



Diverse voices, shared vision: EDI narratives and the future of higher education

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Presentation abstract

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) are essential values in higher education, influencing policy and practice in transformative ways. As institutions strive for inclusive and equitable environments, understanding the personal and nuanced experiences of those engaged in EDI work is essential. The ALDinHE EDI Working Group initiated a project exploring how EDI is conceptualised by individuals within their specific roles in higher education through reflective autoethnographies. This presentation examined the diverse perspectives, challenges and aspirations shaping EDI work in academic settings.

The central question was: what does EDI mean to you in the context of your role? This acknowledges that EDI is not a uniform concept but is shaped by personal, professional and institutional factors. Contributors reflected on transformative experiences, motivations, and ongoing challenges. Personal revelations often deepen engagement with EDI, while

frustrations – such as institutional resistance, limited resources or systemic barriers (Scott, 2020) – highlight the need for meaningful changes.

The paper also explored the aspirations of LD practitioners who integrate EDI into their practices, reflecting on the desired changes and long-term goals for a more inclusive and equitable higher education landscape. However, these aspirations are often tempered by uncertainties, especially when discussing EDI in environments where such topics can provoke defensiveness or misunderstanding. Therefore, the presentation offered a reflective and strategic resource, providing a platform for authentic dialogue and fostering mutual understanding. By sharing personal narratives, the EDI Working Group aims to contribute to the discourse on EDI, helping individuals and institutions navigate the complexities of creating inclusive academic communities.

Keywords: learning development; EDI; working group; higher education.

Community response

This presentation by the ALDinHE EDI Working Group tackled one of the most challenging yet essential aspects of contemporary higher education: understanding how equity, diversity and inclusion are experienced and conceptualised by those working in the area. By employing reflective autoethnographies, the presenters offered a methodologically innovative approach that recognised EDI as shaped by individual lived experiences rather than institutional mandates alone. The responses to this presentation revealed both the profound resonance of this personal approach and the complex ways in which practitioners navigate EDI work within their professional contexts.

One respondent's immediate desire to join the working group demonstrates the power of reflective approaches to EDI discourse. This reaction suggests that when EDI work is grounded in personal narrative rather than abstract policy, it creates more meaningful pathways for engagement and participation:

I found this session so thought provoking and definitely relevant to my role. So much so that I would like to join this working group, although I have yet to organise doing so! Thank you.

Another participant's reflection on how family connections and motivations inform their EDI commitments again reveals how effective advocacy often emerges from lived experience rather than professional obligation alone. The difficulties inherent in EDI conversations, which were acknowledged, also speak to the courage required for sustained engagement in this work:

In my institution, there has been a relatively recent School EDI lead and then an EDI working group, which is composed of one academic representing a 'department' within the School. I am one of these 'departmental leads' and my 'department' is largely the Learning Development Centre (LDC). At one of our earlier meetings, I expressed a concern, or rather a recognition, that I, or very close family members, belonged to specific groups, and this session reinforced that it is not a uniform concept, indeed. Indeed, some of my personal motivations for a more equitable and inclusive society for all are because this is a society (institution in this context) that I wish for my loved ones. What is and what should be EDI, is shaped by many personal and contextual factors. If we can recognise this, then we can only be more open to differing perspectives and voices as well. I think that being involved in EDI so openly is not always easy, for many reasons, and I won't write a personal thesis on this (to everyone's relief!), but what can sometimes feel like slightly difficult conversations must continue to be had, particularly in light of some of the louder external voices that can be heard. It was very thought-provoking to listen to the value of personal reflections.

