

# FE: for everyone

Making the sector a more inclusive  
place to learn and work



A supplement produced by

**FE WEEK**

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## **FE WEEK**

### **EDITOR:**

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### **APPRENTICE:**

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### **PHOTOGRAPHY:**

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## **EDI: honest appraisals and critical reflections**

**W**e work in a sector that is notoriously diverse. Further education and skills is an ecosystem of differences; national and local funders, global and micro employer customers, large and small qualifications in every subject imaginable, and massive college groups and small local training providers serving learner populations that are often more diverse than the communities they come from and who are learning for all sorts of reasons.

Ask people why they work in FE and skills though and you're likely to get a unified response – it's all about opportunity for the learners we serve.

Education is a values-driven service with a social as well as economic purpose. The best educators know this and thrive in those 'light bulb' moments with their learners and

get their kicks developing a curriculum and experience that they know sets them up for their next steps.

We also know that a worthwhile curriculum isn't just about the trade, the craft or the academics. Getting a learner through a study programme, apprenticeship standard or qualification spec is only half the job. We also want our learners to be good people that can understand and thrive in the world around them.

That's why the equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda is so important and why I wanted to shine a spotlight on the important work being done, and that is yet to be done, on making FE an inclusive place to work and learn.

Eyes are, rightly, on the sector's national organisations to show leadership

### **SHANE CHOWEN** Editor, FE Week



and on provider leaders to take action. In this special supplement, you will find honest appraisals and critical reflections from leaders at all levels as well as insights from expert EDI practitioners who are at the cutting edge of culture change in their organisations.

You will find some emerging themes, like the importance of role models and smart use of data. What I hope you don't find in these pages is complacency.

All of this, I hope, will inspire accountability, more self-reflection and, crucially, even more change.

# There's a growing realisation that remaining in the current state is not good enough

When I was appointed as director for diversity by the Association of Colleges (AoC) and the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) it was to support and challenge the further education (FE) sector to increase the pace of equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives.

In the past 10 months working with practitioners, principals and stakeholders, it is evident that real change is beginning to take place. The sector has the ambition and aspiration to take a lead on creating a culture of inclusion across the country and, more importantly, I sense the need for change has been deeply identified. There is a growing realisation that remaining in the current state is not good enough.

Previously leaders in further education would say the right things; for example, they believed that the staff should reflect the diversity of their communities and that the workplace should be one in which everyone can thrive and feel that they belong. However now, sector leaders are taking personal action and are honest about areas they need to learn more about.

They are delving into the data and going passed the quantitative measures of diversity, and getting honest insights from staff and students as to whether they feel welcome and valued in the organisation.

I suspect that some of the responses to these internal reflections are quite uncomfortable. However, it is important that we begin to feel comfortable with the uncomfortable data that such feedback from staff and in-depth reflective questions provide.

At sector level, organisations are coming together to stress their commitment to equity diversity and inclusion and working together to share insights and learning.

Pearson brought together a

number of organisations between May and October to capture the vital witness evidence on how COVID has impacted the inequalities gap. The final report will be published at the AoC conference and will contain evidence on the role that learning and skills can play to address these issues.

November is a 'month of learning' that sees ETF, AoC and WorldSkills UK providing opportunities to ask, learn and reflect on progress in EDI and then commit to further, more concerted action. Other organisations including the Federation of Awarding bodies and Ufi Voch Tech trust are also taking action in this space this month.

As part of AoC's wider work on equity, diversity and inclusion it has developed a partnership agreement with colleagues at the Black FE Leadership Groups (BFELG), committing unequivocally to tackling racism within further education.

The ETF is offering more opportunities in its programmes for governors, leaders, and middle managers to stimulate change in their organisation. We have already seen managers and leaders progress into more senior roles after these programmes.

The leadership hubs at the ETF centres



**Jeff Greenidge**  
Director for diversity at AoC & ETF

for excellence in SEND are promoting a self-improving system to support leaders in creating inclusive organisations.

Practitioners too have been sharing their stories through the ETF and AoC.

They are undertaking real world approaches, capturing actions, successes and failures and they create a space in which challenging conversations can take place and in which opinions can be expressed in a respectful way. These examples of practice are not providing a blueprint, but they do provide a space for colleagues to ask, listen and reflect on their own practice.

Change is tough. It causes uncertainty, volatility, ambiguity, and unpredictability, and can thus perceived as a threat.

It can then elicit undesired emotions, behaviours, and can contribute to total disengagement or even stress. This is apparent in some of the highly charged emotional interactions that can occur, particularly around the themes of gender,

white privilege, racial discrimination, and gender pronouns. But again, these uncomfortable conversations require us to create a safe space for them to take place and for us to reflect on what we can each do differently to move the agenda forward.

As I edge closer to a year in this role, it is clear we must continue to work with partners to amplify learner voice, share examples of practitioner initiatives and bring colleagues across the sector together to look at how best to speed up system change.



# On reflection: understanding who we are and the decisions we make

**W**hen *FE Week* approached me to write for this supplement during Black History Month my immediate response was of course 'Yes', what an honour that would be. I felt an immense sense of pride, privilege and responsibility. This was followed swiftly by an overwhelming feeling of somehow getting it wrong. I then remembered that there is no such thing. This, after all, is about reflection, experience and perspective and I have never been one to shy away from sharing my thoughts on inclusion.

On speaking to Shane Chowen, editor at *FE Week*, I learnt that *FE Week* had recognised its role in the wider inclusion challenge and not just in the month of October. This was like music to my ears. Black history is everyone's history. Inclusion is something I could talk about all day long and has influenced, shaped and developed me throughout my personal life and journey in the FE sector. To tell this story I should start at the beginning:

I live in a leafy green Midlands town.



## LYNETTE LEITH

Vice principal (curriculum),  
Hull College

I live a healthy, cultured and varied life. I'm well educated and well-travelled. My ascendance into this world was quite different.

My academic and socio-economic experiences throughout early childhood, schooling and teenage years presented a very different trajectory. My intelligence played little part in the opportunities

“Would my journey have been different if my cultural and social identity was too?”

available to me, which at the time were few. A challenge faced by many pupils and young people up and down our country. Born in the eighties to an English mother and Jamaican father. A mixed-race young woman attending a failing comprehensive, where my siblings and I were one of two black families. Often mistaken for the other black girl in school. We looked nothing alike.

That remains a place of value; a place where my identity was formed, a place that contributed to the diverse perspectives which I hold today. Here I developed resilience, social understanding and community spirit, coupled with an unwavering work ethic and, followed by a good education, has led me to a place of progressive thinking.

Would my journey have been different if my cultural and social identity was too? I believe so. There are numerous studies which evidence that the way we are perceived physically i.e., race, gender, age and even vocabulary and tone of voice influence how society views us and therefore impacting the opportunities we may encounter.

Further research surrounding employment into leadership roles tell a similar story, for example, I quote “When



“We all carry beliefs and ideas with us about people and cultures”

you appoint you tend to appoint one of your own, to identify with someone with your demeanor... It is much more challenging to the team and you individually to deal with someone who doesn't see things the way you do... Someone from a different ethnic background or with a disability might see things differently to you” (Morrison et al 2006). This shows up in education and employment too.

In the UK we have long standing systemic issues in education. Culture, class and race influence and shape experiences, outcomes and opportunities facing our younger generations. Their intellectual capital plays little role in the opportunities before them. Underperformance starts at school age with the brightest children in disadvantaged communities performing below the least academically able in affluent schools.

