

FE Voices – Session 3

What does representation look like?

All the panellists started from the position that colleges should reflect their communities – in their staff, their students and their senior executives. That is a given. But is it as simple as putting particular “types” of people into specific jobs? Altaf thought not.

He said, “I’m convinced that the future prime minister of this country will come from Luton sixth form College - now that’s my starting point. And then I work backwards in terms of what we need to do to take away the obstacles that are in front of that student of mine... [It’s important to understand] what we mean by representation. So, if it’s a box ticking exercise, that’s not really for me. Representation for me means *values driven leadership*, so if we are impressed by titles and by money, that isn’t where we instil those... values into our young people. For me, kindness, empathy, generosity, humility, and then equity and fairness - for me that’s a fundamental principle; it’s a big-ticket item.”

It’s clear from the discussions that the idea of representation has changed. It’s no longer just the importance of students seeing people who *look like them*, but also a question of lived experience, of knowing that there are people in authority who understand their lives. As Altaf went on, “Deprivation, which stops young people from socially becoming mobile - and if then you add on to that race, if you add on to that gender, sexuality, disability, protected characteristics and other aspects that just amplifies what deprivation is... My students come from some of the most deprived wards... 70% are from ethnic minorities, they have caring responsibilities they have so many obstacles to jump through before they even walk through my doors. COVID has just widened that gap... The final block is finance... I haven’t got all the advantages of independent schools and the money they can throw at skills development. I want to not only give them the best possible education and be an inclusive organization... I also want to spend money on things like DofE (Duke of Edinburgh’s Awards Scheme). I want to spend money on enrichment activities.”

Julie looked to her own experiences of representation and how it had helped in her career. She felt that the toughest challenge facing the sector to become more representative was at the top.

“As the leader of an institution whose workforce is not fully representative of the communities we are part of, I think that is a problem and I think it is our problem to solve,” she said. “We [must] act on making sure that our students and our colleagues have regular and routine access to role models, because I really believe in the power of role models... I think the power of seeing somebody that you can relate to and to recognize in whatever role is really important, and I know that in my career, having worked with leaders from different backgrounds with different characteristics I know that colleagues who share those characteristics feel more comfortable. It's almost as if they have a sense of ‘I'm going to be okay here...’ The optimism I have at this point is that I do think I can sense a shift in the narrative. I do think there is a broader range of more diverse voices being heard and starting to be amplified. And I do think there is a sense that more individuals and institutions are ready to listen. I guess the proof of the pudding is going to be if that listening and dialogue and debate translates into actions that deliver positive change.”

Jeff shared Julie's frustrations but also her optimism, and he said there are concrete examples where a difference is being made, and, encouragingly, it's not always top-down. He said, “At West Suffolk College, the students there developed a black history curriculum - they decided to do it themselves, and they got their teachers to help them to do it. So, these young people are actually changing things. I think we've got something happening we can build on... We have the people in the middle like us – we're there and we're having those conversations now... There are other people perhaps at the top, who are the enablers and we need to do something about them and help them begin thinking about change, but things are happening. Altaf's point about diversity and being more than just gender, race or ethnicity - absolutely correct. We're talking about people with diverse religions, diverse political beliefs, socio-economic backgrounds, different sexual orientation... We have a plethora of potential skills and attributes that we can make the most of... In the commercial world [diversity] is seen as an asset because you get your employees from different backgrounds to come together to foster innovation, creativity, and those things give companies a competitive edge. So why wouldn't the further education sector, begin to use some of those practices and principles? ...It's not necessarily focusing on the *problem* of diversity but focusing on the *solution* which may well be something like inclusion... The moral argument is clear... the business case is clear... We have to pull in those three strands - the student strand, the middle strand (that's us in management) and then ensure those enablers, the Ofsteds of this world, the FE commissioners of this world, the Ofquals of this world - that they're also doing their bit to enable us to make it happen.”