Clearly, EDI is an ongoing journey rather than a destination. The language of 'never arrived' and 'continuously learning' used in the comment below aligns with the autoethnographic approach's recognition that understanding evolves through sustained reflection and engagement. The repeated interest in joining the working group suggests that the presentation successfully modelled the kind of inclusive community that participants wanted to be part of:

I believe EDI is a 'never arrived' area, and I am continually learning how to be more inclusive and equitable in my practice, as well as in the way I share information with others in this regard. Once again, I thank you all. And I will explore joining :)

Finally, one comment in particular elevated the discussion to consider learning developers' distinctive role within institutional EDI efforts:

I was really struck by the sense of social responsibility and community that influenced this work and that of the ALDinHE EDI working group. As our sectoral understanding of EDI issues continues to evolve, so too does the need for evidence-based advocacy to influence often impenetrable institutional cultures and practices. In promoting justice and equity, the presenters in this session called for curiosity in challenging underlying perceptions of diversity. They highlighted the

unique position of our community as LDers to challenge and champion in our hybrid and privileged professional positions. Student contributions to our understanding of EDI are essential in order to provide authentic, experiential insight into exclusionary practices (intended or unintended) and to help us consider ways in which practitioner/organisation assumptions might be more inclusively shaped.

The enthusiastic response to this presentation underscores the value of grounding EDI work in authentic personal reflection rather than abstract institutional rhetoric. By demonstrating how individual experiences and commitments shape professional practice, the ALDinHE EDI Working Group has provided a model for more meaningful engagement with EDI challenges. The multiple expressions of interest in joining the working group suggest that practitioners are hungry for spaces where they can explore EDI complexities honestly and collaboratively, moving beyond compliance-focused approaches toward transformative practice.

Next steps and additional questions

The connection between personal lives and EDI activism has not only resonated deeply with the presentation participants but also generated a range of questions that would be worth exploring further:

- What structures best support ongoing dialogue between EDI practitioners across institutions?
- How can student voices be more systematically integrated into EDI efforts?
- What role should learning developers play in facilitating EDI conversations beyond their immediate professional contexts?
- How can the LD community contribute to broader higher education EDI discourse while maintaining its distinctive perspective?

Authors' reflection

This project has highlighted the persistent inequalities faced by both students and staff within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Learning development (LD) professionals, working across these communities, are uniquely positioned to observe how inclusion

practices often fail to serve all groups equitably. Our reflections highlight the need to move beyond deficit-based models and toward systemic, transformative change.

Students from minoritised backgrounds frequently arrive at university already disadvantaged by negative early educational experiences and a lack of belonging. These challenges are compounded in HE, where institutional structures often reinforce rather than dismantle inequality. A key concern raised was the inadequate provision for students with disabilities, who are frequently forced to mask their needs or disclose them in unsupportive environments. This reflects a broader failure to design inclusive systems from the outset.

The deficit model remains prevalent in HE, with LD often viewed as remedial support. This framing contributes to the overrepresentation of underrepresented students in LD services and reinforces harmful narratives about capability. Additionally, the lack of diversity within the LD profession itself may contribute to the ethnicity awarding gap, as representation plays a critical role in shaping inclusive practices. Attempts by HEIs to support diverse students can sometimes have unintended consequences. As one collaborator noted, ‘the discourse and social practices of inclusion so frequently become a means of exclusion’. This paradox necessitates a more profound and critical examination of what inclusivity truly entails. LD professionals must be recognised not only for their support roles but also for their strategic potential in shaping institutional EDI agendas. Encouragingly, contributors emphasised the power of collaboration and connectedness within the LD community. By sharing practices and learning from one another, LDers can collectively challenge inequality and improve outcomes. However, this must be paired with institutional recognition and support to effect meaningful change.

To move forward, we must develop inclusive curricula and learning frameworks that reflect the diverse experiences of our students. Support for marginalised students must be proactive and accessible, without requiring disclosure or adaptation on their part. Increasing representation in LD and EDI decision-making is essential, as is fostering a culture of inclusivity through ongoing training and reflection. As a result, we must also challenge the neoliberal priorities of HEIs, which often conflict with equity goals. Legislation alone is insufficient; collective responsibility and community cohesion are vital to eliminating inequalities. Partnerships with community organisations and engagement with global HE communities can further enrich our approaches.

In conclusion, LD professionals have a critical role in promoting justice and equity in HE. This requires a shift from remedial support to strategic leadership in EDI work. By embracing holistic, collaborative, and reflective practices, we can create learning environments where all students feel a genuine sense of belonging and are empowered to reach their full potential. As a next step, we will write up our research as a full journal article to further disseminate our findings and contribute to the ongoing dialogue on equity, diversity and inclusion in higher education.

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