

A study of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Irish Higher Education – reading between the lines of hard policy and soft practice.

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by

Mary Nestor

DEPARTMENT OF ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Maynooth University

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Head of Department: Dr Camilla Fitzsimmons

Supervisor: Dr Fergal Finnegan

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Abstract

This is a study about EDI in the emergent technological university sector or Irish higher education. The overall aim of the study is to explore and theorise the experiences of EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers of discourses of EDI and how these are taken up and enacted in their institutions and through these roles. The main focus is on EDI practitioners as their role in relation to enactment of EDI in HE. My locus in this study is as a critical scholar-practitioner who is influenced by critical feminism, policy studies and pedagogy in trying to understand assumptions and power in relation to practice. This study adopts a hybridised theoretical framework, bringing together Baker et.al's equality of condition (2004), Ahmed's theorisation of diversity (2012) and Ball et al.'s theory of enactment (2011) to construct a multi-perspectival analytical lens through which to examine how EDI is understood and enacted in Irish HE. It is a qualitative study and uses data from semi-structured interviews with three cohorts of EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers.

I framed the methodology through a critical practitioner lens informed by lived experience as lecturer, EDI practitioner, and complicated by being an EDI researcher who is undertaking research on EDI practice in the new TU sector. Field work was conducted with 16 participants (5 EDI practitioners, 8 lecturers and 3 policymakers) to get multiple viewpoints on how EDI is thought about and enacted. All perspectives contribute to the 'world-making' of EDI and offer ways of thinking about EDI enactment. This range of perspectives and their different positionalities contributed to the overall findings, but the focus of the thesis is primarily on the experiences of EDI practitioners in TUs.

This research reveals that EDI enactment in higher education emerges from the interplay of identity, visibility, performativity, and resistance. Participants identified contradictions, tensions and complexities in the

creation of the EDI fixture in HE and in institutional enactment of EDI, including through language, policy, practice and relationally. These tensions are experienced most acutely by EDI practitioners who are at the frontlines of institutional EDI practice. The findings illuminate EDI not as a stable institutional function but as contested, contingent, and constantly negotiated terrain where progress remains provisional and where EDI practitioners must navigate fundamental contradictions between authentic transformation and tokenistic performance.

The findings from this research enhance knowledge of how EDI is conceptualised, located, experienced and enacted within HEIs. This exploration is needed as little is known about EDI in HE in Ireland and EDI practitioner roles in Ireland are under researched; this study addresses this gap. It makes a contribution to understanding EDI efforts, the challenges, complexity and the contributions of EDI practitioners and valuing that work. An additional contribution of this research is it puts EDI into the '*institutional flow*' of academic discourse.

List of Abbreviations

HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
TU	Technological University
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
IoT	Institute of Technology
RTC	Regional Technical College
D and I	Diversity and Inclusion
AS	Athena Swan
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Introduction

Six years ago, I stepped out of the lecture hall and into a newly created EDI Manager role, a position that did not exist when I began my academic career twenty years earlier. I quickly discovered I wasn't alone in this transition: across Irish higher education, institutions were appointing people to EDI roles with little precedent, a narrowly defined mandate focused on gender equality and weak institutional support. This study reflects upon and seeks to learn from that collective experience of building a new professional field over a short period of time and explores the 'practice dilemmas' that have emerged through this work (Schön, 1983). When I began my role, I sought out research to guide me through practice dilemmas, in the messy, contested EDI world, I found a void. There were few studies which examined what EDI practitioners actually do, how higher education institutions (HEIs) receive this work, or how practitioners navigate between high level policies and the realities of practice. Four years into this research, that gap remains, making this study not merely timely but necessary.

Thinking about when I began in the EDI role 6 years ago, I reflect firstly, that the identity of EDI in Irish HE has faced some significant challenges; secondly, my understanding of policy implementation has changed radically, and thirdly, my positionality shifted from EDI practitioner to critical scholar-practitioner. These three ideas animate the research you are about to read.

The context for this research is higher education in Ireland, with a particular focus on the emergent technological university (TU) sector. In the last two decades Ireland's population has become racially and ethnically more diverse, due to rapid immigration and displacement of people through war and conflict (CSO, 2017a). This is from a historical context where Ireland had experienced high levels of emigration and relatively low levels of immigration overall when compared with other European countries (Gilmartin, 2015). As a result of this, there have been

huge changes in higher education in recent years in terms of the demographic profile of students in Ireland and has led to race and ethnicity to be a key priority, along with gender and eliminating sexual violence and harassment.

I am a critical scholar-practitioner, influenced by equality studies, critical feminism, policy studies and pedagogy, in trying to understand assumptions and power in relation to practice. Schein defines a scholar-practitioner as ‘someone who is dedicated to generating new knowledge that is useful to practitioners’ (cited in Wasserman and Kram, 2009:12). Tenkasi and Hay (2008), defined scholar–practitioners as ‘actors who have one foot each in the worlds of academia and practice and are pointedly interested in advancing the causes of both theory and practice’ (2008: 49). These definitions reflect my commitment to generate new knowledge and improve EDI practice. This inquiry generates a layered institutional overview of how EDI is playing out in Irish HEIs. It offers a critical analysis of EDI practice by those who are concerned with EDI in higher education, resulting in fresh perspectives and new knowledge. It is part of a small body of critical scholarship on HE and equality in Ireland.

As noted above there is a dearth of research on EDI in practice and this is the first systematic examination of EDI practitioners’ lived experiences in Irish HE. The research offers a picture of the complexity of EDI work and draws on Ahmed (2012) and Ball et al. (2012) to provide analytical precision for understanding EDI work in Irish HEIs. These three theoretical frameworks are not deployed as separate lenses, rather, following Murphy and Costa’s (2022) argument for hybridised theory in education research, they are brought into productive dialogue with each other to construct a multi-perspectival analytical framework fitting to the complexity of EDI enactment in higher education. My study generates evidence-based insights into why EDI remains precarious despite institutional commitment. This knowledge will advance the work of EDI

practitioners and inform future practice and decision-making in higher education. It makes a contribution to understanding the challenges, complexity and contributions of EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers to this work. Critically, this is research from the inside-out: I examine the EDI world not as an external observer but as a scholar-practitioner embedded in the field I study. This positioning enables access to tacit knowledge, emotional labour, and institutional dynamics invisible to outsiders.

While it takes a multi-perspectival view and draws on the experience of EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers in Irish HE, the research is weighted to the experience of EDI practitioners and how they understand and enact EDI in higher education in Ireland. This weighting emerges from my locus as a scholar-practitioner, and the centrality of practitioners to the embedding EDI in HEIs.

Why Practitioner Inquiry Matters

This section explains why practitioner inquiry matters and how I understand it as bound up with critical reflection and praxis. I draw particularly on Schön's (1983, 1987) account of reflection-in-action and Brookfield's (2011) work on critically reflective practice, which together shape how I position myself as a scholar-practitioner in this research.

I began this research in late 2021, two years into a EDI practitioner role. Four years later, I realise that I have used the research to critically reflect on and understand my work as an EDI practitioner and the tensions, dilemmas and complexities of EDI enactment in Irish HE. It has enabled me to grapple with my positionality in the institution and deeply consider how EDI is located within the university. Thus, my interests as a practitioner are at the heart of this research. What EDI practitioners have to say about the material realities they face as they enact EDI in their HEI is the key dilemma to be investigated.

