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DETERMINATION WITH RESPECT, TRUST AND SHARING

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We are all different in gender, race, age, disability, religion, and belief. As such, we need to have learning and work environments that are fair, safe, socially just, and without discrimination. We need to promote equality, diversity, inclusion, and sustainability (EDIS) in the learning and work environment in UK universities. We need to: enhance faith and world-view equality (i.e., all members of the university community have a responsibility to respect people's freedom to express their convictions and religious beliefs, as long as this does not impact on the freedoms and rights of others); enhance disability equality (i.e., I believe the learning environment is the place that students and staff can work and study free from discrimination and harassment); enhance gender equality (i.e., I believe the working environment should be one that promotes and embeds gender equality); and enhance race equality (i.e., I believe the working environment should be one that tackles all forms of racial discrimination and harassment). We must create a better environment for learning and working together in a happy and healthy work-life balance by understanding the cultural differences of our students.

Opinion

What do we mean by equality, diversity, inclusion, and sustainability (EDIS)? The Equality Act 2010 “legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society” (Government Equalities Office & Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2013). We are all different in gender, race, age, disability, religion, and belief. As such, we need to have learning and work environments that are fair, safe, socially just, and without discrimination.

For instance, in 2020 the world experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a new situation that no one was ready for, full of so many unknowns: what kind of virus is it, why has it spread to humans, how can we protect ourselves from it? With all this uncertainty, UK universities needed to understand the impact that both the virus and lockdown measures could have on students' mental health and their risk of domestic violence and technology-mediated abuse (online harassment). Students needed specific support from professional people to deal with all these issues.

I am a PhD student with a different background both from many British people (i.e., different in race, religion, and belief) and many other students in the UK (i.e., age). Academics with backgrounds similar to mine have expressed views and opinions about the learning and work environment within UK universities. For instance:

“I know a lot of ethnic minority academics who have become professors very late in their lives because they have waited and waited to get promoted. The others, some of them have just got frustrated and given up, happy with just being in the middle ranking and not bothered to apply any more. You get a lot of those, many, many more who retire as a

senior lecturer, or reader and so on, and never get a professorship.” [Asian Indian, female, pre-1992 university]... “I think that the problem here is that even if you are on a par in all sorts of ways in terms of your output, in terms of the quality of your work, that imperial past impinges on that in terms of how people evaluate you. And that’s the very, very subtle racism that operates here that one is aware of.” [Asian Pakistani, male, pre-1992 university]... “UK universities provide nice working places, however there is huge scope for improvement in race relationships with colleagues. In these matters it falls behind USA and Australia. It is hard to understand why!” [Asian Indian, male, post-1992 university]... “Nice working environment, but full of little groups which is a major barrier to progress. Difficult for a new lecturer/researcher to break into research without belonging to a particular research group. Fairly okay relationships... inclusion is very, very poor.” [Black African, female, post-1992 university] (Bhopal, Brown, & Jackson, 2015).

These examples are from academics in the UK. The quotes show that there is still much work to do to ensure that the learning and work environment in UK universities provides equal opportunities for all. It is through the development of trust and positive relationships that students will learn to respect each other, and through always acting as good role models. I also believe no one should be the victim of discrimination, and that everyone should receive fair treatment.

Most organisational aspects that have a direct impact on the work environment can be changed to be more health promoting. For instance, how work is divided in time and place and between different groups of employees, how the work process is coordinated, how work is governed and controlled, how the results are measured, how power is executed, and what arenas are available where different expertise, experience, and perspectives are met, discussed, and reflected upon. These formal and informal structures and processes affect the managers and their employees’ actions and interactions that shape practices, logic, rules, and thus also the working conditions and performance (Härenstam, 2017).

To improve EDIS in UK universities between students and teaching staff, we need to understand students’ needs, respect their views, and listen to their opinions through surveys and interviews. We must accept that people are all different (gender, race, age, disability, religion, and belief) and that we all have the same entitlement to human rights, equal opportunities, and social justice. We must also remove any barriers of communication between students, and between students and teachers: use simple English language, be clear in your ideas, and use visual tools in the learning and work environment. Furthermore, there needs to be extra teacher training, resources, and research within universities to deal effectively with the wide variety of students both from within the UK and (especially) from outside the UK.

Finally, my experience of working in primary schools around the world has shown me the importance of teaching children how to communicate with other children of different backgrounds. Children need to respect and trust each other, and share their life experiences through digital stories, culture (e.g., festivals, food, fashion, and songs), knowledge, and

understanding. In my opinion, we could implement this approach in the learning and work environment in UK universities.

In the short term, I am keen to achieve something significant. I am ambitious, in that I wish to challenge myself, push myself to new heights and achieve a major goal of enhancing my career by finding a suitable job—which in turn will help me to enhance and progress my knowledge. It is also important to mention that I will keep developing transferable skills to enhance my career.

In the long term, I enjoy the academic environment and would like to become an expert and main contributor in my field to support and help children and young people through creative activities. I would like to do this by working in academia or the public sector. Therefore, I am keen to take an important step forward in my professional career after graduation with my PhD program in art and design, as a professional artist and designer, to enhance my knowledge and experience. This will also help me to support the community by improving children and young people's well-being through participation in creative activities. I believe that creative activities can help children and young people—who may struggle with a variety of mental health problems, learning disabilities, and depression—to reconstruct negative thoughts into a healthier mindset.

In general, competitive markets, poor economic perspectives, pandemics, and racism are the most severe obstacles people could face while progressing their career. Life after university is not only full of challenges and obstacles, but also great opportunities—hence we need to work hard to seize these opportunities and enjoy the fruits of their outcomes. As my final word to myself and others, we need to stay confident in our work, determined, and ambitious—and never give up!

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