



Research Article

## “What master do you serve?” Struggles in university EDI committees

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**Abstract** In light of the recent suspension of the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) advisory group by UK Research and Innovation, this article invites a reflection from my observations as a member of an EDI committee of negative attitudes towards Advance Higher Education charters and EDI committees at higher education institutes. Using race equity as an example, I hope to suggest why these negative attitudes from institute members are by design inevitable, if the Advance Higher Education framework is the only angle in which EDI progress is understood.

**Keywords:** Equality, Diversity and inclusion, Race equity, Ethnicity, Athena Swan

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### Introduction

“Which side are you on? What master do you serve?” In a world more polarising than ever, it should come as no surprise that people would wish to find out the camp to which they belong, before launching into carefully navigated conversations that avoid topics where potential disagreements may lie. But I did not expect to be asked this question as I approached fellow colleagues at an equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) focus group in my academic institute. UK Research and Innovation had an answer to this question as it suspended its EDI advisory group.

Universities nowadays have many groups dedicated to



Figure 1: A portrait from Bjar @bjart (TikTok)

promoting EDI at various levels (each department, faculty, etc.). These EDI committees are initiated and maintained by their group members. Having served on my institute’s EDI committee for over a year now, it has become clearer to me that there are two contrary attitudes towards EDI committees (discounting complete apathy or agnosticism). I see these attitudes as the pivotal barrier obstructing EDI from being inclusively embedded in our culture. I want to put it out there front and foremost: despite these different attitudes, people in both groups are mostly supportive of the idea of a more equitable learning and working environment – we all share the key common ground.

The first group is a huge believer of the Advance Higher Education (HE) charters, namely the Athena Scientific Women’s Academic Network (Swan) and Race Equality charters (Advance HE, 2023). Advance HE is a member-led charity missioned to address systemic inequalities in HE. Named after the masculine Greek goddess Athena, who was believed to have been born out of Zeus directly without any involvement of women, the Athena Swan Charter aims to metricise and recognise efforts and progress in promoting gender equality at departmental level for their staff and students. Since its introduction in 2005,

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Athena Swan awards (bronze, silver, and gold, to be renewed every four years) have quickly gained popularity among HE and academic departments. Between 2011 and 2020, a Silver Athena Swan award was necessary to apply for any funding from the National Institute for Health Research in the UK (Donald et al., 2011). The Race Equality Charter is a recent (2023) addition to Advance HE and it follows the model of the Athena Swan Charter to eliminate ethnic inequities.

“Getting the gold” – or, in my experience, “keeping the gold” – provides a strong external motivation for academic departments to gain wider recognition and, given its wide adoption and endorsement by HE and UK Research and Innovation (the UK government body that directs research funding), it is sometimes thought to be a sufficiently objective and validated measure of progress on EDI (Xiao et al., 2020). Academic institutes may employ full-time staff to support the charter applications but they are usually led by EDI committees whose members volunteer their time.

By contrast, the other group sees members of institute EDI committees as hypocritical careerists who are from cliques that are detached from the struggles of their fellow colleagues. EDI initiatives that are mobilised by people giving up their own time might be seen as bureaucratic showboating. Activities that support EDI are increasingly recognised as desirable or essential criteria for promotion by institute management. This belief may have originated in how one’s lived experiences at the institute are discordant with the cultural change the “gold” award acknowledges. This group sees it instead as the “fool’s gold”.

You may find people at all stages of their academic careers aligning with either of these views, with a strong predisposition for more senior academics to be in the former group – and early- to mid-career researchers in the latter. At the surface level, the conflict between these two groups lies in their opposing valuation of the “gold award” – the former group sees it as an honour, the latter group as shame. I see a deeper conflict that lies in the presupposition that each group sees the other group’s actions promoting EDI as nonconforming, debilitating, and obstructing to their own. This is a representation problem.

By using ethnic equity as an example, I hope to suggest potential reasons that this unnecessary dichotomy of these two groups is inevitable under the current EDI paradigm.

## **Reason 1: some HE charter measures are not sufficiently valid measures of progress on race equity.**

In the UK, the terms we use to describe minoritised ethnic groups have been changing – people of colour, BME, BAME... And now the Sewell Report says that “it is time we drop BAME” (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). The widening or abandonment of an overarching term to describe all people who are not white British reflects a changing demographic in the UK, and a changing public discourse to use better terms to describe people’s identity. The Advance HE charters, including the new Race Equality Charter, are one of the few places where the terms BME or BAME are still used as the preferred term to describe ethnicity, and the basis on which Advance HE evaluates whether ethnic equality has been achieved in recruitment and promotion processes.

Readers of *Stolen Tools* need no further elaboration of the arbitrary nature and meaninglessness of ethnic categories that are mindlessly clustered. Originally designed to fulfil an administrative need to separate “white” and “coloured” populations, ethnicity measures in the present day are still, in effect, operationalised in the same way in research (Lam et al., 2023). The Office for National Statistics introduced the definition of ethnicity as a “self-identification measure reflecting how people define themselves”. But it truly does not offer much freedom for meaningful self-identification. The way ethnicity is asked (limited-option tick boxes) and reported (unnecessarily clustered) in research, HE, and beyond, is far from individuals’ own definitions. These ethnicity definitions and measures reflect an administrative need and do not necessarily serve the purpose of understanding membership and individual stories.