This inquiry is an egalitarian, democratic and dialogic effort which seeks to engender transformative possibilities for the field of EDI and for those who work within it. Later in this chapter and in more detail in chapter 2, I will offer a historical overview of the development of EDI and discuss varying ways of making sense of it but for now I wish to simply state how I see the domain of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). I view EDI work, however unevenly and imperfectly enacted, as part of a conscious attempt to contribute to the common good. It involves taking an active position to advancing social justice and equality of outcome, with the aim of enabling human flourishing in Higher Education (HE) and wider society (Baker et al. 2004). EDI work is bound to social justice, identities and histories of identity, and by its nature is messy, contested and complex. Given this complexity, understanding what is happening to this new institutional fixture of EDI in contemporary Irish HE, required me to reflect on my own identity and professional role, the genesis of EDI in Irish HE and its place within institutional hierarchy, how knowledge is produced in the field and its impact on staff and students and wider society.

Schön (1983, 1987) has written extensively on practitioner knowledge and reflection and argued that practitioner knowledge is valuable because it addresses the complexity and uniqueness of real-world problems, of which there are many in EDI. Valuing practitioner knowledge integrates multiple forms of knowing (technical, intuitive, experiential) and develops through active engagement with authentic professional challenges. It provides insights that pure theoretical knowledge cannot capture and enables adaptive expertise that can handle novel situations. Schön has distinguished between two types of reflection – that which is ‘reflection-in-action’, denotes the intuitive responses that professionals make in the moment while they are engaged in practice, drawing on tacit knowledge and instinct. The second type is ‘reflection-on-action’, this is the deliberate and

retrospective analysis of experience by professionals to understand what happened and why certain approaches worked or failed. 'Knowing-in-action' is the tacit, embodied knowledge that skilled practitioners develop through experience and allows professionals to respond effectively to unique situations without conscious deliberation. Schön's concept of 'reflection-in-action' captures what I now do when facing resistance in institutional meetings. It involves the real-time calibration of a response, drawing on embodied knowledge from repeated encounters with pushback and resistance.

Schön argued that knowledge such as this is intelligent and sophisticated, even if it can't be easily articulated, and in my view, even if the institution does not recognise it as such. Schön's work challenged the traditional hierarchy that placed scientific knowledge above practical knowledge, arguing that they complemented each other and led to the development of fulsome and competent professionals. He argued that traditional professional education, based on 'technical rationality', was inadequate for dealing with the messy, indeterminate problems professionals actually face, such as in the EDI world. He critiqued the dominant model where scientific theory is applied to practical problems, arguing that this creates a false hierarchy that devalues practical wisdom. He asserts that 'because professionalism is still mainly identified with technical expertise, reflection-in-action is not generally accepted, even by those who do it as a legitimate form of professional knowing.' (1983: 69). Curiously, for EDI, perhaps because it is a relatively new institutional fixture, there is little or no technical expertise required in job descriptions (Bhopal, 2023; Milian and Wijeshinga, 2023). The tricky world of EDI involves identity work and courts strong ideological positions from people and institutions when they feel under threat. Examples of resistance which EDI practitioners regularly experience at meetings and other institutional fora include patriarchal resistance to gender equality measures, anti-transgender

arguments, discussions on race inequality for students. It is my view that EDI practitioners become accustomed to dealing with uncertainty and become skilful at impression management (Goffman, 1959: 208) and not giving themselves away with their non-verbal cues.

As an EDI practitioner, I have had opportunities to ‘practice my practice’ (Schön, 1983:60) of receiving, ameliorating and sometimes overcoming resistance from colleagues. When faced with practice dilemmas, the frequency of being able to practice your practice leads to reflection-in-knowing. Schön advocates for ‘reflective conversation with the situation’, where practitioners experiment, observe outcomes, and adjust their approach based on what the situation ‘talks back’ to them. This creates a dynamic learning process embedded within practice itself. Schön has summarised the import of critical reflection by practitioners:

For these reasons, the study of reflection-in-action is critically important. The dilemma of rigor or relevance may be dissolved if we can develop an epistemology of practice which places technical problem solving within a broader context of reflective inquiry, shows how reflection-in-action may be rigorous in its own right, and links the art of practice in uncertainty and uniqueness to the scientist’s art of research. We may thereby increase the legitimacy of reflection-in-action and encourage its broader, deeper, and more rigorous use. (1983: 69)

In addition to Schön (1983, 1987), the work of Brookfield on critical theory (2011) and on the importance of critical reflection on professional experience (2017) has contributed to my understanding in an important and meaningful way in the research process. Brookfield proposes that we can become reflective practitioners when we become aware of our assumptions by seeing our actions through four complementary lenses: student eyes, colleagues’ perceptions, theory and personal experiences. Fostering critical reflection requires reflection on presuppositions (as well as experience) and moving beyond the realm of surface level

reflection; he refers to the latter as 'technical reflection'. Brookfield's four lenses inform the structure of my inquiry: I analyse my own practice (personal experience), interview colleagues across the sector (colleagues' perceptions), examine theories and concepts (theory), and consider impacts on students and staff (their eyes). This multi-perspectival approach generates the 'critical reflection' Brookfield argues transforms technical practice into scholarly knowledge. I therefore explore the field of EDI practice through a critical lens that questions taken-for-granted realities. I am committed to praxis and its transformation imperative as framed by Freire (1970) and have strived to reflexively monitor my own performance as a researcher after each interview. I believe there is an important space for scholar-practitioners in the academy; for me, this positionality necessarily emerged through the reflexive process of inquiry itself, rather than being predetermined at the outset.

Overview of EDI and general research context

EDI is concerned with addressing systemic barriers, challenging discrimination, and ensuring fair access and treatment across differences of race, gender, disability, sexuality, class, and other marginalised identities protected in legislation. In the societal context EDI is about creating an equal society, underpinned by the values of democracy and social justice, allowing for the fact that some people may need additional supports to achieve the same outcome.

HEIs are a microcosm of society and are spaces for the exchange of ideas, but also exist as social institutions in which colonial, racial (Lawson, 2020) and other hierarchies of power and privilege are reproduced. It is argued that embedding EDI values in HEI policies, structures, and processes serves a broader civic purpose: students who experience these institutional practices may be more prepared as democratic citizens to contribute to more progressive and cohesive social futures (Nussbaum, 1997) as they may have internalised EDI

values. Yet this relationship is also reciprocal (Ahmed, 2012) in that HEIs are equally shaped by wider society and social movements, as social change percolates into institutional systems and is then reproduced through graduates. Over a period of decades, Irish HE, prompted by various Government/state initiatives and elaborate policy documents, priorities and targets, focused on widening access and participation and lifelong learning. EDI is the latest in a long line of institutional equality interventions in higher education. Given its recent emergence as a construct in Irish HE, research and critique in this area remain limited.

As an EDI practitioner, my work materialises in policies on equal treatment, recruitment, sexual harassment, gender identity, and disciplinary procedures; alongside public-facing initiatives such as diversity events, guest lectures, panels, and exhibitions. Ahmed (2007, 2012) observes that EDI work frequently centres on document generation in the form of policies, strategies, action plans, and frameworks, which can create the appearance of institutional commitment while potentially substituting for substantive transformation. I've experienced this tension firsthand: drafting policies that signal commitment while structural inequalities persist. A tension that runs through EDI work is the distinction between 'hard' measurable outcomes (diversity statistics, policy counts, framework compliance) and 'soft' relational work (culture change, coalition-building, dignity). This study examines how practitioners navigate this binary, which is itself gendered (Beveridge, 2012), while making visible the sophisticated knowledge embedded in supposedly 'soft' work.

