that took part in the interviews:

"In terms of race, we don't give it much thought."

There was one exception, geographically located in South East Asia, who said they do consciously think about racial and ethnic representation of the academics when meeting with partners. More commonly, the reason offered for members not actively thinking about the race or ethnic diversity of those they work with, is that the demographic makeup of the institution's academic staff hinders any meaningful consideration of racial diversity. Alternatively, for some their academic body is racially and ethnically diverse and therefore finding diverse representatives for business engagement requires little intervention.

Disability/Differently-abled

Collectively members viewed this as a very sensitive area as disabilities are often hidden and not obvious to an observer. It was a characteristic that was considered private and too personal, and as one participant put it:

"not something we would have knowledge of outside of the HR department."

One of the members explained that their university had an active staff disability forum, so it was possible for them to at least know where to start if they wanted to encourage participation from differently-abled individuals. For the majority though, disability was not something they actively considered in relation to representation.

Where we are: Data collection

None of the six members routinely collect data on business engagement at their department level, neither in relation to the academics or to the business partners with which they collaborate. Most were aware of, and knew where to find, university level staff and student data on gender, race and disability as these were often driven by funder and reporting requirements of sector initiatives such Athena Swan or the more recent Race Equality Charter.

Where we are: Diversity of external partners

This is not a consideration for any of the members. As one person explained the businesses they partner with are defined by a range of external factors outside of their control not least the requirements and KPIs attached

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to the funding scheme, the strategic priorities of the institution or department and the types of companies in their region. A couple of members pointed out that due diligence is conducted on governance and reputation of partners and for larger multi-national it was standard to also obtain publicly available information on gender, race and disability within their workforce. This was rarely, if ever the case, for SMEs which for most members were the majority business type with which they worked.

Where we are:
Communication channels

Overall, the most favoured method was targeted communication. Despite members holding slightly different job roles and responsibilities, there are common patterns in the processes applied when trying to identify academics for a business partnership opportunity. People draw first on their own knowledge of who might be an appropriate fit for the project, often based on those they have worked with previously or others they are aware of doing relevant research within the university. They then supplement what they know by speaking with colleagues in the research development or innovation teams of the Research and Enterprise departments in which most members are located or to which they are affiliated, and also with Directors of Research. If they have them, members will also use institutional research management systems or department websites to identify individuals doing appropriate research and approach them directly.

During the discussion one interviewee observed that there is a danger of "...*being a bit exclusive. I can see that I hold power and there is an opportunity for bias in my role.*"

Only one member said that they have in the past circulated opportunities to a specific representative group (women in research). No-one else had thought about using these groups or forums in that manner and were unsure whether that would be appropriate.

As well as targeted communication, different dissemination methods are used, depending on what is available, the type of opportunity being communicated and the timeframe for action. For example, an IAA call will be circulated widely via email to all departments, included in weekly newsletters. Twitter and LinkedIn are also used.

Where we are:
Awareness of institution level support for EDI

All members are aware of their institution's EDI policy, and most were able to provide a good understanding of the structures in place to deliver on and manage the policy. The majority also knew the EDI representative for their department, felt that they were regularly updated on developments and news and knew where to go if they needed further help.

The point was made by nearly everyone that the quality of leadership mattered but most felt that in relation to EDI their leaders were 'leading by example' For one, diversity was enthusiastically described "*as front and centre of what we do, and it comes from the Directors.*" Most said that they felt that their university senior leadership were genuinely and visibly supportive of EDI and the overall sense was one of optimism.

Where we would like to be:
Personal development

Taking part in the interviews gave each individual permission to consciously reflect on their practice in a way that most of them had not previously. When faced with the question of what they wanted to develop in relation to EDI, there were different answers that reflect the areas they personally felt less confident in, or not as well informed.

"I would like to know more about the demographics of our staff and students that engage in KE and how it compares with the sector as a whole...there is an assumption that KE is driven on the supply side by young white males, and we can diversify that. I would be interested to know how to do that."

"Disability is an area I could be more conscious of and have more knowledge and info on."

"This conversation has made me realise that we are still that level where we are fixated with better gender representation but haven't reached the point of better representation across all the staff. And in terms of business, we don't give enough time to think about who we are engaging with how representative they are."

"The challenge is I don't know what I don't know! For me, in this role, it is the female aspect...anything I can do in that space to support, and help is where I am focusing my energy."

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A wider view

The second question asked as part of this study is *what learning on EDI can be taken, adapted and applied to business engagement from other connected areas of the university/business environment?*

This has been more difficult to address in this brief study, not least because of the vast amount of material available, particularly under the theme of innovation and enterprise. Increasing the diversity of innovators and entrepreneurs is fully embedded target for government agencies, funders and practitioners and has been for some years. There are a number of schemes and programmes aimed at increasing the diversity of start-ups and entrepreneurs and a body of literature, evaluations and reports highlighting the barriers and challenges. These tend to focus on the supply side of how to facilitate diversity among entrepreneurs and start-ups and, it appears anecdotally, that much of the diversity has been aimed at gender equality. Race and disability are in the mix as demonstrated by UKRI's recent Supporting Diversity and Inclusion in Innovation report on the effectiveness of schemes to encourage more Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and disabled entrepreneurs, but not as prominent.