This need to objectify and metricise all parts of human interaction and identity is the perfect prey to Goodhart’s Law: when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. Using recruitment panel composition as an example, the target here is to avoid all-white recruitment panels. Apart from the logistical stress this meant for the few BAME staff to be asked over and over to sit on interview panels, adding loads of administrative tasks that do not add to their careers, this measurement relies on the assumption that having a non-white person in the space provides sufficient signals to the candidates that this is a diverse workspace. How do we know if this assumption holds? Does it only hold if the candidate’s ethnic identity matches the BAME member’s perceived identity? We don’t know. Furthermore, this assumption strips away the values of white members of staff, that their personal warmth, thoughtfulness, and effort in cre-

ating a welcoming and open atmosphere are not enough. It strips away our stories.

People non-representative of an idealised, entitled, and privileged embodiment of whiteness remain entrapped in Fanon's "zone of non-being". Representation, at its core, is about ensuring that all voices are heard and that no group is left invisible or marginalised. When the existence of a group is not recognised, how can one expect their voices are heard?

The key question remains: who is describing others' identity? For what purpose are we classifying these qualitatively different identities? Is it solely the need to satisfy the charters' requirements?

## **Reason 2: state of exception – how EDI committees may not sufficiently represent its members**

We come back to the notion of *power*. Agamben defined sovereigns as the ones who have the *power* to decide the state of exception, when the usual laws and rules do not apply (Agamben, 2004). In our context, the state of exception is used by the dominant group to define when a group exists: "when does blackness count?", "how much of your Asian-ness is sufficient to tick our box?", or "do we care enough to differentiate Hong Kong people from Japanese?" Ethnic categories are defined in relation to white British (e.g. mixed black and Asian groups is not an option); encapsulating terms only tend to emerge when minorities gain a larger voice. But these emerging terms do not change the fact that they are created to serve the dominant group, and one's group membership in data systems does not rely solely on your identity but also depends on the dominant group's perception. A quick example: someone of Middle Eastern heritage who speaks perfect English and has pale skin colour has been treated vastly differently administratively since 9/11 than they were previously – had it not been for the tragedy, they would have been classed as "white". Ethnically minoritised groups are often cast as representatives of their entire ethnic group (or, worse, BME in general), whether they choose to be or not, as a direct result of lack of diversity within HE.

The other dimension of sovereignty is the choice to unrepresent. Back to the example of recruitment panels, the current EDI goalpost counts interviews as good representation for having at least one panel member from the BME group. If I were to be chosen to sit on the interview panel, there is no mechanism through which I could declare that I do not feel eligible to represent whatever the panel is hoping me to represent. My story would be misrepresented and reduced to my non-whiteness. Nevertheless, in the HE charter measurements, the institute would be thriving towards the next "gold".

On a societal and interpersonal level, ethnically minoritised groups can seldom exercise in any state of exception. "I'm not like them." The "one bad apple" excuse is too often used and accepted when one white person has breached the law, understandably due to the large variation in the population. But the same logic is never extended and applied to minoritised ethnic groups. This is another way of explaining how unconscious biases remain pertinent in the UK. Members of the dominant group reject any potentially negative connotation linked with their white British ethnicity (for example, (Corbin, 2017)) but are too quick to label and act on stereotypes they assign to minoritised groups. Take a look at the disproportionate rates of stop and search in young black men (UK Government, 2023) or the (seemingly) innocent "you all look alike" comment; the colonial spirit lives on, the same spirit that separated families, insulted cultures, and maintained the hierarchical social classes within the UK. Minoritised groups sometimes feel like we have a target on our back, that our every step is being watched, and that we will always have the burden to outperform, to represent, to shine for our people who have gone before or will come after us.

This power imbalance, via the lack of sovereignty, is embedded deep into how institute EDI committees are perceived by their members. In an environment where I cannot represent my authentic self, who are these people to say they can be representative of me in pursuit of my benefits? EDI committees' member composition, as you guessed it, is yet another measurement for progress in promoting race equity.

There are *really* no two groups, and there are *really* no two masters. There isn't a master hoping to maintain the status quo while masking with the impression of progress, or a master of genuine reform that may threaten existing power structures. Membership – or, better worded, individuals' – alignment towards these two attitudes is dynamic, as our own identity evolves, and ideologies mature over time and personal experiences. However, this dynamic conversion appears to be mostly one-sided, from the first group to the second, and very seldom the other way round. Not just for the reasons I elaborated on above; it is the downstream effect of working in an inequitable environment. No one is spared living under an unequal system of power and resource distribution. One simply cannot ignore the hypocrisy of "gold" when they or someone they are close to is hurt by this unequal system of power. One could be a parent who faced significant barriers accessing parental support, or a person with disability who could not give a lecture due to poor access, or an early-career researcher who, despite having reported bullying behaviours, received no support from the institute. The

longer one spends in the system, in particular those who are disadvantaged intersectionally, the less likely one is able to trust that justice is coming soon enough. Equally, it does not make it any easier for people who have decided to contribute to the structures of institute EDI committees. They have the front-row seats to add all these stories to their burden, and it is draining.