EDI's scope is expansive: it applies to all staff, students, and contractors, encompassing access to education, recruitment processes, teaching and learning, class dynamics, service provision, institutional culture, belonging, dignity, and respect. Paradoxically, this comprehensive reach contributes to perceptions of EDI as diffuse or intangible. Because EDI concerns experiential and relational dimensions, it is sometimes

dismissed as ‘touchy-feely’ or ‘woolly’; characterisations which reveal more about epistemological assumptions regarding legitimate knowledge than about EDI’s actual rigour. The impact of EDI initiatives and policies are amenable to systematic examination through surveys, policy analysis, behavioural indicators, and qualitative methodologies that centre lived experience, and explore behaviours, values, and institutional treatment.

Yet EDI can remain marginal to what is perceived as the ‘core’ institutional business of teaching, learning, research and academic quality assurance, which necessitates ongoing justification of its value and impact (Ahmed, 2017). The introduction of performative frameworks (such as Athena SWAN, Consent framework) attempts to render EDI measurable and thus legitimate, though such frameworks are themselves contentious. As Lynch et al. (2014:217) argue, measuring equality through the achievement of targets risks obviating the need for structural reform, with compliance substituting for transformation. This tension between making EDI legible to institutions while avoiding its co-option into managerial performance metrics shapes the contested terrain in which EDI practitioners operate.

As the research is about the enactment of EDI work in Irish higher education, it is prudent to critically attend to how EDI is held as a term in this context. Equality refers to ensuring fair treatment and equal access to opportunities for all staff and students with cognisance that people have different starting points and some may need additional supports to achieve the same outcome. It requires the removal of systemic barriers that prevent particular groups from fully participating in higher education. Diversity encompasses the recognition and valuing of differences across the institutional community, including characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background. Inclusion involves creating institutional cultures and practices where all individuals feel they

belong, are respected, and can meaningfully participate and contribute to academic life. Although it can be usual to disaggregate them initially, equality, diversity, and inclusion form an integrated conceptual framework with the three components reflecting the irreducible complexity of structural disadvantage, social identity, and institutional culture.

Higher education policy is directed by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, with oversight from aegis bodies, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland. Other relevant structures are the national agency with responsibility for research, Research Ireland and external agency Athena Swan Ireland, which oversees an accredited gender equality framework for HEIs. Historically, higher education in Ireland has consisted of a binary model comprising of: the traditional university sector, which features a number of older and newer entrants; and of Institutes of Technology and a small number of colleges, with a more vocationally oriented education offering and a mandate of widening access and participation for non-traditional learners. The latter has generally been perceived to be of lower status and with significantly lower research outputs (Hazelkorn & Moynihan, 2010). The recalibration of the Institutes of Technology into newly merged alliances of Technological Universities has resulted in an expanded research brief and increased funding, while maintaining the commitment to the spirit of regional development, access and responding to industry needs (Houghton, 2020:2). On foot of this regional reconfiguration to TUs, the higher education sector in Ireland now consists of eight traditional universities, five Technological Universities, two Institutes of Technology, and two Colleges. Total student enrolments in higher education have increased 14.8% between 2017/18 and 2023/24 – up from circa 231,710 to circa 265,905 (HEA Student Data, 2024) and with circa 36,000 staff

(HEA Staff Profile Data, 2022). This research project is grounded in the TU sector, with 12 of 16 participants¹ employed by a TU.

Most HEIs in Ireland have chosen the descriptor of ‘Equality, Diversity and Inclusion’ to organise their equality actions with some also explicitly drawing on the language of human rights (Fogarty & Scott 2025: 65). From 2015 onwards, EDI has become a key element in Ireland's higher education (HE) landscape, particularly since it has been included as a key performance indicator in the performance compact agreement negotiated between the HEA and HEIs. HEIs are guided by national EDI policy in priority areas such as gender equality, race equality, and ending sexual violence and harassment, each with specific data requirements. The assumption is that integrating EDI into institutional policies is beneficial, reflecting values of justice, equality, and fairness. These values support the dignity of all individuals, are essential for a democratic society, and are important graduate attributes that prepare staff and students to address the challenges of a complex, interdependent world.

Research questions and research design

In order to document and understand my professional world in a scholarly and critically reflective way, I spoke in-depth with lecturers, EDI practitioners and policymakers involved in driving EDI work in higher education. I inquired into how they see the ‘EDI world’ and explore their experiences and perceptions of how EDI is viewed, understood and enacted in HEIs. Fundamental to critical practitioner research is to really understand what is going on and to be able to name the strategies used for advancing EDI and the key dilemmas and tensions that emerge through this work. My aim is to explore practice in an empirically

¹ Through the thesis, I use the term ‘participants’ to refer to all interviewees who partook in this study – this term includes all three cohorts of lecturers, EDI practitioners and policymakers. I use the term ‘EDI practitioner’ to denote a variety of cognate EDI roles that have various titles.

grounded and theoretically informed way and contribute to my, and my field's, professional development as well as wider scholarship on Irish higher education.

I explore this through three research questions:

1. How is EDI constructed and represented within sectoral policy documents and what does this reveal about the assumptions and priorities underpinning the field?
2. How do participants, especially EDI practitioners, experience, understand, and enact EDI work within Irish HEIs?
3. What do research participants' perspectives reveal about the challenges, dilemmas and complexities of this emergent field?

While my epistemological orientation remains as a scholar-practitioner, the research questions are ordered to reflect the analytical sequence the study. The critical analysis of EDI policy documents (1.) was conducted first, both to interrogate how EDI is constructed at sectoral level and to inform the design of the interview questions used to explore participants' experiences (2. And 3.). The findings chapters and thesis structure follow the same sequence.

Using a critical qualitative methodology, the research involved a two-phase research design to interrogate both discourses and dialogues of EDI and enabled me to form a layered analysis on how EDI is conceptualised and delivered in Irish HE. The first phase involved a critical analysis of nine foundational EDI policy documents to analyse these for discursive shifts (Fairclough, 2001) and for how they illuminate the broader context for EDI. The findings from documentary analysis of the policy documentation informed the discussion guide for Phase 2, the semi-structured interviews. I explored through participant dialogues how these policy discourses are enacted in HEIs. Chein, Cook and Harding (1948:49) articulate this as the researcher learning to sense

‘how the community evaluates its problems... and [the researcher] must play a role in helping it to articulate its problems’.

Phase 2 sought to open a space for critical dialogue with participants involved in driving EDI policies in higher education. Sixteen participants were drawn from three cohorts: EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers for the purpose of understanding the lived experience of participants and getting multiple perspectives on how EDI is understood and enacted in HE. EDI practitioners are the translators of national policies within their HEI and are responsible for driving local EDI policies and initiatives. Their experience is valuable as they have to interface with structures and actors at institutional level and national state agencies to drive EDI progress. The role of the EDI practitioner within the HEI is cross-cutting and includes both staff and students; outside of the HEI, EDI practitioners collaborate with colleagues in the sector on joint funding applications and contribute in various fora such as national committees, networks and working groups with bespoke remits in relation to policy priorities. Lecturers have classroom authority but limited institutional power; their voices are an important source of information to consider as they have the largest audience with potentially the most impact in the classroom and can therefore model and embed an EDI lens in their teaching and learning, pedagogy, assessment and classroom management techniques. Policymakers from state agencies/aegis bodies and agencies shape frameworks but remain distant from implementation; they are an important voice in this discussion as they respond to societal and demographic changes and foment policy discussions within the HE sector, and ultimately decide on priorities, resourcing and reporting. While it takes a multi-perspectival view and draws on the experience of EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers, the research is weighted to the experience of EDI practitioners and how they understand and enact EDI in higher education in Ireland.

Sixteen participants across three cohorts provide depth rather than statistical generalisation. This scale enables the thick description and analytical attention to contradiction that critical qualitative research requires.