This pattern continues into college life where EDI data shows that those from some BAME backgrounds perform less well than their peers and white males from disadvantaged communities underperform

and are at increased risk of becoming NEET. The divide in the UK between the 'haves' and 'have nots' is widening. Yet here we are centuries later fighting the same cause. I'm interested in how this influences the social context of education itself. How this shows up in teachers, learners, leaders and managers, how we can recognise this and how it might impact our students, to inform meaningful discussion within our specific settings supporting positive change from the ground up.

Take my own experience. I was raised in a white working-class environment in a wonderful and inclusive family setting where our Jamaican heritage was embraced. I learnt how to cook Jamaican food from my white mother, I was taught about the history of Jamaican music and lived a happy mixed heritage life. However, there was an unavoidable undercurrent which told a particularly

negative narrative about black males. I lived with this for most of my adolescent years and it wasn't until later in my early teaching career that I looked back and realised that I carried that preconception about my very own culture, the culture which I love and am immensely proud of.

I heard the same sort of narrative in the staffroom when colleagues have referred to BAME students and what they expect or, more so, do not expect from them. This was not always reserved to BAME students. I have seen and heard this narrative regarding those from deprived areas too. An unwritten law that 'those' students won't do as well.

At this point I should be clear. I don't believe that staff across the sector want students to fail or that they come with racism and prejudice as standard or even on purpose. I start from the basis that everybody wants only the best for our students. My question asks... how might our personal identities influence how we treat others?

I think this is an important discussion to consider; do the perceptions, beliefs and ideas of individuals subconsciously influence how they see and engage with each other and students? Of course, the 'educated' person would not seek to hold any sort of prejudices but equally, we don't simply let go of our conceived subconscious beliefs overnight.

We all carry beliefs and ideas with us about people and cultures. Have these manifestations created microaggressions and how do they impact the classroom, committee room and beyond?



# Student Commission on Racial Justice Q&A

## When you think about your experience in education, how would you describe the differences in your school experience compared to your college experience?

I definitely noticed a strong difference surrounding inclusion from school compared to being at my current college. My school was in one of the least diverse places in the UK. I expected to face a lot of prejudice and I did. People refused to talk to me because of my race, both students and teachers would participate in racist behaviour from micro-aggressions to using slurs. Despite complaining, nothing was done. At my current college, I do not feel it's a hostile environment at all, there are societies dedicated to celebrating different cultures and racist behaviour is dealt with accordingly and I find many members of staff supportive around that matter. **Olivia, Long Road Sixth Form College**

## In what ways does your college try to create an inclusive learning environment?

My college has societies to create an environment to celebrate and discuss culture for different races and ethnicities, as well as food options in the canteen that are culturally inclusive. As an appointed equality and diversity lead at my college, I feel like these work to combat inequality not only on a social level, but on a systemic level too. However, I still feel as if there can be a little room for improvement like making sure all members of staff are more knowledgeable on different ethnicities' histories. It's also important for mental health services within the colleges to

recognise cultural factors. **Olivia, Long Road Sixth Form College**

## Do you feel involved in decision making at your college?

Yes definitely. Our college has lots of different ways to involve students such as surveys on different topics, wellbeing clubs and societies. I've been involved in recruitment process of new staff members. I'm also a student governor and can influence the college as a whole. We have a student council, and they are responsible for raising issues and were involved in how the college should solve those problems.

**Carlos, Leyton Sixth Form College**

“I feel like colleges and employers should try to add or improve to the experience given”

I felt very involved in the decision making at Long Road when the issues of racial injustices were brought up. Students have a voice on procedures they want implemented, or what could be done to make them feel safer within the college. They reach out through email, face-to-face and never made me feel as if I had no

Effective change cannot come about unless we understand students' experiences. Here, four students from the Leaders Unlocked commission respond to our questions on their time at college

place or voice within the matter. **Anthonia, Former student of Long Road Sixth Form College**

## Are there ways that employers can improve the experience of students they take on for work experience or work placements?

Employers should tell students how they contribute to the community and how important their role is within it. A lot of the time we are told how to do something but not why we are doing it. **Jordan, Kirklees College**

## What do colleges do well, and what could they do better, to prepare you for the world of work?

Colleges do very well with making sure you have the right guidance with getting some form of work experience, though not much else is done. I feel like colleges and employers should try to add or improve to the experience given. It feels too cut and dry for something that is meant to hold great importance to our careers. **Jordan, Kirklees College**

## If you were a college principal, what would be top of your agenda to improve the student experience?

I would say it would be technology – having more resources such as a college app to communicate with students, spread news about college development and opportunities inside and outside the college. This would improve students experience as they would have all the latest information straight to their phone and they could then get involved in more things that would benefit them. I would make sure that students were involved in the development and the creation of the app so it could be a learning opportunity as well. **Carlos, Leyton Sixth Form College**



# The importance of training a diverse workforce in building services engineering

**RACHEL JAGGER-THOMAS**

**Diversity, safeguarding and inclusion advisor, JTL**



Changing a culture doesn't happen overnight – 'it takes time to turn a ship around'. The number of invitations to webinars and events we all receive these days, inviting us to discuss how employers can build and benefit from a more diverse workforce, confirms this is a real and current concern.

Building services engineering is no different in terms of employers starting to ask themselves these questions. But what, in a sector where the next generation of electricians and plumbers are apprentices, do both training providers and employers need to do to help them thrive and succeed in the modern world and workplace?

### Training the next generation

Working in a sector where less than 6 per cent of all workers have shared that they identify as coming from BAME communities, and only roughly 2 per cent of trades professionals are female, it is even more important to think hard about trying to do what we can to create a more diverse workforce.

No matter what apprenticeship programme learners opt for at JTL, diversity and inclusion topics are integrated into it. Challenging them to consider what it means to work well with clients from all backgrounds, communities and abilities, as well as how they should expect to be treated at work are tools that they need to use every day. It isn't some sort of 'add-on', but rather supporting them in developing the necessary foundations of working in a respectful manner with other people.

### Diversity supports the economy

We live in a multicultural society. Customers have high expectations, not only in terms of the quality of work carried out but also how trade professionals interact when coming into their home. Learners need to be trained



accordingly.

Equally, anyone seeking a career in the electrotechnical, plumbing, heating and ventilation trades has a real opportunity to do well and be successful; race, gender or age should be immaterial. The bigger question now though, is, "Is the industry challenging itself as to what it needs to do to retain a more diverse workforce?"

**"Is the industry challenging itself as to what it needs to do to retain a more diverse workforce?"**

In recent years, it has been well documented that gender diversity, for example brings an array of benefits to business, and economic benefits to employers who better represent the customer-base. Ultimately, increased diversity benefits the construction industry and wider society.

As the industry begins to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, employers are looking at how to access wider talent

pools. Apprenticeships are a brilliant way for people of all ages, genders, communities, and abilities to kickstart their careers. At the risk of sounding critical, encouraging more diverse talent to start an apprenticeship is often the easier part. Ensuring that their working experiences are such that they decide to stay and successfully complete their programme is what really plays a pivotal role in supporting the next generation of trade professionals and the ever-widening sector skills gap.

With JTL primarily training young people, we know that the new generation coming into the sector has a clear understanding as to how they should expect to be treated and treat others at work – and to call things out when this is not case.

The last 18 months has been a time where many people have been re-evaluating what is important in their lives, especially when it comes to work culture. Why wouldn't it be the same for anyone just embarking on their career or considering a new career path too?





