

FE Voices – Session 1

What is it like to be me?

That's the essence of the first FE Voices session. It offers a window on the worlds of *other* people who perhaps don't look like you and whose lives involve belief systems, customs and behaviours which are unfamiliar.

I don't know what it's like to be Texan or Turkish or Tongan. I can never truly *feel* like them, but I can get an idea by asking people who are, and by listening to their answers.

Depending on your perspective, some of the things the panellists say may shock you – or you may simply shrug and say to yourself, "I know what that's like."

Representation

Listening to James in particular it is clear that having someone who looks like you performing a role to which you aspire can be hugely significant. He spoke about the barriers he faced when first trying to get work in broadcasting. He told how he used to go to be an audience member for various programmes just to watch how the technicians did their jobs. As a young teenager he would try to ask them questions about what they did and how they began their careers. He said, "One thing I noticed was a lot of people that didn't look like me - young black men. I didn't see any people that represented me in the television industry behind the cameras... That was a barrier for me, I would say, and self-belief as well was a big thing because it's quite disheartening when you don't see a lot of talented people who should be in a position that aren't."

He says it was a combination of sheer determination, an FE training course in television production and concentrated use of networking and social media which eventually got him through the door.

Representation was a theme which came up several times. Kimmy said, "I haven't seen any young black girls working at the college. There was one but she left, so I don't feel like I'm represented... We're so conscious of who we are and so aware, when you walk into a room... there's no one else that looks like

you... As a person of colour... it's like you're almost carrying your identity on your sleeve... There's a lot of rooms I will come to where I do feel like I'm the only one here so you do get that little bit of pressure like, I'm here to represent the group.”

Sayeda had similar feelings. “I definitely feel more comfortable when there is another person of colour in the room, even in NUS meetings... It just makes it easier knowing there are other people of different backgrounds.”

Lived experiences of racism

We cannot expect people who have never experienced racism to understand it if we don't explain it to them. Storytelling is central to being human, and it allows us to empathise in a way that slogans and statistics cannot.

Haroon was as young as eight when first singled out along racial lines. He remembered being in primary school and mixing easily with children from different backgrounds. Outside the sanctuary of the classroom things were different. “I remember going shopping... and I saw somebody from school and I was really happy to see them,” he said. “When I tried to speak to them, I noticed they responded differently, and couldn't wait to get away... The same thing happened, the weekend after... This was a time when my parents were trying to get settled into the country themselves, and probably experiencing the same things... It's sad that forty years later, I noticed the exact same behaviour with some professionals in education. Even in meetings I've noticed... whenever suggestions are made by me, they're either not heard or they're just ignored, but then when the same suggestion's made by another colleague, it's the best idea ever.”

Panellists said the impact of race is felt even in a sector which considers itself open and inclusive like education. Haroon became a teacher twenty years ago and was offered specific training in what was then known as the Black Staff Group which left him baffled and frustrated. “Why should my training needs be any different? I've got the same level of education. I've got the same opportunity for professional development as everybody else. So why are you highlighting my race? I look back now and I realise how naive I was. Where could I been in my career if I did join that group and I learned to tackle those little microaggressions that were happening?”

Career progression is an important issue; without it where will those role models come from to encourage others to aspire to bigger and better things? Haroon's experience is apposite.

“I've seen many people who have joined before me overtake me and being selected ahead of me... Somebody from my background isn't considered and yet I'm more able and more competent, and I have the skill set for that role, but I don't have the opportunity to prove that I can do it. Others are encouraged and coached, and they're even given time to grow and develop into those respective roles, but with somebody like myself, whenever I go for a role, I'm expected to hit the ground running. It's the same when you go for employment interviews, hear the same responses, 'it was a strong application and if we had two places, we would have given you one.' They might be genuine, but... I wonder the people who make those decisions, do they have any unconscious bias, or are they challenging even conscious bias?” James explained how even the small things can add up.

“I have experienced racism, many times. I'd say not as much as my parents would have, but... systematic racism could be from microaggressions subtly, from a comment about my hair colour, food I eat, about the music I should listen to or I was expected to listen to - those sort of things that all... come together as systematic racism.”

Haroon described being denied opportunity, but Aniesa found that when it did come in the form of being asked to lead a management team briefing at twenty-three, it brought out the racism in jealous colleagues.

She said, “I was given the opportunity to lead on a Friday briefing... On the morning... As I approached the briefing group, a group of staff were walking ahead of me and I overheard the comment that *the principal must have picked her to do the briefing because she's brown and wears a headscarf*. This had to be the first time that I overheard a derogatory comment about myself. I'm reflecting back now, that controversy manifested itself quite deeply within me. This passing comment left me second guessing every [bit of] praise, accomplishment and opportunity which came my way. I've always wondered if I was good enough, or was it because I fit the picture?”

Not all racism experienced by FE colleagues is subtle and random abuse is still something our panellists are vulnerable to, as Aniesa illustrated so powerfully. “Before COVID I was walking between two campuses when a member of the public drove past, wound down the window and shouted, ‘Muslim S-L-A-G.’ A male colleague, who was with me, spoke to the extent that you must report this as this is a hate crime. [The] safeguarding team were brilliant. I wonder, did they make that comment because I happened to be with a white male colleague, or was it the fact that I wore a headscarf *and* happened to be with

white male colleague? This incident raises many questions in my mind, but again made me very conscious of my differences.”