Understanding and critically reflecting on EDI: the contribution of the thesis

This research reveals that EDI enactment in higher education operates within a complex web of identity, visibility, performativity, and resistance. The findings demonstrate how these elements interconnect to create both possibilities and profound challenges for EDI work in contemporary HE institutions.

The inquiry begins with identity as the foundational driver of EDI engagement. Participants' commitment emerges from experience and a biographical orientation that shapes how they perceive and respond to injustice throughout their professional practice. Yet, it emerges that identity operates at multiple scales: personal biography intersects with role-specific constraints (EDI practitioners, lecturers, policymakers each navigate different institutional terrains), while EDI itself constitutes an emergent institutional identity formed through repeated discursive articulation rather than existing as a stable fixture.

This identity work confronts immediate challenges of visibility. The research exposes persistently low awareness of EDI policies across HE institutions, with discourses struggling to penetrate everyday institutional life. The low awareness of EDI across HEIs means that without headline-generating activity, EDI disappears from institutional view. Without senior leadership legitimisation and strategic resourcing, EDI remains precarious and on the institutional periphery, a finding exemplified by the rapid dismantling of EDI in US HE contexts.

The tension between identity and visibility generates the third finding: the performativity paradox. EDI work requires performance for institutional

recognition, yet this necessity risks reducing transformative equality efforts to measurable ‘busy work’. I propose that these outputs are ‘hardlines’, that satisfy sectoral imperatives while potentially hollowing out substantive change. Participants navigate a spectrum that ranges from necessary to strategic to non-performative enactment, distinguishing between ‘hard’ metrics-driven work and ‘soft’ relational labour, though this binary itself reinforces problematic epistemic hierarchies.

Finally, these dynamics unfold against pervasive resistance that strategically targets those with limited institutional power, namely, EDI practitioners, positioned at the institutional frontlines. EDI practitioners become the face of EDI work while facing disproportionate exposure to institutional resistance, explaining why they experience constant demands for self-justification that practitioners in established functions never face. Resistance operates not merely as internal pushback but increasingly draws on external culture war narratives that reconstruct EDI as ideological overreach, rendering established gains suddenly reversible.

Together, these findings illuminate EDI as a contested, contingent, and constantly negotiated institutional space where progress remains provisional and EDI practitioners must navigate fundamental contradictions between transformation and tokenism. This study makes a distinctive contribution to international EDI scholarship by providing the first empirical examination of EDI practitioner experiences in the Irish context, addressing what Ahmed (2012, 2107) identifies as the persistent gap in understanding the experiences of ‘diversity workers’, and what Bhopal (2023) and Milian and Wijesingha (2023) note as the absence of research centering practitioner voice. While critical scholarship on EDI in the UK and Canadian contexts has documented institutional resistance and performativity (Ahmed, 2012; Swan & Fox, 2010; Tatli, 2011; Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2015, Tildesley, Lombardo & Verge, 2022; Marom

2023; Vander Kloet, 2024), and Irish scholars have examined structural inequalities in HE (Grummell, 2007; Lynch, 2014; Lynch, Grummell & Devine, 2012; Loxley, Finnegan and Fleming, 2017; Ryan, 2019), no study has yet explored how EDI practitioners in Ireland, complicated by working within a post-merger TU landscape, experience and enact EDI policy amid competing institutional logics. By theorising and documenting their experiences, this research elevates EDI practice as a legitimate field of knowledge while generating practitioner knowledge that is needed to navigate resistance, maintain legitimacy, and prevent the erosion of EDI gains.

Structure and outline of the chapters

The section explains the structure of the thesis. I outline the sequence of the study and describe the rationale for what I decided to include in each chapter. There are ten chapters in total, each one with a specific focus but all connected in terms of the conceptual, methodological and contextual issues that form the essence of the study.

Chapter one introduces the research topic of EDI in Irish higher education. I describe my locus in this study as a critical scholar-practitioner, influenced by critical feminism, policy studies and pedagogy in trying to understand assumptions and power in relation to EDI practice. I describe aims and research questions and give an overview of the research context.

In chapter two, I set out the context for higher education in Ireland. Attention is given to the emergence of the technological university sector in Ireland. Chapter three gives critical and analytical attention to key policy documents that have influenced EDI development and progress in priority areas.

Chapter four identifies theories of equality and a select number of theoretical concepts which explore the complicated ways that policy is taken up. I draw on these as a way to make sense of this new field of EDI.

I later extend these theoretical concepts and articulate how my perspective offers a way to hold these together to enhance the precision and understanding of the EDI world.

Chapter five presents debates from international empirical research and identifies key debates in the field of EDI in HE.

Chapter six frames the methodology through my lived experience as lecturer, EDI practitioner, and how these positions are complicated by being an EDI researcher who is undertaking research in the new TU sector. I reflect on my insider-outsider identity as a scholar-practitioner and examine the importance of critical reflection in the study. I describe the research design, methods, data analysis and ethical issues.

Chapters seven to ten build a portrait of EDI work from the inside: how identity drives engagement (Chapter 7), why EDI struggles for visibility (Chapter 8), how performativity shapes enactment (Chapter 9), and how practitioners experience resistance (Chapter 10). Together, they reveal both the fragility and necessity of EDI work in contemporary higher education and the practitioner knowledge required to sustain it. These extend theoretical concepts from Ball and Ahmed and develop knowledge on EDI enactment in HE.

Chapter eleven reflects on the significance of the findings and synthesises insights, outlines the implications of the findings for policy and practice, offers theoretical and methodological reflections and outlines limitations and areas for future research.

Critical Summary

The values underpinning this inquiry are not incidental to it; they are constitutive of how the research has been conceived, conducted and interpreted. As set out above, I approach this study as a scholar-practitioner, and this position is bound up with a particular ontological stance: a belief that EDI work is inseparable from questions of social

justice, and that knowledge in this field is properly generated through critical reflection on practice, rather than from a detached neutral position (Schön, 1983, 1987; Brookfield, 2011).

This position has direct implications for the research. My view of EDI as oriented toward equality of outcome and human flourishing (Baker et al. 2024) is not a neutral empirical stance but a normative commitment that has shaped which questions I considered worth asking, the discourses I was alerted to in policy documents and how I interpreted participants' accounts of dilemma and constraint. My insider status as an EDI practitioner in a Technological University afforded access to tacit institutional knowledge and to the voices and candour of other EDI practitioners as participants. This proximity to the focus of the study brought with it a risk of foreclosure of critical distance: the potential to read participants' experiences through the lens of my own professional commitments rather than holding those commitments open to challenge. In keeping with the scholar-practitioner tradition that treats reflexivity as a resource for knowledge production rather than a threat to its validity, I chose to work with rather than against this subjectivity and engaged in reflective practices such as journalling, supervision discussions, writing annotative memos during analysis and conversations with critical friends within my doctoral study group. Even so, navigating this subjectivity remained a live tension rather than one that was fully resolved and one that I tried to hold up for scrutiny rather than treat as self-evident throughout the analysis that follows.

Chapter 2: Higher Education Context and Policy in Ireland

Introduction

This chapter examines the context of higher education in Ireland and the recent emergence of EDI as an institutional fixture tasked with addressing inequalities within the sector.

The empirical focus of this research centres on Irish higher education and particularly on its technological university (TU) sector, an emergent and rapidly developing part of higher education resulting from the institutional consolidation of former Institutes of Technology. After examining this context, in Chapter 3, I critically analyse a select number of policy documents which focus on EDI, gender and race, spanning 2004-2023 and parse the emergence of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) as an institutional policy priority and how EDI discourse has evolved within the broader HE context over this time. In chapter 4, I discuss theoretical frameworks of equality considering this context. In later chapters I examine how EDI policies are interpreted, translated, and enacted within newly established, heterogenous and complex TUs as they undergo significant structural and cultural transformation.