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STUDENT  
CHOICE**

# DON'T SCRAP BTECS

The **#ProtectStudentChoice** campaign coalition of over 20 organisations that represent and support staff and students in schools, colleges and universities is deeply concerned about the Government's recent review of Level 3 BTECs and other applied general qualifications in England. We urgently need your support to protect the future of BTECs and other applied general qualifications:

- **Sign our petition on the Parliament website and share with your colleagues, governors, students and parents – [petition.parliament.uk/petitions/592642](https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/592642)**
- **Write to your local MPs to secure their support**
- **Tweet support for the campaign [#ProtectStudentChoice](https://twitter.com/ProtectStudentChoice)**



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To find out more visit [www.protectstudentchoice.org](http://www.protectstudentchoice.org)

# An SFCA view on rising to EDI challenges



**GRAHAM  
BAIRD**

Director of HR  
services, Sixth Form  
Colleges Association

**T**he Sixth Form Colleges Association has recently published a paper setting out the practical, immediate steps colleges and academies can take to demonstrate their genuine commitment to racial equality and ethnic diversity. Graham Baird reveals the key points

Organisations that attract and develop individuals from the widest pool of talent consistently perform better, meaning better experiences for students and stakeholders. There continues to be a focus on the need to improve racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion, and there are consequences for those who fail to address this challenge, both within education and across wider society. This is an issue that must remain at the top of colleges' agendas in the coming years.

SFCA continues to work with the sector to support racial equality in colleges and has recently published a new edition in its series of occasional papers. This sets out key concerns and supports improvements in racial and ethnic diversity in the workplace. The paper considers practical, immediate steps that sixth-form colleges and academies can take to demonstrate their genuine commitment to racial equality and ethnic diversity, to support their ethnic minority community members and to promote ethnic diversity in their organisations.

When it comes to strategic diversity and inclusion thinking, 16-19 colleges are aware of the additional legal duties to which they are subject as public bodies, and how these duties provide a foundation for best practice. There are specific duties under the legislation to publish information demonstrating compliance with the public sector equality duty and to prepare and publish equality objectives.

These provisions add an additional layer of legal obligations on public sector organisations, placing colleges under a duty to go beyond the basic requirement of addressing instances of discrimination and to take proactive and positive steps to promote equality. Meeting this duty requires colleges

and academies to consider the equality impact of all aspects of its operations and to demonstrate that, where an adverse impact on a protected group is identified, appropriate steps have been taken to address that.

It is essential that institutions act within the parameters of the Equality Act 2010 when considering how they can address racial and ethnic inequalities. Whilst positive action can be encouraged and lawful, positive discrimination remains unlawful, a few exceptions relating to statutory occupational requirements aside. Therefore, an employer is likely to be acting in breach of the Equality Act if it recruits a candidate purely on the basis of his or her race or ethnicity, regardless of their actual ability to do the job. It is also likely to be unlawful to set quotas to recruit or promote a specific number of people with a protected characteristic, regardless of ability.

What colleges as employers can do, however, is encourage people from a particular ethnic background to apply for jobs, ensuring that the final decision on who to appoint is made on merit alone. They can also consider how positive action can be lawfully, and effectively, used within an organisation. Examples of other positive measures sixth form colleges could put into place include mentoring, development programmes, and specific and time-limited quotas.



It is also important to remember that members of college and academy communities who are from a minority ethnic group may also face workplace struggles, and colleges should be mindful of this whenever diversity and inclusion issues are being considered. Known as 'intersectional discrimination', discrimination can arise from the unique combination of 'protected characteristics' of a person which are completely inseparable.

**“It is essential institutions act within the parameters of the Equality Act 2010”**

Of course, addressing areas of under-representation may not be easy and many colleges and academies will require a long-term process of cultural change encompassing leadership support, training, talent management and recruitment efforts.

It is not only in the recruitment of employees that colleges and academies are seeking to make improvements. Young people at the age of 16, whatever their background or circumstances, must feel that the college option is accessible to them. Colleges already take a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, or with lower prior attainment, or with more additional needs, than their closest comparable sector (school sixth forms), but more can be done. In a recent collaboration with the Behavioural Insights Team, SFCA developed a resource setting out strategies to ensure that all young people are encouraged not only to enrol in a college, but to feel a sense of belonging once enrolled.

There is still work to be done, but significant progress has been made in recent times.

# Our pilot leadership programme aims to nurture talent from all backgrounds

The UK is a melting pot; an island that has few completely homogenous communities. There are several reasons for this. One reason is that the UK has long been an economic power that has attracted people from all over the globe to settle here, and another is the UK's imperial past.

These two factors are inseparable. Many people from around the world decided to make the UK their home. This diversity of thought and influx of immigration has led to some incredible innovations. The UK is a hub of cultural blending from the Windrush generation to migrants from Asia, Africa and the EU. Looking at the England team from this Summer's European Championship, 7 of the starting 11 have a parent or grandparent from overseas. While cultures have merged, there is still a great deal of power imbalance in the UK. The UK is a diverse country, but why

are those in leadership positions not reflective of this? Why are we not as inclusive when it comes to leadership?

**“Almost everyone agrees that the best mode for economic advancement is through education”**

This lack of inclusivity is a huge blind spot. The country loses out on potential by not fostering and promoting diversity of thoughts and experience. By nurturing talent from all backgrounds, the country can move forward and create a better life for all its people.

Almost everyone agrees that the best mode for economic advancement is through education. When looking at the leadership of FE colleges, it's disappointing to see a lack of diversity in its leadership. How can our colleges be hubs for innovation and inclusivity when the leadership isn't inclusive?

The lack of diversity in leadership is why Collab Group launched a pilot leadership programme that aims to nurture and advance the existing talent of the Collab Group college's black and ethnic employees. We are excited to have launched this pilot because we think it will be an incredible chance to learn and grow our college's talent pool.

The programme consists of different sessions. A key component of the programme will be pairing a participant with a senior member from a Collab Group college. The senior member will then act as a mentor for the nominee. Creating this link will enable the participants to use their mentors as a sounding board and help them grow and expand their talent. Mentoring is hugely beneficial for people as their careers progress. Learning from people's past experiences is the best way to avoid past mistakes and forge a smoother path upwards. It also fosters an environment where mentoring and nurturing talent is crucial. Creating this environment is especially crucial for those who come from a Black or ethnic-minority background. A lack of leaders from these backgrounds can hinder others from ethnic minority backgrounds from advancing into leadership positions.

A separate part of the programme will be masterclasses. These masterclasses will give the participants chances to learn from a leader



who comes from a black or other ethnic minority background. The participants will be offered the chance to work with these leaders.

This will also function as a valuable networking opportunity for those on the programme. The participants can learn from each other learn about each other's backgrounds. They can learn about everyone's unique challenges and obstacles, and take the lessons learned back to their colleges and help to create environments that have inclusivity built into the framework.

Over this year, we hope to keep the FE sector updated on the progress of these participants. We hope to take what we learned from the programme and disseminate these lessons across the sector and the UK at large. This way, the FE sector can continue doing its best and help the UK achieve its skills and economic goals through an inclusive and progressive environment.



**Ian Pretty**  
Chief executive,  
Collab Group



# AELP's priorities around the equality, diversity, and inclusion agenda

**M**y vision is to see AELP recognised as the nation's leading membership organisation for the employment and learning sector. In reaching our full potential, AELP must be positive, forward-facing, forward-thinking, and constantly adapting. We need inclusivity at the heart of our values. Every learner- no matter their age, gender identity, race, religion, sexuality, disability status, or background- should have the equal ability to achieve their full potential. This must always be at the heart of our mission.

While C-19 did not create structural inequalities, it has undoubtedly exacerbated them. Throughout the course of the pandemic, we have seen much fewer younger and socially disadvantaged participants studying on apprenticeship programmes. Employment rates are stubbornly lower for those from non-white ethnicities.