Closer to home, ASPECT's ENT CoP has documented examples of policies and actions put in place by London School of Economics and the University of Bristol to increase diversity among women founders Supporting Diversity in Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Both institutions first conducted research to understand the barriers before acting to tackle both individual and systemic challenges. The necessity to gather data on the particular area of activity is key. It seems safe to conclude that very few institutions will have specific data on diversity and business engagement, so obtaining this will be the first step in moving forward.

Outside of the business innovation space there is growing research on diversity in higher education (students, academic and professional staff) that offer opportunities to reflect on one's practice and underlying assumptions. A good place to start on race is the Centre for Research in Race and Education at the University of Birmingham. Professor Kalwant Bhopal's research mirrors the findings of this small study that gender is accepted as a universal concern, but not so race. Research related to disability in academia is harder to source. The Centre for Disability studies at Leeds University recently published an article on the experience of disable academics. Nicole Brown's 2018 article entitled Ableism in Academia, and book of the same name, explores the challenges of identity and marginalisation faced by disabled or chronically ill academics.

Conclusion

This study indicates that there is a lot to celebrate in the EDI space within higher education. Nearly all members have access to training on diversity and have in place formal structures and resources that members can use. However, the diversity barometer seems to be 'stuck' on gender and career stage.

That gender equality is so prominent is not a great surprise as it has been prioritised in higher education policy, notably through the Athena Swan Charter for more than 16 years, as well as other innovation and business-related policies and schemes. This demonstrates the importance of sector-wide drivers to encourage change. A 2019 review of Athena Swan revealed that it is commonly perceived as a key tool in helping to achieve real behavioural and cultural change. 70% of UK HEIs[2] have engaged with Athena Swan and all the institutions represented by the BE CoP members that took part in this study are signed up to it. The Race Equality Charter, which was formally launched in 2016, has the potential to similarly drive behaviour and cultural change, but it is still very much in its infancy with only one member explicitly mentioning their participation in the scheme.

Moving beyond gender and career stage and routinely including considerations of race and disability representation is the next evolution of diversity in practice within HE, but it is complex and challenging. Professor Bhopal points out that the focus on gender within HE, while laudable and necessary, makes it harder to move on the diversity conversation to include race and disability because *"while institutions can claim to be working on structural inequality by focusing time, resources and attention on gender equality, there is little or no imperative to shift the focus to uncomfortable conversations..."* (University Business, 15 July 2020). While institutional and sector drivers are undoubtedly necessary to achieving real change, there also needs to be some personal imperative.

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2 Graves, A., Rowell, A. and Hunsicker, E (2019) An impact evaluation of Athena SWAN

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Taking on the challenge of 'uncomfortable conversations' what actions can individuals take to alter their own knowledge, understanding and behaviours and to influence those of its institution? Below are some suggestions inspired by conversations with members of the Business Engagement CoP.

- Take some time to reflect on and ask difficult questions about your own assumptions and modes of behaviour. When and where do considerations of race and disability equality filter into your decision- making and does this happen frequently enough?

- Ask yourself what you *really* know about diversity in your area and whether you need more data to acquire a deeper understanding of your institution's particular circumstance.

- Ask questions about recruitment within your own institution: What sort of mix of people are being attracted/ recruited? Is there a wider HR discussion to be had about where roles are advertised, the language used in job descriptions and the type of skills required?

- Speak to your colleagues in research and innovation about diversity initiatives in their spaces and consider what might be transferable to business engagement.

- Talk to your academics, especially in social sciences, who have a broad spectrum of research expertise in relation to EDI and the workplace and can point you to reports, studies, examples and tools.

Resources

ASPECT, (2020), Supporting Diversity in Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Centre for Research in Race and Education (2019) Advancing Equality in Higher Education

UKRI report on race and disability (2020), Supporting Diversity and Inclusion in Innovation

Olsen, J. et al (2020) Reporting from the Margins: Disabled Academics reflections on Higher Education

Brown, N (2018) Ableism in academia: where are the disable and ill academics?

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About Aspect

Aspect (A Social sciences Platform for Entrepreneurship, Commercialisation and Transformation) is a network for organisations looking to make the most of commercial and business opportunities from social sciences research.

Supported by Research England's Connecting Capability Fund, Aspect members sit at the epicentre of discovery, imagination and progress in the social sciences. We draw together pioneering academics with innovative industry leaders to tackle the most complex societal challenges of our time.

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