Prior to looking at EDI in TUs in detail, I will, drawing on the thinking of Freire (1970), Brookfield (2017) and Mezirow (1991, 2009), examine the context of HEI in Ireland.

The Purpose of Higher Education

HEIs are the products of the social, economic and demographic context in which they operate (Freire, 1970; Brookfield 2011; and Mezirow 2012; Lynch et al. 2012; Grummell & Finnegan, 2020) and they seek to take an active role in shaping society² They operate within a multi-layered governance and policy landscape and are faced with responding to rapid social and technological changes, which make EDI work both challenging and essential. Understanding this complexity is key to

² Educational institutions have a role in either perpetuating or challenging oppressive structures (Freire, (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*)

ensuring that EDI is not only compliant but transformative. I will introduce each of these strands before looking at the interactions, contradictions and tensions that can result from the interplay of each of these elements and the resulting challenges for EDI practitioners.

HEIs, as an extension of state infrastructure, possess considerable power to shape society³ functioning as ‘incubators for the thought leaders and social leaders of the future’ (Mott, 2022: 4). Indeed education’s capacity to drive social cohesion and transformation and shaping society ‘for good’ is often seen as one of their key missions. Boni and Walker (2016), building on the work of Sen⁴ (1999), emphasise that universities must actively commit to serving the public good to prevent the continuation of inequality and social exclusion. They argue that HEIs should prioritise human development values in their transformation efforts, supported by appropriate public policy frameworks (Boni & Walker, 2016: 102). Fleming (2010) reminds us of this fundamental rationale for EDI work, one that originates not from external policy pressures or legal compliance, but from education's intrinsic purpose.

Apart from all the imperatives from the system and the law, there is another even more crucial reason why equality and diversity matter in education. And it is not derived from the legal requirements or from the system. This reason does not come from outside education at all. The reason why equality and diversity matter comes from within education itself.

(Fleming, 2010:4)

³ In Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he states that universities are crucial spaces where abstract rights claims can be made concrete through democratised knowledge production, inclusive curricula, and institutional practices that model equitable social relations. When the values and norms of equality, diversity and inclusion are evident and practised in academic institutions, this context can serve as a model for a more egalitarian society.

⁴Sen (1999) identifies 'good education' as a fundamental catalyst for social change and social justice.

Although scholars approach critical research and learning from different angles, they agree on the importance of context. Freire emphasises that critical education and research should fully acknowledge their political context. Brookfield (2011) focuses on acknowledging the social, institutional, and ideological contexts that shape both research and practice and Mezirow (1991) argues that critical reflection necessarily requires examining the contextual factors - cultural, social, historical - that shaped those presuppositions in the first place.

Through their policy aspiration to social justice principles and their role in developing future leaders, HEIs thus hold a pivotal position in shaping a more equitable society. Notwithstanding this, HEIs have their own histories and are products of the historical and social context in which they operate (Lynch et al. 2012; Grummell & Finnegan, 2020) with power relations and social inequalities that are reproduced through their structures.

This brings us to a key question in critical policy studies and Irish higher education: to what extent has Irish HE shifted its logic and operational framework toward a neoliberal system? My research will explore this question by drawing on an extensive body of critical scholarship on higher education internationally (Ball, 2003; Ball et al., 2012; Deem & Morley, 2006; Ball, 2016; Barnett, 2013) and specifically within the Irish context (Ryan, 2019; Lynch, 2014; Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2015; Finnegan, Fleming and Loxley, 2017; Finnegan 2019a). However, research examining EDI within this framework remains more limited (Tildesley, Lombardo & Verge, 2022; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019).

Ends and Means – Challenges, Complexity, and Resources

In this section I explore the complexity of delivering on a mission of ‘serving the public good’, preventing inequality and social exclusion, in a society that sees the market as the primary organising principle. A key challenge is how can we align the dual missions of HEIs to be levers of

economic growth while also : ‘advancing the intellectual, cultural and artistic accomplishments of society; through rigorous, sustained and critical evaluations of the past, the present and the possible futures of society; through commitment to the highest standards of research in the various branches of learning’ (Department of Education and Science 1995: 91). How we define equality (the end) impacts the tools (means) we use to achieve it. What type of equality ‘should’ HEIs and EDI practitioners promote – basic equality, liberal equality of opportunity, equality before the law, equality of outcome, equality of condition. Conceptualisations of equality will be discussed in the next chapter.

On a practical level, there is also the challenge of the means of how HEIs deliver on their EDI mission. Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh,(2009) argue that the free market approach to public services is misguided, that it can lead to an increase in inequality and underfunding of resources that are required for the long-term health and viability of a population.

Finnegan (2016:55) argues that neoliberalism is a harmful feature of education policy and practice which limits educational assessment, outcomes, and imagination broadly and that ‘the political, economic and cultural effects of neoliberalism have led to a deep crisis in democracy’ (2016:55).

I will examine these ‘tensions’ later in my research and how they emerge in the role of the EDI practitioner.

The Neoliberal Economy

I understand neoliberalism to be a ‘complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory ‘market’ as a basis for the universalisation of market-based social relations’ (Shamir, cited in Ball, 2012: 18). Kenton

(2020) explains neoliberalism as an economic ideology⁵ that seeks to expand free market capitalism through the reduction of regulation of finance and corporate power, government spending and public ownership.

There are many reasons why scholars critique neoliberalism and disagree that it is a largely economic ideology. These include that the free market approach to public services is misguided and not subject to the same profit motivations as other industries and can lead to an increase in inequality and underfunding of resources that are required for the long-term health and viability of a population and lead to increased financial instability, globalisation and monopolies (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009). Finnegan (2019: 151) outlines Sayer's (2015) three-dimensional understanding of neoliberalism: the ideological privileging of deregulated markets; the gradual embedding of market logic and competitive individualism into cultural practices and institutional life, including audit regimes; and the restructuring of economic class relations through the expansion of financialisation of the economy. This suggests that neoliberalism is not just a way to organise the economy, but that it impacts on how society is structured, particularly when market rationale and structures are applied to public services like education, which has a brief to build more egalitarian societies. This raises the question of what the 'ideal' of a HEI is and what is the actual reality. Can a just, equal society be created by institutions that are being governed by a neoliberal logic? This tension will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

⁵ Ostry, Loungani and Furceri (2016) writing for the International Monetary Fund, assert that neoliberalism rests on two main planks: 'the first is increased competition—achieved through deregulation and the opening up of domestic markets, including financial markets, to foreign competition. The second is a smaller role for the state, achieved through privatisation and limits on the ability of governments to run fiscal deficits and accumulate debt.' They conclude that a nuanced view of what the neoliberal agenda can achieve is needed as there is evidence to support that instead of delivering growth, some neoliberal policies have increased inequality, in turn jeopardising durable expansion (Ostry et.al. IMF 2016).

According to Finnegan (2019: 151) in some respects, Ireland is one of the most neoliberal countries in Europe and describes the accretion of neoliberal ideas over time as ‘uneven’ rather than the unfolding of a unified program (2019: 153). He argues that neoliberalism is a harmful feature of education policy and practice which limits educational assessment, outcomes, and imagination broadly and that ‘the political, economic and cultural effects of neoliberalism have led to a deep crisis in democracy’ (2016:55). Lynch asserts that when managerialist approaches (which emphasise efficiency, control, accountability, performance metrics, often at the expense of traditional academic values like collegiality, autonomy, and critical inquiry) are deeply ingrained, they can serve to suppress prosocial institutional values. This results in the net effect of devaluing of moral purposes in and of themselves and defining essential public services ‘as commodities to be delivered to the market to customers who can afford to buy them’ (2014:5). Apple (2013) concurs and asserts that:

It is clear that neoliberalism also requires particular kinds of identities. It needs people to ‘willingly’ engage in the constant production of evidence that one is acting in the ‘most efficient’ manner and that one has internalized an identity of ‘performance’ based on the assumptions embedded in it (Apple, 2013:919).