“While Covid-19 did not create structural inequalities, it has undoubtedly exacerbated them”

We know women are disproportionately employed in lower-paid sectors and with less secure working conditions.

Likewise, a higher proportion of disabled people have been made redundant than employees who are not disabled over the pandemic. We owe it



to all of our learners and employees to build back fairer, ensuring the skills and employability system is inclusive, accessible and works for all.

AELP don't want to pay lip service to the equality, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I) agenda. We want to lead, and set a good example to our members and the wider FE sector, learning from a wide range of individuals and organisations that are doing fantastic work. I am proud of the work that our EDI board group are undertaking, led by the formidable Sharon Blyfield, Head of Early Careers at Coca-Cola Europacific Partners Limited. This group is all about actions, not words.

We were delighted to have achieved Investors in People accreditation recently. A huge thanks must go to our members, the AELP board and the staff team for their contributions, hard work and dedication which helped us get there. But of course, there is always more to do and learn. We are working on delivering against

the action plan to keep making our work better.

We are also working to become awarded Investors in Diversity, working closely with the National Centre for Diversity (NCfD) on their recommendations. We will be putting forward a wide offer of support for our members around the EDI agenda, including webinars, workshops, and other events. Sharing best practice is absolutely crucial. I know how much I have learnt from providers and other key stakeholders across the sector, so let's keep sharing and collaborating.

In addition to this, with support from NCfD, we will be undertaking a view of our external communications and internal policies and processes, to ensure they are as fair and inclusive as they can possibly be. Building on existing work, we will be implementing more training for our staff, including unconscious bias training and training around mental health and wellbeing. We will also ensure our future events reflect the truly diverse range of voices from across the sector. This is just the beginning.

The skills and employability sector must ensure that no community is left behind, as we work towards the post-pandemic recovery. It's a huge challenge that we face, but I have no doubt that by working together, we will deliver a fairer and more inclusive future for learners and employers.



**Jane Hickie**  
Chief executive,  
Association of  
Employment and  
Learning Providers  
(AELP)

# Don't ditch BTECs – they are an important aid to diversity and inclusion



**CLAIRE ROGERS**

Interim SVP for BTEC and Apprenticeships, Pearson

**Strong recent evidence shows that if the number of BTEC and other vocational qualifications is reduced, this is likely to adversely impact less-advantaged students, says Claire Rogers**

For many years and across governments of different political persuasions, there has been talk about improving the standing of technical and vocational education. We welcome the current government's ambition and commitment to do this too – especially as, against a backdrop of rapid change, lifelong learning will be crucial in supporting both social and economic prosperity.

However, in striving for this, we have always warned that policy makers should not lose sight of what is working well already – namely existing high-quality qualifications that are respected by employers, universities and students alike, be they BTECs or other vocational qualifications.

A number of these are currently at risk under government plans to remove funding for qualifications that cover similar subject areas to T Levels and A-levels, focusing on supporting only these two remaining choices for students.

The education sector agrees, and we welcome the new #ProtectStudentChoice campaign supported by 21 organisations in defence of BTEC (and other high-quality qualifications). In particular, they highlight how the narrowing and limiting of choice of qualifications post-16 will have a negative impact on learners, higher education, employers and the economy.

Evidence shows that there is a risk that the proposals would reverse recent trends to widen diversity and broaden inclusion. The DfE's own impact assessment highlights the risk that certain student groups may be more adversely impacted by these proposals than others. It estimates that 273,000 16-19 enrolments, out of a total 1,946,000, are on qualifications likely to be defunded, so around 14 per cent. It also highlights that learners with SEN, from Asian ethnic backgrounds,

males, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are all more likely to be negatively affected by changes.

When we compare the average known student cohort profile, according to HESA data, of those following an A-level-only route, versus those studying a BTEC-only route for higher education entrants in 2017 (across all subject areas), we can start to see why. A greater proportion of those studying BTEC come from an ethnic minority background (such as Asian, 17 per cent; and Black, 14 per cent) than those who studied purely A-levels (Asian, 13 per cent; and Black 5 per cent).



In that same year, approximately 20 per cent of those following an A-level route came to university from the bottom four socio-economic groups (HESA), versus double that (41 per cent) of those following a BTEC-only route. This is evidence of the BTEC qualification's inclusivity, which is more representative of the wider student population. If the number of BTEC and other vocational qualifications is reduced, this is likely to adversely impact some student groups more than others.

In addition, research by the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) shows that widening access to HE could start to decline from 2024 as a result of the

proposals. If even only half of the learners taking BTECs or A-level/BTECs were lost to HE then this would, relative to 2020 levels, set participation by the most disadvantaged groups back to 2015/2016 levels.

Research undertaken by the Baker Dearing Educational Trust suggests that the reforms will harm social mobility by reducing progression from University Technical Colleges to higher technical study and higher or degree apprenticeships by as much as 40 per cent.

So it is clear that there is a serious risk that the proposals could reverse recent work to widen diversity and inclusion. Existing high-quality vocational qualifications, including BTECs, support a diverse range of learners – and the skills they bring to employers and the UK economy.

My Pearson colleague, Ria Bhatta, recently explored the potential impact of the consultation proposals for one occupational and degree area – nursing – for a long-read piece published by HEPI. In 2017, just over 21 per cent of entrants to nursing degrees held a BTEC Level 3 National qualification, representing approximately one-in-five nursing degree entrants. Given that most nursing degree holders do go into nursing as a career, this illustrates that BTEC alumni constitute a significant proportion of the nursing workforce. The cumulative effect of the government's proposals could reduce the number of existing routes into nursing, at a time when we urgently need to increase the size of the nursing workforce.

If we consider the impact of reduced accessibility to other degree areas that BTEC students progress on to, including allied health, social work, teaching, engineering and construction, the potential repercussions would be significant for the wider UK workforce, society and the economy.

If we want a diverse and high-performing workforce to meet the changing needs of our economy in these challenging times, we need a rich and diverse Level 3 curriculum that supports that.



# How to create a self-improving inclusive FE sector

**W**hat does an inclusive education system look like, and how can we achieve it? At the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), we have a responsibility to support the sector and help leaders to catalyse a culture change towards inclusion. This doesn't mean one central body designing "the perfect training programme" or finding a one-size-fits-all solution. Catalysing culture change to see diversity as an asset requires a three-levelled approach: bottom up, middle out and top down.

## BOTTOM UP: GRASSROOTS

Our learners and front-line staff should inform everything that we do as educators and leaders. It's vital we encourage inclusive practices within school and college and support initiatives like inclusion champions and ambassadors who can open the floor to different ideas and start those vital conversations.

If we're being realistic, not everybody is equally well-informed or passionate about this agenda. Learner champions and staff ambassadors can help keep the momentum going and inform those conversations about diversity and inclusion from the bottom up. We need to create protected spaces where we can enable these open discussions, and help shape thoughts into action, ownership, and responsibility.

## MIDDLE OUT: INSTITUTIONS

Learning institutions are the backbone of our education sector and a key catalyst to sustainable culture change. They hold the power of professional networks, leading effective practice, sharing effective practice, and defining effective practice on anti-racism and inclusive activities.

Part of the ETF's role in championing an inclusive sector is to support these institutions through our membership body, the Society for Education and Training (SET). Earlier in November, the annual SET conference hosted several insightful discussions on equity, diversity, and inclusion, including a discussion on

'Working with learners to improve curriculum and quality'. Elisha Soanes, from West Suffolk College, shared how she kick-started a learner-led approach at the college on how her learners wanted to get involved with the Black Lives Matter movement, which led to a culturally enriching experience for both learners and staff. Our philosophy is to help institutions like West Suffolk College to create a self-improving system by working with them; we're not here to do things to people or for people, we're here to help people do things for themselves.