As the soon-to-be FE Commissioner, Shelagh will have those connections to the top which the panellists felt were so important in addressing change. She said, "There's a whole load more things that we need to do, some of it at policy level. I was fascinated to see the AOC's refresh of the government's code which includes something around measuring diversity - that's a great step - some of it is around inspiring staff at all levels to realise how important this is, that diversity of thought. It's also to me disgraceful that we still have such a difference in terms of student outcomes nationally, for people of a different colour [from] white."

Cindy said, "I think [the] key things here are data and visibility and transparency, coupled with a really clear talent plan - knowing your talent and developing talent and actually creating an environment where talent can flourish. And then I think the third element is education and learning, and part of education and learning is identifying where unconscious bias exists, or bias exists, and really looking at how we tackle that in a way that is inclusive and drives the right behaviours so that institutions and the sector can move forward."

Solat argued that representation isn't just about the impact it has on those who finally see someone like them in a position to inspire aspiration. He said it is almost as important for the impact it has on wider society.

"When I was growing up, I was really keen on football. I had no role models [coming] from an Asian background. My role model was the late great Cyrille Regis; really curious choice for a skinny Asian boy... because Cyrille Regis had the biggest muscles in football. But the point is I had to latch on to somebody that looked like me so I [could] believe that I could be in that position as well. It's important that if I *can't see it, I can't be it* but it's also [other] people. If society can't see it, society won't allow us to be it either, because the brain, unfortunately, when it sees two things, joined together, it begins to bind them together again and again and again so it sees white chief execs and that makes it harder to see a woman, or an Asian in that role, or a black or disabled chief exec... Society's got to see it as well, in order for you to be it so it's a bit like a chicken and an egg situation."

Change – whose responsibility is it anyway?

The panellists agreed that it's one thing to say something needs to change but quite another to work out with whom the responsibility lies to take the necessary steps. Julie felt that everyone has a part to play. She said, "As the chief exec, it's my responsibility and the governing body's responsibility and actually everyone who joins the college. Part of what we are trying to do... is work with our students to really focus on values about behaviours and what that means, and to have those debates and try to challenge those issues. I think we as a sector [have] neglected to do that with our staff. And I think

that's something which we've probably slipped on over the last twenty or so years. [We've] probably underplayed the importance of colleges in creating those opportunities, not just for excellent learning for all of our community, but also for excellent careers for all of our community... If there was a national strategy I guess that would make it easier for everybody to get on the bus than having to do to on their own, but actually I don't think it negates the fact that people also need to take responsibility *and* do it on their own."

Jeff wanted to see greater recognition all round of the problems a lack of diversity exposes. "It is everyone's responsibility to take these actions really, because ultimately, a college is a self-governing body that has a responsibility for a huge area and to be seen as being the lead in that area. So it's absolutely the college's responsibility to take action to support their students to progress, to give them that leg-up that we in education want to give our students. It's absolutely the college's responsibility to look to the community. If I'm working in a particular community, surely, I'd want to be representative of my consumers because they're consuming my product... And I have to get the best out of the staff to then get the best out of the students so that's *absolutely* the college's responsibility... and then you have regulatory bodies the ESFA, Ofqual etc, and they can make things happen, or they can stop things... We have a classic case now where a lot of black and Asians are doing BTECs. And then you have another group of students who are doing A levels. Now, how has that happened that we have this disparity in populations? We've all got a role to play in this and the challenge is how we fit our particular roles together."

Cindy made the point that this whole discussion should not just be about outcomes. It's not only a case of where people end up but where they've come from in the first place. She said, "I was really struck by the BBC documentary, *Subnormal - a British Scandal*, where kids from the Caribbean were tested using the established system, and of course they failed and they got put into remedial classes. It's about understanding the journey - the kind of background, the kind of cultural context and that's not just race it's also social, economic - and I think we need to be careful we don't make assumptions and actually we should be *bigging up* the successes of role models from different pathways and careers... [For Example,] Dragon's Den has a new Dragon, a twenty-eight year old young black man called Steven Bartlett. He has become successful by setting up a business in a new area, social media marketing. My point is while we look at all of this change, we also need to drive change and drive the right change; we need to look at what some of the other changes are that are happening and how we feed all of that in, in order to make people access the right curriculum, the right pathways [and] that we're assessing them correctly and not making judgments."