I will return to the particular kinds of identities of those involved in EDI work later in this study. In reflecting on my identity as a lecturer over twenty years, this was influenced by the prevalent framing of teaching and learning in terms of its relevance and the usefulness of its programmes in the applied context of the workplace and serving the economy, learning knowledge and skills specific to subsequent job roles and was (and arguably still is) influenced by new managerialist approaches. New managerialist approaches can prevail in traditional universities as well, however, the dominant ideology in IoTs/TUs is

distinct from the university approach with the latter offering a broader process of intellectual development, beyond the framing of skills and performativity.

The growth of managerialism

By the early 1990s in Ireland, there was a concerted push towards modernisation⁶ in government and public services and new managerialism had become ‘the norm for public management in Ireland’ (O’Malley, 2012:107). This approach permeated higher education as it did other public bodies. Key features of managerialism include: a change in nomenclature from that of citizens, rights, welfare, and solidarity to that of customers, services users and competition; a focus on outputs, achieved through monitoring, performance league tables, target-setting and benchmarking. This discourse positioned education as another consumption good, ‘paralleling other goods and the individual is held responsible for her or his own “choices” within it’ (Lynch, 2012: 96).

Grummell (2015:10) refers to this application of new managerialist practices in further education as,

the distilling of learning into measurable outputs or displays of quality [which] disguises the question of why and who is making these judgements about what learning is measured and how quality and outcomes are being defined (Lynch, Grummell & Devine 2014:14).

This has implications for learning itself and for how the student is conceived of as ‘an economic maximiser, governed by self-interest’, and

⁶ Within critical theory frameworks, modernisation in government and public services represents what Marcuse (1964) would recognise as ‘repressive desublimation’—whereby advanced industrial societies suppress individual freedom by creating false needs through consumerism and mass media. This distraction stops people from challenging existing power structures and living authentic, fulfilling lives, while appearing progressive.

as a means of income generation. This is at odds with 'education's key purpose as a key institution in protecting people's human rights' (ibid). Lynch asserts that, in the organisational context,

people come to internalise the values of efficiency, productivity and outputs, through the twin practices of habitual practice and ideological infusion and ultimately achieve hegemonic control within organisations (Lynch et al., 2014:5).

Indeed, I was a model and compliant citizen in my lecturing career when it came to faithfully coalescing with new policy initiatives such as modularisation, justifications for programme viability, credentialisation and others. In this respect I can relate to how staff, over time, are co-opted and indoctrinated into conceiving of HE through a performative lens, whether this is through progression rates, numbers on programmes, or achievement of key performance indicators.

These changes in discourse raise questions of how the new language of education relates to the prosocial mission of HEIs as forces for good in society if students are viewed as customers and economic units. Lynch (2012: 97) concludes that:

Neo-liberalism embeds not only a unique concept of the learner in education, it also maps on a new set of goals to education that do not sit easily with education's purpose as a key institution in protecting people's human rights.

Following the financial crisis of 2008, subsequent collapse of the Irish economy and resultant pressure on public finances, new managerialist approaches were further validated to identify savings in public expenditure. the government cut public sector wages, reduced social welfare payments, and froze or reduced funding across various departments. These changes impacted the whole of society and also permeated higher education, where HEIs, reliant on state funding, were forced to grapple with substantial reductions in their core funding. This

led to a reduction in staffing levels, the scaling back of research programs, and the postponement of capital projects that had been planned for campus development. HEIs were compelled to look for alternative sources of revenue, such as increasing tuition fees and expanding their international student market. Burke (2021) asserts that prior to the financial crash, the scene had been set for new managerialism, notably by the Hunt Report (2011), which had set out policy instruments that ‘moved to typify and sanction neoliberal practice in Irish HE’ (2021: 117). After the financial crash, rationalisation measures were accelerated further and legitimised by the context of the precarity of the national finances.

It is argued (Lynch 2012; Lynch et al. 2012; Lynch 2014; Walsh & Loxley 2015, Burke, 2021) that the current HE system is heavily influenced by new managerialism and its concomitant performative frameworks which are knitted to the allocation of funding from the Higher Education Authority based on the negotiated Strategy and Performance Dialogue process between the HEA and the HEI. The process serves as ‘the foundation for system development and performance management, informs investment decisions and provides the basis on which to build greater transparency and accountability in the future. It also enables the HEA to manage system risks’ (HEA, 2018).

Lynch asserts that new managerialism is the organisational arm of neoliberalism and defines the former as:

a mode of governance designed to realise the neoliberal project through the institutionalising of market principles in the governance of organisations....it involves the prioritisation of private (for-profit) sector values of efficiency and productivity in the regulation of public bodies, on the assumption that the former is superior to the latter (Lynch, 2017:159).

A key feature of new managerialism in higher education is the focus on outputs, achieved through monitoring, performance league tables, target-setting and benchmarking, the commodification of education as a product for the market, rather than as a socially, culturally and often economically transformative experience for humans.

Higher education as an economic driver

Walsh and Loxley (2015: 1128) identify this reorientation of Irish HE to serve broadly utilitarian objectives and its repositioning 'as a 'cure and restorative' for economic failures and structural deficiencies manifest during and after the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' era (1995-2007)'. They comment on the Hunt Report (2011) and maintain that it 'articulates and reinforces the overarching theme of the "knowledge economy" agenda' and its overriding emphasis to 'mobilise structural and cultural reform to underpin and facilitate this pervasive knowledge-based economy project', and that this represents, 'an explicit value position, which in the Irish context also exhibits a high degree of historical continuity' (2015:1129). Lynch (2012: 94) states that this reorientation under neoliberal logics was enhanced by EU linking of 'a market ideology in education' with that of the economy in the Lisbon Agreement. The repositioning of HE as a 'cure' for the economy is conflated with a rigorous performance framework in the form of Compact agreements. I will refer to this focus and monitoring of outputs as a performative framework or performativity throughout my research.

The Compact agreement between the HEA and each HEI is the overarching performative framework and measurement device to enhance system accountability, from which other specific frameworks emanate. It focuses on outputs achieved 'through a measured monitoring of employee performance, and the encouragement of self-monitoring through the widespread use of performance indicators, league tables, target-setting and benchmarking' (Lynch 2017:159). These so-called *hard* measures drive practice but often are not designed

to reflect *soft* often relational practices that are taking place ‘on the ground’. If the measurement of HEI performance according to chosen metrics or performance indicators is too one-directional, for example where policy is directing practice, the outcomes for the learner vary (Coffield et al., 2007). As argued by Lynch (2012), Lynch et al. (2012), O’Malley (2012), Lynch (2014), Walsh & Loxley (2015), Finnegan (2019), Burke (2021), HEIs that achieve the performance targets set out in these agreements (and the market-led values inherent in these concepts) have become models of the ‘good’ HEI. As part of this, targets for EDI are agreed, most recently in relation to race and gender inequality, sexual violence and harassment and prior to that in relation to access and participation. Coffield et. al (2007), writing extensively about FET in the UK, conclude that funding and targets are two of the most important levers for specific policy initiatives. The de facto impact of embedding EDI targets in the performance framework will be explored in later empirical chapters.