At the ETF, we are keen to measure the impact and effectiveness of our work and adapt where necessary. Our director for diversity, Jeff Greenidge, who we jointly appointed with our partners at the Association of Colleges (AoC), has been researching the measurable impact of the ETF and SET coaching programmes, and believes they are already affecting positive change within the sector. From his research, we know that those who are attending the diversity in leadership programmes have turned what they've learnt into action, and are challenging others to do the same, which in itself is creating systemic change.

**"It's vital we strengthen teacher training on how we approach this angle of inclusion"**

## DAVID RUSSELL

CEO, Education and Training Foundation (ETF)



### TOP DOWN: NATIONAL POLICY

The UK's national frameworks, policies and training programmes shape the heart of education organisations and their cultures. Therefore, anti-racism and pro-inclusion must become embedded in national curriculum specifications and occupational standards.

It's vital that we strengthen teacher training on how we approach this angle of inclusion and equip our teachers to be informed voices in fields such as cultural competency. In a very busy and financially stressed sector, it can sometimes be tempting for leaders and governors to take the view that because their local community may not be very diverse, it's not a high priority for them. However, this is precisely why it is so vital, because we're not simply preparing our students for success in their local community, we're preparing students for success in the world.

### THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

Culture change rarely happens overnight and often takes a generation to achieve. That said, I very much believe in this three-pronged approach and, with the power of collaboration, we can drive a culture change that promotes equity and inclusion together.



# Lessons from the private sector

**NEIL BENTLEY-GOCKMANN**  
Chief executive, WorldSkillsUK



I spent over a decade working for the Confederation of British Industry and pushing hard to get diversity and inclusion higher up the corporate agenda. It wasn't easy, but big company leaders are now increasingly in the right space on this.

A combination of leadership risks piling up from inaction certainly helped prompt the change. Companies spotted threats posed by reputational damage and loss of business, problems in attracting, and retaining, leadership and management talent and the threat of regulation. However, there was an increasing awareness of the need to build the business case for change being social as well as economic.

**“When I moved into the further education sector, I thought the debate on inclusion would be more advanced”**

I am not saying the private sector has nailed it on this agenda - far from it - but it has moved a long way in the past decade and, while there is still a long way to go, there could be lessons for further education.

Perhaps naively, when I moved into the further education sector six years ago, I thought the debate on inclusion would be more advanced. I was positive about my experience of seeing the make-up of the student population as more diverse than in the wider population and I had visited colleges up and down the country with commitments to equality and inclusion displayed on the walls. But, as recent

debates have shown, there is long way to go to make a sustainable difference.

Addressing this requires serious collective buy in from us all in further education and, crucially like in business, at the highest level. Only when business leaders got organised and made public commitments to make real change by celebrating role models, sharing best practice and being held accountable through data-tracking did we start to see a shift.

We need to do more to celebrate diverse role models at all levels, so our contribution is about encouraging more young people from all backgrounds into our programmes. We commissioned The Social Innovation Partnership to look into the barriers that stood in the way of young people getting more involved in our work and how to improve inclusion on race, gender, disability, LGBT+ and socio-economic status.

As a result we launched our Inclusivity in Excellence programme, which supports colleges to encourage students from under-represented groups to engage with our work and help improve their career chances. We have also increased the diversity of the training managers working with young people so they can better see what they can be.

Use of data is vital so we can hold ourselves to account. Figures from our competition registrations show that young black people make up only 2% of the total and that young black people coming onto our programme are mostly from London and the North West of England. We can also see that young black people are finding more attractive training for careers in the digital, business and creative sectors.

We are using the data to set targets and take a more informed view on how best to support young people meet their full potential. It also allows us to share our insights and learning with partners and make sure we are making progress.

But we all need to do more and we need to work together. That's why I'm pleased we are working with the Association of Colleges, the Education and Training Foundation and Collab Group in this area.

The last lesson to be learned from the private sector journey is that we need to properly commit for the long-haul, with resources and effort, and be prepared for change and challenge along the way. No one sector has a monopoly on wisdom on this agenda, but we can surely learn from each other to make sustained progress.



# Interview: Dr Florida Starks chief diversity officer, Pearson

By **Shane Chowen**

**G**lobal education giant Pearson is one of the most recognised brands in further education and skills. You'd be hard pressed to find a company whose brands and services touch so many learners at some point throughout their lives. 'Tens of millions' of learners in around 200 countries in fact, according to Pearson's last annual report.

With the ability to determine how and what is taught and learned by so many learners comes the potential to have a profound impact in workplaces, societies and communities across the world.

So how exactly does Pearson intend to achieve change in education and society?

One such as action is a pledge that by 2025, all of Pearson's products and content will be compliant with its 'global editorial policy' which guides content developers towards products that are 'relevant, appropriate and inclusive'.

Pearson's diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) action plan, unveiled in August, included fifty board approved actions which range from investing in recruitment, reviewing content to eliminate bias and publishing free education resources on social justice.

And to oversee this work, Pearson appointed its first senior strategic leader to head up its DEI work.

Based in New York, Dr Florida E. Starks started at the company as senior vice president and chief diversity officer in



**“I absolutely love education and the power it offers. Learning, I believe, is elevation”**

February 2021, bringing with her more than fifteen years of senior leadership experience on DEI. *FE Week* editor, Shane Chowen, caught up with Florida to find out more about how her leadership is shaping Pearson as a company, as well as its work in education.

With decades of experience working in organisations, some even larger than Pearson, through various HR functions like diversity, equity and inclusion,

talent acquisition and learning and development, I wanted to find out what brought Florida to the world of education.

"I am a lifelong learner" Florida declares as we start our conversation. "I absolutely love education and the power it offers. Learning, I believe, is elevation."

The role itself is a great opportunity "to combine two of my heart's desires in one function; to come to Pearson and share my knowledge and expertise around how we can be much more of an inclusive organisation, and in doing so meet the needs of our diverse groups of learners across the world."

What became clear early on in our conversation was that immediate

recognition, shared by all education organisations, of the two jobs to do on equality, diversity and inclusion; becoming an inclusive employer and being an inclusive educator.

I ask how you take an organisation of over 20,000 employees working all over the world with you on this journey?

"Very carefully" Florida replies candidly, "what we're doing is really playing that significant role where everyone has equal and lifelong opportunity to succeed through learning, but we also turn that mirror inward so we look at opportunities that not only advance equity through our learning products, but then also advance equity within our organisation.

The answer, according to Florida, was that by creating an environment at work where employees could be themselves and "know that they play a valuable role", improves their ability to contribute.

"Our goal, through how it is that we define inclusion, is that we're creating safe spaces where people have a sense of belonging and empowerment so that they can use their voice at work which helps us deliver fantastic products and content, but also delivers good for people in those spaces where they live."

When leading change or advancement in the EDI space, there are common themes that transcend organisational type or size, Florida tells me. I was trying to understand whether Pearson's size

made a difference to its ability to do the things it's doing.

"It's all the same, right?" Florida replies, "No matter what the size of the organisation, it's the human elements. When I look at the common themes around how you engage with people; how you build trust, showing that you're walking the talk ... those are just some key behaviours that are common in terms of leadership.

"Making sure that you're creating spaces for people, ensuring that there's that degree of engagement, the authenticity that people can see that helps build trust ... those things transcend organisational size."

Central to knowing how you're getting it right, is having a good plan. Florida's has "very specific areas", she tells me.

"The first is how we recruit people, and talent mobility within the organisation. That means really sound plans around who it is we need to bring into the organisation and who we elevate within our organisation.