Figure 2: A portrait from Bjar @bjart (TikTok)

### Reimagining roles of EDI committees: towards a relational building, not structural reattributing, system of power

Creating impact as a member of an institute EDI committee comes with its limitations: preparing the application to HE charters will be a core part of your responsibility, whether you agree with its rationales or measurement or not. There will always be a new “gold” award and, by the looks of it, academic institutes will be incentivised to get them. If EDI can only be promoted through a lens fine-tuned by external charters, we lose sight of the kaleidoscope at arm’s length from our local context. Without being fully dismissive of any charters or formalised structures, for these structures to be truly conducive to EDI we need to change our approach, from relying on metrics as the single measurement of truth to listening to local needs and acknowledging different ways of progress.

Advance HE acknowledged the rigidity and flaws in its old Athena Swan metrics by introducing the transformed Athena Swan Charter, emphasising “greater focus on autonomy and flexibility”, to cut down administrative burden for applications, and take a “developmental and supportive” approach.

It is also too soon to be expecting substantial transformations in how EDI committees operate in academic institutes, or how Athena Swan awards are evaluated. I

do appreciate the emphasis on adapting to local contexts. It would be a pity if the transformation halts at the “paying lip service” level. A locally focused approach towards equity is about representation – that all *beings* are heard. It is about individuals and the cultures that flourish when the individuals feel respected and supported. HE charters cannot be the only measuring stick for equity. A major reason that EDI charters and committees are in their conflicting and sometimes despised position is that they have failed to acknowledge that EDI is driven by people and their stories, and not by structure. EDI committees are not there to separate themselves from others in dictating what should be changed, but facilitating, listening to, and being with others and their stories. If these are not sufficiently valued in HE charters, we look for alternative charters, such as the City of Sanctuary Charter, which has a stronger emphasis on relation and network building, as the vehicle to drive change.

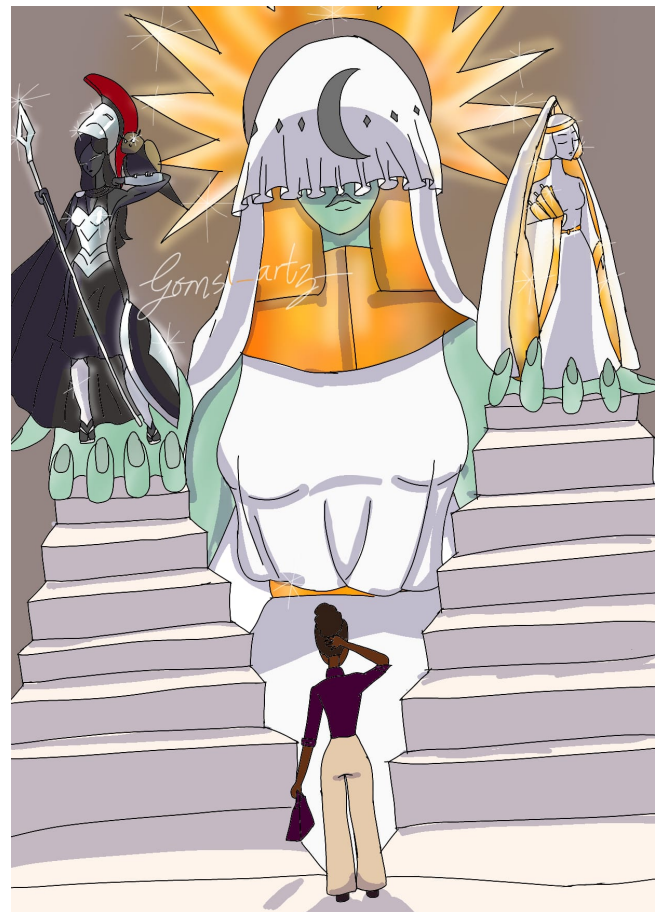


Figure 3: Artwork by Ugomsinachi Agu @Gomsi\_Artz (Instagram) created based on the article

How can we liberate ourselves from this conundrum? How will we dissolve the inevitable dichotomy of attitudes towards EDI committees within the institute? I can only

speak of my personal experience in how my choices hope to co-build a relation-focused system. I see the EDI committee as holding the bargaining power to leverage for a better alignment between institute strategic priorities and member priorities. In light of recent decisions by UK Research and Innovation, I know this platform may not always exist. I choose to influence my surroundings by sticking my dissent at the heart of the committee, while keeping on trying to build authentic relationships and understanding with others. I choose to share my internal conflicts with my colleagues. And I choose to say to the members of the HE, regardless of their position and attitudes towards the EDI committee: I see you. I see you are trying from where you are. Carry on. I choose to show that I am struggling to make sense of everything I do but to also show that I believe it is a collective struggle that will eventually lead to a deeper understanding of one another, and, from this, a collective power to build a more inclusive and equitable future.

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