Legislative and policy context for equality, diversity, and inclusion in Ireland

Equality is recognised and protected at a constitutional and legislative level and is one of the core values on which the European Union is founded. It is expressly recognised in several Treaty articles, Directives⁷ and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms⁸. While many Western democracies developed stronger legal equality frameworks since the 1990s (Bell, 2008), acceptance remains contested, implementation is uneven (Lombardo & Forest, 2012), and recent years have seen significant reversals in some contexts such as Poland and Hungary (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014). The EU continues to be a central influence in Ireland’s higher education system, particularly from the

⁷ Access to European Union Law [Equal opportunities - EUR-Lex](#)

⁸ [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#)

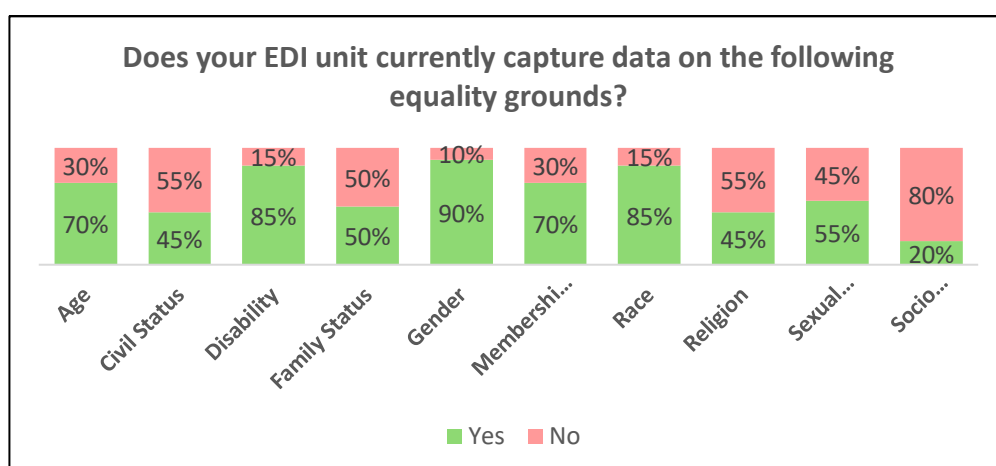
1990s onwards (Burke, 2021), although a detailed account of European higher education policy is beyond the scope of this inquiry.

The overarching state infrastructure tasked with advancing equality in Ireland is the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC). It is an independent public body that accounts to the Oireachtas, with a mandate established under the IHREC Act (2014) to protect and promote human rights and equality in Ireland and build a culture of respect for human rights, equality and intercultural understanding in the State. Other legislation governing equality, diversity and inclusion is contained in the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2018, the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018, the Disability Act 2005. To comply with the Employment Equality Acts, employers may not discriminate against any employee or potential employees on the basis of any of the nine protected grounds. Discrimination is prohibited in advertising, pay, access to employment, terms and conditions of employment, training, promotion or re-grading, the provision of vocational training, and dismissal. Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act (2014) requires public bodies to have regard to the need to ‘eliminate discrimination; promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and the persons to whom it provides services; and protect the human rights of its members, staff and the persons to whom it provides services’.

HEIs are publicly funded bodies, and educational institutions are considered service providers in the eyes of the law. These laws outlaw discrimination on nine grounds which are gender, disability, religion, family status, civil status, sexual orientation race, age, membership of the travelling community; a tenth ground for inclusion in this list is people at risk of poverty and social exclusion. HEIs are employers for the purposes of this Act; equally HEIs are liable for the actions of employees and employees must, on behalf of the HEI, comply with the provisions of this Act.

Since the enactment of the IHREC Act (2014), there is an augmented responsibility to actively promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of employees, students and the wider public that are served by the work of HEIs. This is known as the Public Sector Duty (PSD) and is underpinned by data collection and analysis across the equality grounds. Specifically, all HEIs must undertake assessment and monitoring of staff and student equality data. Despite being implied in equality legislation, data collection has been limited and sporadic. HEIs are obliged to ensure that students, as recipients of education, are not discriminated against or harassed; and that students with disabilities are provided with reasonable accommodations. The Disability Act 2005 places statutory obligation on public service providers to support access to services and facilities for people with disabilities. To date, data collection has been limited primarily to age, gender, disability and more recently race and ethnicity, as data returns on these grounds have been mandated by the HEA since 2021. A 2023 survey established that 76% of HEIs are now collecting data across all equality grounds as standard practice (Nestor, Reilly and Costelloe, 2025). The authors conducted a survey to assess data collection challenges faced by HEIs in Ireland, targeting EDI staff across 19 institutions with a 100% response rate from April 3rd to May 5th, 2023. Findings revealed significant variation in the ability of HEIs to collect, analyse, and report on equality monitoring data.

Figure 1 Data captured on Equality grounds by HEIs.



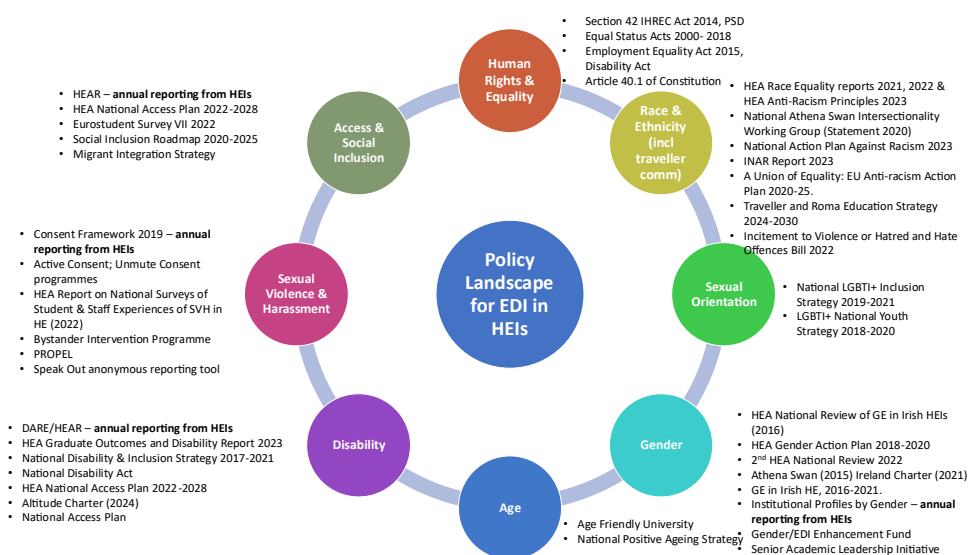
Source: Nestor, Reilly and Costello, 2025: EDI Data Collection Methods in HEIs Survey 2023

In addition to the IHREC having overall responsibility for supporting implementation of the duty by public bodies; other state agencies, or non-commercial state agencies in Ireland are public sector bodies of the state and have a statutory obligation to perform specific tasks on behalf of the government. The *Our Public Sector Service 2020* public reform plan gives effect to the public sector reform commitments on participation and consultation with civil society in the *Open Government Partnership National Action Plan* and the *Civil Service Renewal Plan*, with specific reference to the promotion of equality, diversity, and inclusion (action 16) (IHREC, 2019:14). HEIs are therefore required to ensure the implementation of the public sector duty in all aspects of its everyday activities and culture. Organisational culture and the values that drive a culture of equality are central to effectively implementing the Duty. The Commission's guidance states: 'Implementation of the Duty can assist an organisation to define and give expression to equality and human rights values related to its purpose and key public sector values', (IHREC, 2019:18). This regulatory or compliance argument is a key driver, as is reflecting the changing societal and student demographics, and the overarching moral

argument for equality. All publicly funded HEIs state that they are guided by core values, including those with an equality and human rights focus, such as respect, participation, partnership, empowerment, inclusion, and diversity. To navigate this complex regulatory and policy landscape in my work as an EDI practitioner, I found it necessary to map how these various frameworks intersect within HE.