Partnerships also feature. A new collaboration with an organisation that focusses on career opportunities for members of the LGBT+ community has

delivered "close to 300 new employees within the first six months of that partnership. That's remarkable."

On the education side of the business, "a new policy has just been released that helps us be really sharp around how it is we show up as an organisation.

We have race and ethnicity guidelines, guidelines that focus on disabilities and making sure our products are accessible, we also have guidelines that focus on gender and on how we focus how we represent LGBT+ people across our business and in our products."

The danger with policies in guidelines though, is that they can become out of date very quickly. Particularly in the EDI space, because we're learning new things all the time, but also the discovery of new and different inequalities especially as we emerge from the pandemic.

"The beauty here is that inclusion, equity and diversity is a journey. We're never going to fully arrive" Florida tells me. Though, I must have looked a little disheartened at this point.

She continues, "We get really good along the way and there are for sure milestones that we have to achieve. The needle is always moving though.

"Our responsibility as a company that creates digital learning technology is to not only be on the cusp of what's new, but also what's next."

“The beauty here is that inclusion, equity and diversity is a journey”



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The year 2020 will go down in history for Covid and many other developments where we either came together or came apart. It also heightened some of the hidden fractures in our society and the continued calls for gender equality as well as other protected characteristics.

My own experiences during Covid brought forward a harsh reality of gender inequality with a backdrop of multiple other experiences heightening the inequalities I found myself to be in during the lockdowns.

I had always perceived myself to be a working mum in a household that fully embraced gender equality without the constraints of first-generation immigrant parents experienced in my childhood. Coming from a British Indian household where I had spent years navigating gender discrimination between two cultures, I made different choices in my 20's and 30's to avoid the same pattern repeating itself.

Then I became one of the many full time 'remote working' mums in my 40's and the years of progress peeled away as I took on Teams and the household turbulence, revealing in its wake a false illusion of equalities I had securely carried for so long. The experiences and insights also gave me a better understanding of our FE education system and how it reflects society and the inequalities it houses and unconsciously contributes to.

I am starting to understand that the layers of experiences we have as women are interdependent on multiple factors creating unique levels of disadvantage. I didn't think this way before the term 'intersectionality' entered my vocabulary. Now I see it



# ASMA AHMAD

Head of ESOL & supported learning, Lambeth College

## Intersectionality in FE

everywhere. How have I not considered this when planning the curriculum, a scheme of work or when setting targets during a tutorial. Neither am I looking at how this may be impacting the learning outcomes for a female student in my class. Until now I have only perceived the single identity that she is a female and possibly that she belongs to a particular race or may have childcare arrangements to consider. I am not even consciously aware to say that I am ignoring the diverse realities and experiences of a unique individual with unique disadvantages she carries with her into the classroom. Its not even in my thought process.

I'm glad to see EDI is now at the centre-stage of FE, establishing the new imperative for making education more inclusive. I have even embraced the opportunity to be an EDI committee member at the college I work in to support positive developments take place.

However, there is a need to go a little further to ensure that the work around EDI is adopted through an intersectional lens in order to identify the multiple factors that impact processes leading up to discrimination of female students.

An intersectional approach acknowledges systemic discrimination which impacts access to opportunity. Using multiple lenses develops a deeper understanding through which we can examine the processes, practices, policies and

structures that increase the risk of students experiencing disadvantage or discrimination because of their intersecting identities, leading to better outcomes for students within an inclusive education system. Adopting an intersectional perspective through the whole organisation is fundamental in raising real consciousness around privilege and oppression for real transformational change to take place.



“I'm glad to see EDI is now at the centre-stage of FE, establishing the new imperative for making education more inclusive”

It needs to go beyond providing childcare facilities and courses in engineering for women, it needs to be embedded into all aspects of the student journey and the organisation. It starts with having difficult but rich and constructive conversations followed by a progressive agenda and action plan. Only then will we have education systems that support all individuals with multiple dimensions of diversity, who are then able to engage with others in increasingly diverse and complex societies.



# Many colleges' boards still do not represent their communities and students

**B**ack in 2019 I wrote an article saying I'd like to see the further education sector open up the discussion on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), for two reasons. First, to showcase more of the good practice that colleges and the sector often take for granted; secondly to take stock of colleges' overall performance on EDI.

I was clear then that we had given too little focus on EDI in society and within the FE sector. I worried that we didn't know enough about the experiences of staff and students, the levels of bullying and harassment, stereotyping, support and culture, and outcomes for students across the legally protected characteristics and beyond.

Two years later there are strong signs of progress. Our sector is facing up to its own challenges and shortcomings on EDI as well as helping to highlight wider societal issues.

Colleges are clearer about the actions they will take on EDI and there are some showing great leadership. There is a broad recognition of the need to improve diversity particularly at senior levels in colleges and on boards, to reduce the attainment and learning gaps of certain student groups and to take a whole-college approach to key staffing issues where EDI is critical - recruitment, progression, pay outcomes and retention.

At the systems level we know we need better data, which is why we will be publishing a revealing report at our annual conference on college boards. We did this because we knew that college boards are not as diverse as they should be, but we had insufficient data to really understand the scale of the challenge.

So, rather than shying away from



that, and with the urging of the Black FE Leadership Group (BFELG), we funded a comprehensive survey so that we could set a baseline to work from. Sometimes you need to know the scale of the challenge before you can address it and I believe that is the case with this one.

The survey proves that we need a significant step-change in the approaches to the development, attraction and recruitment of leaders and governors. Many colleges boards still do not represent the communities and students they serve, particularly for black and ethnic minority groups.

We have also worked closely with BFELG and other executive recruitment companies, our competitors, to support the development of antiracist and diverse recruitment practices for our sector. This work would not have happened a few years ago, so I am delighted that it has now.

As well as those concrete examples of action, there is a tangible enthusiasm and energy amongst colleges to

take action on EDI, overcome the big challenges and embed practices, principles and policies to make further education an inclusive, representative space at all levels.

The call for more urgent, concerted work has been heard and is being acted upon. Another nice example is that we have invited 50 emerging BAME leaders to attend our annual conference, giving them the chance to network and learn amongst established leaders in our sector.

A lot of this progress is thanks to the work of the leaders in the sector and EDI specialists who make up our AoC EDI Steering Group and across our wider networks. I also want to pay tribute to the Black FE Leadership Group because their advocacy, challenges and support have really helped.

We've been aware for a long time in the sector that inequalities existed, and yet too little was happening to change that. So, this work has been a long time coming, but I'm proud now of the passion there is to create a more diverse and inclusive culture in colleges which will support the widest range of students.

For me, that's one of the key things about all of this. Students in colleges come from some of the most diverse and also marginalised backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the communities we serve. They deserve to be understood, to feel comfortable, safe and supported in every college. They need the very best environment to be able to realise their hopes, dreams and ambitions. I know that colleges work so hard on that, and I am confident that we are well on our way to being able to offer that as well as starting to truly reflect that diversity back to them.



**David Hughes**  
Chief executive,  
Association  
of Colleges



# ELLISHA SOANES

Lecturer and equality and diversity digital co-ordinator, West Suffolk College



## Our personal stories of racism inspired a raft of events and workshops to bring positive change

**L**aunching in summer 2021, one FE college has devised a black history programme of events that now reach far outside the college gates – creating a sustainable model that others can adopt, as Elisha Soanes explains

The death of George Floyd had a ripple effect across the world. As a result of this tragic news, students at West Suffolk College decided to use this as a starting point to bring about positive change. We had discussions in lessons and explored personal and more general conversations based around racism. From the powerful stories that we shared, we created some training videos about black icons and our own experiences to share with other staff and students. The videos were so well received, we decided to look into the possibility of embedding black history into our curriculum throughout the year.