Is the curriculum fit for purpose?

The panellists moved on to the complicated area of curriculum. Simply put, they grappled with whether we're teaching the right things to the right people in the right way. Cindy believed it is far more complex than that. "This point about curriculum being relevant, to support progression and access to careers is probably even more prevalent and important as we're coming out of COVID. [The] 32% of adults from a black and ethnic minority background studying in the further education sector, many of those would have been most impacted by COVID because the data is telling us [they are] in terms of furlough, redundancy and loss of earnings. The whole infrastructure around our sector needs to be able to support those learners to access the curriculum where they're going to be able to flourish in their lives in terms of careers. So, I think it's not just about the *attainment* that they might get straight away in terms of their grade, it's about where they end up in their career and in their life... Curriculum is important and we've been doing a lot of work looking at our editorial policy, the writers that we work with, but actually it's broader than that. It's about our talent as well... and making sure... we're assessing in a way that allows people to succeed. What you also need to embed in the design of curriculum are those bits that are missing around enrichment and cultural capital and those soft skills, because I spent four and a half years in FE and I... am convinced the students that succeeded, succeeded because of enrichment. [That's] what made the difference, not just the learning, but the enrichment and the kind of teaching."

Shelagh had the perfect example to illustrate Cindy's point. "At West Sussex [we had] a 10% BAME community, or even smaller than that. And we discovered we weren't delivering hairdressing for those people who needed a different type of hairdressing because they have a different type of hair. We just hadn't thought about it. Some of it is not that the curriculum isn't there, it's how you actually interpret the curriculum and make sure it's delivered for the whole of your community. I also agree that it is enrichment that is going to make the difference. It's enabling people to hold their own in their workplace, and pick up those soft skills, which is going to make them stand out."

Solat was frustrated by the recent Sewell Report which questioned the significance of institutional racism. "I think it's really important to take a step back and contextualize the whole issue around an inclusive curriculum. The system in this country was developed for one type of person for 1950 years – heterosexual, white Anglo Saxon males... It's only been seventy years... to try to change that system. When the Sewell report came out, I absolutely expected it - I was disappointed. People who should have known better didn't know better and actually gave an excuse to people who perpetuate the system."

He also felt that there is a paucity of research into whether or not the curriculum is one with which everyone can engage.

“Even if that research had been done, it’s BC - Before COVID. COVID has changed the world in all sorts of different ways. It’s changed us. We’ve changed as people; what we want from life has changed... When you see culture change you can see it as a result of a new chief executive, a merger, acquisition, a regulatory report - it changes for all of those things but it changes from the top. For the very first time that culture change is coming from a different place - from people, grassroots. We’re getting loads and loads of reports from people in our network of colleges and what they’re saying is that the students are asking those questions. What are we doing about BLM? What are we doing about George Floyd? What are we doing about systemic racism? And that’s produced real conversation, but the positive thing is the colleges we’ve been working with are really taking this agenda on board with an enthusiasm which is refreshing. People are impatient for change and it’s not just people of colour or women. What COVID also has done is to expose those deep-seated inequities within society. So, intuitively, if you answer that question [about curriculum] you’ll probably say, *no*, it’s not particularly inclusive.”

Rajinder had a clear idea of the blueprint for what a truly inclusive curriculum *should* be. “It’s about raising aspirations. It’s about ensuring that we can engage and nurture and enable people to thrive. And that is at all levels, whether they be staff, whether they be governors, whether they be learners.”