While the panellists agreed that it can be a good thing when colleagues ask questions, sometimes there is a fine line to be drawn between being inquisitive and ignorant. Sayeda has found that her faith and culture can be unpleasantly challenged by seemingly the simplest of enquires.

“Starting with the pronunciation of my name, needing to explain that Canada *is* where I originally come from, feeling the need to justify why I don't drink, or why I bother to starve myself for a whole month.”

We often discuss racism as a thing to which people are subjected, without thinking what impact such events can have on the self-image of the individual on the receiving end.

Kimmy said, “Sometimes you don't know how that really affected until you start to dig deep into that experience, but I think growing up it made me a bit conscious of little things like how I do my hair. I don't want to look unprofessional in this environment... When I interviewed [for] my job I came in my natural hair, but then when I walked in the room because there was little to no representation of [people like] me, I felt like ‘Oh my gosh, maybe it shouldn't have been my natural hair. It's little things like that.”

Supporters and cultural disconnects

All of the panellists recognised how supporters and allies can be hugely significant in terms of assisting with an individual's career trajectory or how they feel about themselves.

Aniesa in particular felt that she had benefitted greatly from positive interventions made at the right time.

“I met some really inspirational people who have been very helpful in terms of my career development. One lady in particular... shared stories of the struggles that she faced, being a woman but also being a woman from an ethnic minority background. I remember sitting there thinking how could this possibly happen?... I remember having meaningful conversations with her in corridors but when other members of staff appeared she would walk away saying they would see two brown people talking to each other as a threat. I never really understood what she meant by this, but eventually I became very conscious of my social circle during work hours, and I kept thinking was my

group reflective of SLT? Did I have at least one white face in the group so people didn't think I was forming a gang?"

"Two ethnic minority managers pushed me to apply for internal roles. One of them always said to me 'lift as you climb.' She was a lead inspector for Ofsted at this point and had experienced discrimination and a lack of opportunity based on her ethnicity."

Anyone with any experience of working in FE will appreciate the way in which the sector can be looked down upon by many in authority. It is regarded all too often as a *place for other people's children*. What is perhaps less well understood is the degree to which some cultures also share a negative impression of colleges.

Kimmy found that there was an expectation at home that university was the only route to a respectable career as did Sayeda, but both have been pleased with the way in which their families have adapted their attitudes based on the women's experiences.

Sayeda said, "[University] was a natural expectation, but my parents and I are more open minded... I have younger brothers and... it's nice knowing there are options.

Aniesa has experienced a similar transformation. "My journey started at a local FE provider... I had preconceived ideas that they're largely for those students who do not take an academic option... When I was growing up FE was not an option. The expectation was that I would go to the local sixth form college and complete my A levels. That was the only option for my mum."

What now?

"We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." *Albert Einstein*.

How do we make things better?

There is no magic wand to wave to make racism vanish. There are no perfect solutions. What we can do is attempt to modify our behaviours in ways which make the situation a little better each time.

The panellists described some of the changes they've made in their own lives, some of the areas where they have seen improvement in others and some where more effort is needed.

James said, "So the environment in I grew up in South London had a lot of people of colour... That inspires a lot of work that I do as a creative. I'm able to push these ideas in these spaces with a lot of black stories, a lot of Asian stories, a lot of cultural stories that we haven't seen on TV yet... that isn't just about like gang culture, and stuff like that."

He went on, "Now there's an equality team in a lot of colleges... and schemes are 100% able to help young people, to make sure that they're being given equal opportunities, that they understand how to stand up for themselves when they leave and go out into their industry to find a job."

Kimmy is trying to change attitudes and systems at college to ensure that responses to racism go beyond bald statements of condemnation and are more geared to supporting those affected.

"In the handbook when students join, there's some small print somewhere that says, 'We don't tolerate racism.' And then, when it comes down to it and big things are happening, [they're] just trying to cover themselves and just put out a statement, 'We're sorry that happened.' There's no real addressing students and making sure everyone is okay and trying to talk to students about their experiences and reaching out directly to students... It's almost like a band aid and... on to the next day. I feel like more resources needs to be put into it... We need to educate our students more on this issue... Mentally you don't know how situations like this... [are] affecting a lot of the students so there needs to be that sense of care, and just taking time out to ensure everyone's okay."

Aniesa said, "SLT here recognises they don't reflect the student body; students recognise it too. The good thing is the desire for change which is first step in right direction... to recognize that something needs to be done about this... Events like this are absolutely crucial in enabling people to have healthy dialogue, which changes stereotypes in a safe and supportive environment which ultimately opens up opportunities for all."

Regardless of how successful institutions are at reform, Haroon emphasises the need for everyone to take personal responsibility. "Encourage people to apply for roles to help break the glass and increase their belief; raise their aspirations... Be aware of your own biases and treat people as individuals – not just with the big things but the small things we say and do."

James said, "As a former FE student I experienced racism and realised the perpetrators can be students as well as lecturers. It should be addressed publicly not brushed under the carpet... Students must feel supported;

punishments should be as serious as the crimes including suspensions, exclusions, even sacking staff.”

Sineha had a message for students impacted by racist incidents. “To learners listening, if you’ve experienced discrimination, take time to process it and share it with someone you trust. It will help so much more than holding onto it and feeling bad about it years later.”

Using those support networks is so important for building resilience and standing up to the bullies, because that’s precisely what overt racism is, a kind of bullying which is designed to make the person on the receiving end feel *less*. Recognising allies, working together, becomes a mutual support mechanism of great value.

The right word at the right time can change a person’s life.