Our principal and governors have been incredibly supportive of our plan, and thanks to additional support from Place 21, the European Union and the college as a whole, we slowly began to create building blocks that would enable us to carry out our mission. Funding has been created to create some new roles for equality, diversity and digital inclusion ambassadors. They are helping to champion what we are trying to do by creating a series of events and workshops with diverse community groups and businesses.

### WINDRUSH GENERATION AND 'UNTOLD HEROES' CELEBRATED

We officially launched in June 2021 with a powerful occasion that celebrated the Windrush Generation. We welcomed Derrick Bobbington Thomas for a talk about his journey. He was the first ever person from the Windrush generation to become a sergeant in the Royal Air Force. After the event, guests and students enjoyed a Caribbean-inspired meal in our restaurant, Edmunds.

Following on from this, we created a series of sessions with 'untold heroes' from the black community. We had authors, business people, DJs, a footballer, a model with her own clothing brand and two people (Alex Wheatle and Leroy Logan) whose stories were made into films as part of the Small Axe series created by the Oscar-winning film director Steve McQueen.

We involved local talent from the black community in Suffolk and their message was "dreams are not un-reachable, they are achievable". We had an amazing performance from Wooden Roots, whose music was featured in the Black Panther movie. Our students were also involved in workshops inviting diverse community groups to be part of the Power of Stories exhibition, hosted by Colchester and Ipswich Museum.

### WORKING TOGETHER

The ongoing plan is to encourage others to adopt what we are doing in relation to teaching

black history all year round. West Suffolk College is part of a family called the Eastern Colleges Group – a collective of post-16 education providers (West Suffolk College, Abbeygate Sixth Form and One Sixth Form), with over 15,000 students. One Sixth Form has been inspired to work with us and recently set up their own group at the college called Ethnic Youth Empowerment Society (EYES).

We want to create a sustainable model that others can adopt. Our own students had the opportunity to be part of this process, gaining work experience through filming the events and interviewing our iconic speakers. This footage could be shared with local schools and the community – as well as more national and potentially global audiences.

### FUTURE PLANS

We are launching a student equality, diversity and digital inclusion ambassador programme, to give students opportunities to extend their employability skills. The story of one of the ambassadors is another source of inspiration. Esther Ruse was on my health and social care course last year. By becoming an advocate for equality and diversity, she gained in confidence and started to pursue a career in music. Earlier this year she secured a record deal and she is currently in Los Angeles, pursuing her musical ambitions.

“We created a series of sessions with ‘untold heroes’ from the black community”

Personally, I've been influenced by so many people in my life, but the great Nelson Mandela is perhaps my ultimate inspiration. He famously said: "Education is the most powerful weapon to use to change to the world."

This is what the equality and diversity team and I are trying to achieve at West Suffolk College. We hope others will work with us or on their own to help create an ongoing legacy.

From the **AoC** blog

# EDI no longer an abstract concern, we're tackling it in the real world

## ARV KAUSHAL

Equality, diversity and inclusion manager, Milton Keynes College



It's heartening to see how much interest there is in equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) across the sector, and the way in which individual colleges are past the stage of merely identifying a problem, but showing ingenuity and commitment in terms of implementing practical solutions.

We're moving from seeing EDI as an abstract concern to viewing it as a concrete problem which can be confronted in the real world. This is so important. Sharing our approaches and initiatives, finding out what works in

one place and replicating it elsewhere – this is how we will learn to do things better. With this in mind Milton Keynes College Group held a series of online panel discussions, FE Voices - MK College, which brought together students, staff and experts to talk about what experiences of racism and to discuss ways of bringing about positive change.

The challenges faced at Milton Keynes College Group are probably familiar to many other institutions. At the most basic level

there are challenges around curriculum. It's not just about the content of different courses or the range of qualifications on offer and how accessible we are making them as providers. It's also a question of how those are perceived and valued in different communities.

For example, in families from an Indian background there is often still a very heavy bias in favour of university education and the status of having a degree. A degree from a

“The message we need to convey is that different qualifications are more valuable in different roles.”

British university is seen as a universal passport, internationally transportable in its value. A British apprenticeship or T Level, less so.

The same is true from the point of view of particular industries in that a higher apprenticeship qualification will often be viewed less favourably than a degree. Our challenge is how to get that message of equivalence, or even superiority, of the qualifications we provide. If you want to become an engineer, practical qualifications will always trump academic ones. If you want to be a research scientist, academia is more relevant. The message we need to convey is that different qualifications are more valuable in different roles.

This would be challenging enough, but when you overlay the issues of funding and accountability it gets even more difficult. The pressure on secondary schools to steer pupils towards A-Levels and university applications is intense (hence the government's declared intent to tighten the Baker Clause). There is little or no incentive for them to highlight



the advantages of vocational education post-16, which in and of itself increases the prejudice that it is a lesser route to follow. Make no mistake, these are issues of equality.

There is an old adage, "if you can't see it, you can't be it," and this is a big problem for FE. If our students do not see lecturers, mentors and executives who look like them they are going to be less inclined to believe they can aspire to those roles themselves.

The original TV series of Star Trek is famous for showing US television's first interracial kiss but

it also gave Oscar winner, Whoopi Goldberg, the belief that she could be an actor. Seeing Nichel Nichols playing Lieutenant Uhura she said, "Momma! There's a black lady on television and she ain't no maid!" Nichols was persuaded not to leave the show after the first series by Dr Martin Luther King Jr., who told her he allowed his daughters to stay up to watch "Star Trek" because of her.

Role models matter, and not just for students. A black lecturer is less likely to aspire to a college's executive team if they see nobody like them in such a role. Improving representation at all levels is a big challenge, among students, staff, managers, and of course, the curriculum. And imagery is so important here. If your college website, your teaching materials and your social media overwhelmingly depict one type of person, why would people from other communities think it is for them?

Stating a problem is easy, doing something about it often less so. Changing the way your institution looks, changing the kinds of imagery mentioned above, is a fairly simple

“There is an old adage, “if you can’t see it, you can’t be it,” and this is a big problem for FE”



fix, but how do we go about improving representation?

Big journeys require small steps, and the first thing we are doing at Milton Keynes College Group is measuring the problem – because if

you don't do the counting, how can you tell how big an issue it is? We are gathering data on student enrolment, achievement, conversion to higher qualifications etc, and similarly with regard to staff recruitment, retention, promotion etc. We have also committed to publishing some of this data, most notably what pay gaps exist between different ethnicities among the staff. Publication is a powerful tool.

Research findings released by the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics shows that employers obliged by law to publish their gender pay gap statistics have narrowed the differential between women and men by almost a fifth (19%). This legal requirement was only introduced in 2017, so that's a pretty impressive improvement and there is

no reason to suppose the impact in terms of ethnicity, if this was also mandated by government, would be any the less.

This approach has been formalised into publicly-stated policy in the group's newly published strategy document. It's central message is that we will be, "Driving ambition in our communities to build fairer futures," – and it's important to understand that by communities we mean workforce, learners, supply chain, parents/guardians – everyone with whom the college has contact. It sets measurable goals, and this is really important. It's the kind of self-imposed pressure which, while not a guarantee of success, is certainly a powerful stimulus for those in leadership roles to strive to make things better.

Change will be, as ever, incremental. We cannot expect dramatic improvement overnight. One year's data is a snapshot – five year's data reveals identifiable trends and shows whether specific initiatives are working. The bigger the quantity of data amassed, the more informative and reliable the results. If I had one message for my colleagues in FE it would be, let the counting commence.