Arv felt that there has been a sea change in the months since George Floyd’s death and since the pandemic took hold. Something quite subtle but highly significant. “We’re actually able to have these conversations which may have felt a lot more uncomfortable a year ago... not necessarily just on a webinar but actually within our institutions... I don’t mean that in a complacent way but more comfortable in the sense that people are actually going to acknowledge that this is a challenge that we all need to address and that we all have a part to play. And I’m glad during the session [that] The Subnormals was mentioned because I had a massive load of pennies drop for me when I watched [it]... We had a system that was geared towards the failure of a certain group of our community... then we saw the birth of the supplementary schools which added that enrichment for those students in terms of - how do they engage with the communities that they come from and still be a part of society that they’re going to live in? ...This is in my lifetime... and I’m thinking, I still know teachers that are teaching today that were teaching then... Those people are still in the system. I’m not saying that we should remove those people but that there is a level of education and support that we need to give a wider community within the people that provide the provision, so that they

can come on board with this... It is about a culture shift to what *normal* should be where everybody is taken for who they are and allowed to flourish within the organization, whether they're a learner of a professional. You need to take a look at your own institution [and] see what works in terms of the mix of people that you've got and your aspirations."

Pearls of Wisdom

Each panellist was asked for the one thing they would want listeners to take away from the discussion, and Jeff had an anecdote he felt was a sign of hope. "Last year [I saw] a young woman from Tottenham, and she described herself as an angry black woman. She was going for a job in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and she was very nervous... Anyway, she got the job, and she was buzzing, because she said, 'I went in, I didn't change my voice. I was myself. I was my authentic self and they wanted me.' To me that is representation; it's someone who thought differently and Kensington and Chelsea needed someone who thought differently to shake things up, and she was exactly the right person for that job. I think more organizations can look to the *additive*, as opposed to the assimilation."

Solat also had a story to tell about how easy it is to miss the mote in one's own eye. "Look at the manifestation of systemic inequality within your own organization. We all have them and there's no shame to admit it. In our grant awards ceremony I was very switched on to the whole thing about non-binary and not being gender specific, but I didn't translate that and didn't tell the external speakers. So it's, 'ladies and gentlemen,' all night. Very kindly we had somebody that came back to us, one of the corporates, and said, "Just want to share this with you, so you can improve the next time. When people say ladies and gentlemen, I don't know where I fit in with that." So, you know we all have it. We shouldn't be ashamed because it's natural for us to have it. Let's embrace it, look at it, and then start to unpack it and remove some of these barriers that tend to be built within our particular system."

Cindy felt that control of the issue was moving away from central authorities and towards those traditionally with a very limited voice – the young. "Young people are our hope. And I think that the world we live in now is so different that they will accelerate this change for us. And I think we need to amplify the real role models so the Steven Bartlett that I talked about, Marcus Rashford, Malala - they are there and other young people are going to be looking at them and looking at their pathways and looking at their journeys and thinking 'I could be Prime Minister' ... They're going to hold us to account to drive the change."

Shelagh said she had found the discussion extremely encouraging, standing on the verge as she is of becoming the FE Commissioner. "I feel really positive going into that role knowing that there are so many leaders in Further

Education who are passionate about inclusivity and want to make a difference... We've got that ambition - we need to stick to it."

Julie said she was inspired by Solat's earlier point about challenging the connections in the brains of society as a whole in terms of representation.

"What that's really reinforced for me is that actually that very *practical* activity of Decolonising the curriculum so that the role models that we all learn about are diverse with different backgrounds is such an important thing to do. I think it's something our passionate, aspirational teachers can really enjoy doing as well - reshaping that curriculum with their students, with other stakeholders and that could be something to re-excite the sector in terms of building that curriculum future... [We must remember that] it is great to have these conversations but they need to lead to action and at every level. We've underplayed the power of the voice of FE. We do have a lobbying role; we can influence policy and we have created a generation of skilled technical vocational staff who actually have the opportunity to not just empower but to really give voice to on that national stage."