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# The grand designs of diversity and inclusion

**H**aving worked out what was missing in one college's approach to EDI, the task was to build a completely new one – from the ground up, explains Anastassia Parsons

In the early days of my journey at the Bedford College Group, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives seemed to be focused primarily on compliance with statutory legislation and satisfying requirements of external and regulatory bodies.

EDI was an abstract concept that was someone else's job with little connection to service delivery and quality improvements. The EDI initiatives were seen as an optional extra – like putting a fancy chimney on a shed.

What was missing was applying an EDI lens consistently to organisational processes, practice and policies and thus creating an inclusive place to study and work. The challenge was to make EDI relevant to individual job roles so that people know how it applies to their day-to-day work and helps them achieve the organisation's business goals. It was time for some building work!

## FOUNDATIONS

A diversity champion network was constructed starting with a diversity ambassador role, first in the teaching teams, and then extended to include the professional teams. The diversity ambassadors act as role models for inclusive behaviour and scaffold an internal system for the sharing of good practice.

Systems are set up for the in-year monitoring of student progress, achievement and experience by equality factors at top and department levels. Student recruitment and achievement, bullying incidents, disciplinary actions, complaints and satisfaction rates are scrutinised for disproportionality for groups of students who share a protected characteristic or come from a disadvantaged background.

Systems are also developed for a better understanding of the staff experience by

equality factors at all stages of the employee cycle.

## BRICKWORK AND ROOFTOP

Diversity staff groups for women, LGBT+, disability and race equality are now in place, with allocated funding for the forums' co-chairs. These groups provide support to members, contribute to consultations on issues affecting both staff and students, offer a collective voice for raising concerns and a channel to influence policy and practice.

As an internal benchmark, EDI standards for teaching areas were developed to provide clarity on how compliance with equality legislation and inclusive teaching translate into these teams' practice.

The standards with the corresponding EDI audits aim to ensure consistency across all teaching departments and increased ownership at a manager's level. They can also support processes such as departmental self-evaluation and quality improvement planning, performance management, and professional development. Reviewing key policies and processes through an EDI lens is becoming the norm in the college.

The college's equality and diversity group transformed into an EDI committee with a clearly defined strategic role to identify priorities, lead on actions and review their impact, and to challenge the college on its practice, especially where progress is limited or in support of underrepresented or disadvantaged individuals or groups.



## ANASTASSIA PARSONS

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, The Bedford College Group



To secure a sustained support from the top, senior leaders, including the college principal, self-nominated for the role of an executive sponsor for individual strands (women, LGBT+, ethnicity, disability). While they are not expected to be experts in individual protected characteristics or diversity issues, the executive sponsors are an ally – creating the environment for change to happen.

## FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

Numerous assets update and develop people's inclusive practice: an EDI info hub on the staff intranet, monthly diversity updates disseminated via the diversity ambassadors, panel discussions with a focus on the lived experience of protected groups, an EDI section in the staff newsletter and a monthly series 'What inclusion means to me' where staff and students share their personal perspective and experiences.

## FUTURE UPGRADES

How staff are managed is one of the most important factors on how our people experience the culture in the college. If we want to enjoy a truly inclusive place, then we also need to focus on developing inclusive leadership capabilities. We are reviewing and redesigning the system and rewired processes and practices along the way.

For the success of any EDI strategy and priorities, we need all leaders and managers on board and equipped with solid abilities to connect with and support people who are different from them, to spot and address bias including in decision-making, to support diverse needs, to allow for different voices to be heard and to champion diversity and inclusion ethos in their teams.

From the **AoC blog**



# Closing the attainment gap in further education



## JASPA DHALIWAL

Head of inclusion, maths, English and digital skills, Westminster Adult Education Service

**A**t WAES, the pandemic exacerbated an existing achievement gap related to social disadvantage. So, as Jaspa Dhaliwal explains, the college rolled up its sleeves and set about closing the divide. Here's how

Adult Community Learning (ACL) and FE are invaluable layers in the UK education system, providing school leavers and adults returning to education another opportunity to gain qualifications. A large proportion of school leavers who attend FE are those who have not been successful at school during key stage 4; these learners at college largely go on to undertake vocational qualifications. It is worth mentioning the 'type' of student that enters FE.

After key stage 4 approximately 55 per cent of students leave school and go on to A-level qualifications, leaving the remaining for 45 per cent going to FE to take either level 1, 2 or 3 courses, which are largely vocationally based qualifications.

These students are also less likely to have left school with five A\*-C GCSEs and this group has a higher disadvantage factor, with 25 per cent eligible for free school meals (FSM) at level 3, and 40 per cent at level 2. This is significantly higher than the students who take A-levels, with only 16 per cent eligible for FSM. This gives us an indication of not only the academic ability, but also the social disadvantage that these students enter college with. This is relevant across all ethnic groups.

FSM-eligible pupils are less likely to achieve a grade 5 or above in English and Maths GCSE than those not eligible during key stage 4 (DFE, 2018).

At Westminster Adult Education Service (WAES) an achievement gap has emerged between our African learners and our

White British learners, and over the past three years that gap has widened. As a response we set up a group to work on initiatives to firstly reduce and then close that gap.

As a start point, we considered all touch points of the learner journey from application, enrolment to progression. This included reviewing all communication to learners to ensure that key information was being delivered and acknowledged. We refocused our attention to support services offered and streamlined priority access.

The pandemic had a greater impact on particular groups within society and with that in mind we reviewed our additional learning support service to make it even more learner focused by supporting learners during evenings and weekends.

With attendance rates improving and the year-end in sight we firmly set our sights on achievement and through the predicted grades activity we were able to identify learners who were at risk and then embarked on our ambitious mentoring programme.

**“To start, we considered all touch points of the learner journey from application onwards”**

Mentors were given training around a seven-point approach to understand key responsibilities. A cohort of learners were identified as being at risk of failing and as a direct result of the mentoring programme we were able to move 75 per cent of learners towards achieving their qualification. The feedback from learners has been extremely positive.

The mentoring of these learners improved their outcomes



and progression opportunities into further education and employment – a remarkable feat!

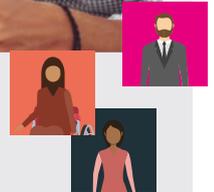
The feedback from managers has been amazing and we will be widening the network of mentors across the service.

Throughout the journey this group regularly met to review progress to ensure momentum continued and support and supervision was in place at all times. All of this fed into our wider Equality and Diversity Committee.

Underpinning these bold steps has been an awareness from the leadership at WAES to actively commit and acknowledge the challenges faced with EDI. In a bid to work towards greater awareness and understanding, managers have participated in the ETF Diversity in Leadership coaching programme and ETF Diversity in Leadership coaching workshop – receiving coaching and mentoring from established and effective leaders, such as Dr Maxine Room CBE.

At WAES we are committed to preventing achievement gaps and have a firmly set agenda that has been internally developed and has everyone connected at the service as key stakeholders.

From the **AoC blog**





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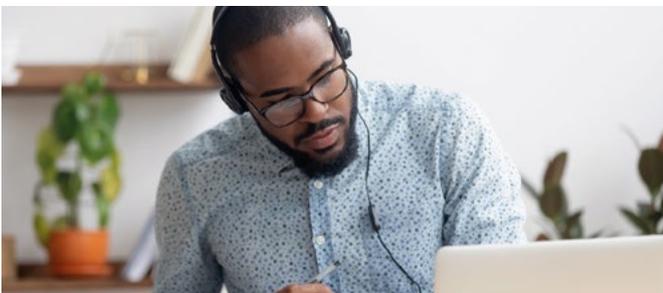
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