As an EDI practitioner, I am involved in many aspects of EDI work and developed Figure 2 to present an overview of the breadth of policy and the depth of the legislation and frameworks as they pertain to the context of HE. The areas selected in Figure 2 are based on the stated priorities in HE policy over the last ten years and do not cover all of the nine grounds referred to above.

Figure 2: Policy Landscape for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education



Establishment of EDI in Higher Education

In the last eight years EDI infrastructure has been resourced in the Irish higher education sector through the creation of institutional structures

and committees and actors with specific EDI roles or aspects of their role that are specific to EDI. The key structure established in 2019 was the Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality. The HEA's Centre of Excellence was established to ensure sustainable acceleration towards gender equality in Irish HEIs by providing centralised support for institutions, sharing of good practice, and funding for innovative organisational and cultural change initiatives nationally. This was transformed into the Centre of Excellence for EDI in 2020 with an expanded remit which includes all aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion. It can be argued that the titling of the Centre as one of 'Excellence', is not ideologically neutral and reflects a neoliberal transformation in higher education, where academic value is increasingly defined by market logic, managerial control and performance metrics and one that is at odds with the public mission of higher education. In any case, the language echoes the dominant discourse of academic excellence contained in the HEA (2016) Gender Equality Review. The Centre advises the Minister and department on progress, new developments and measures which may be required in future for Ireland. Annual data returns from HEIs to the Centre are key to enabling data-driven decisions to be made so that actual, rather than perceived barriers to diversity can be addressed.

In addition to this new structure in the HEA, and on foot of recommendations in the HEA (2016) Gender Equality Review, designated roles to drive the work were created such as EDI Officer, EDI Manager, VP for EDI and more recently EDI Data Analyst. These developments were largely led by introduction of the Athena Swan Charter for gender equality in 2015 by a UK-based charitable foundation called Advance HE. Leaders of HEIs are required to commit the institution to the Athena Swan principles before engaging in significant institutional self-assessment through engagement with staff and reflection on legacy institutional data in relation to gender equality, including gendered

distribution of roles, career development, flexible working and other relevant areas. HEIs must write a detailed application which identifies key areas of concern and develop a Gender Action Plan to address areas of inequality. The Higher Education Authority supported the import of this Charter by working with key agencies like Research Ireland⁹ and others to require that HEIs who successfully compete for research funding, must have achieved an Athena Swan Bronze award in order to draw down that funding. The above roles were created largely to enable leading the work required to gain the Athena Swan award.

The Athena Swan Charter has driven progress in gender equality in HE, not least because of its backing by the HEA and the link to research funding. This requirement represents a so-called ‘hardline’ policy lever driving institutional engagement with gender equality through comprehensive self-assessment, data analysis, and action planning processes. Organisational insights gained through this process have effected positive change and it has provided a structure for implementing recommendations set out in the *HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish HEIs* (2016) and the *HEA Gender Action Plan 2018-2020*. However, some scholars claim that it is a neoliberal iteration of audit culture ‘obsessed with measuring efficiency and performance’ (Finnegan, 2019:152) and not necessarily delivering on impacts (Bhopal & Henderson, 2020). A deeper assessment of the Athena Swan Charter will be discussed in chapter 3 along with other relevant policy documents.

Higher Education Landscape in Ireland

I will explore the socio-historical and policy context for higher education in Ireland against this backdrop of neoliberalism. A discussion of HE in Ireland needs to account for the broader European policy context given

⁹ Research Ireland was established in 2024 as a result of the amalgamation of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland.

its membership of the European Economic Union in 1971, and its later form the European Union (EU). This research focuses specifically on TU institutions, to properly contextualise TU sector development, an overview of the HE landscape is first required.

Up to the 1960s, higher education in Ireland consisted of four universities¹⁰ (Clarke, Drennan, Hyde & Politis, 2018), which focused on professional training such as medicine and academic scholarship.

The *Investment in Education Report* (Department of Education, 1962) and the *Commission of Higher Education Report* (Department of Education, 1967) made a number of observations on ‘the piecemeal nature of HE, inequality, inadequate resourcing, and low participation at entry level’ (Burke, 2021: 26) and provided the impetus for the expansion of higher education provision in Ireland, specifically with the establishment of Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) in the 1970s. This created a binary model funded by the state (Walsh, 2018). Ireland was in line with developments in other European countries that placed emphasis on education to modernise their countries although other international factors at the time, such as the guidance provided by the OECD and global political developments, had a major influence on Ireland’s will to change (Loxley et al., 2014).

In Irish higher education, the binary model is comprised of the traditional university sector, which now features a total of seven institutions, the four older institutions and some relatively recent, ranging from the first university in Ireland Trinity College Dublin (1592) to newer entrants Dublin City university and University of Limerick (1989) (O’Malley, 2012). The second and historically more recent track of the binary model comprises of Technological Universities, Institutes of Technology (formally Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs)) and a small number of

¹⁰ From this point onwards, I refer to universities as traditional universities, in order to distinguish between these and more recent technological universities.

colleges, with a more vocationally oriented education offering, a mandate of widening access and participation from non-traditional learners and a teaching rather than a research focus which meant that typically there were low numbers of staff with PhDs.

What's in a name? From RTCs to IoTs to TUs

On foot of a number of government reports on 'the underdeveloped provision of higher education technical colleges' (Coolahan, 2004:76), in 1966 the then Minister for Education announced the establishment of RTCs. By 1977 nine RTCs were established. Coolahan (2004) states that RTCs were seen as highly innovative and a successful initiative in HE. Despite this, Hazelkorn and Moynihan (2010) posit that RTC/IoTs were generally perceived to be of lower status and with significantly lower research outputs. The lower research output can be linked to significantly higher teaching hours for lecturers than lecturers in traditional universities. The heavy teaching load emerges as a factor relevant to enactment of EDI later in the study. Coolahan (2004:79) traces the origins of the heavy teaching loads to the vocational mission inherent in the establishment of RTCs. This is linked to decisions that were taken between the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) and Vocational Educational Committee (VEC) based on a 'second level' attitude to teaching and management matters, including an agreement with the Department of Education to keep teaching staff free of duties from 20 June to 1 September each year. This perceived lower standing of RTCs has arguably been shaped by their vocational focus, underscoring enduring epistemological hierarchies that position practical knowledge as less legitimate than academic or theoretical knowledge

RTCs were renamed as IoTs in 1998 following the enactment of the Universities Act 1997 (O'Malley, 2012:105) with degree awarding authority.

In 2006 the OECD commented:

One of the strengths of Ireland's tertiary education system is the extent to which a diversity of mission has been maintained between the university and the institute sectors, as well as within the sectors. This has been reinforced by organisational differences and the differences in funding regimes and accountability mechanisms (OECD, 2006: 36).

In this report the OECD recommended that the diverse missions of the binary divide should be maintained. The mission of the IoT sector was defined as:

Local economic development, in encouraging wider participation through local catchment, their support for apprenticeship and craft skill training and the provision of ladders of opportunity through different educational levels, and in the applied character of their work (OECD, 2006:3).

The IoTs were removed from the direct control of the Department of Education in 2006 and placed under the HEA for the purposes of funding and accountability. The Institutes of Technology Act 2006 was passed into law and substantial powers that previously were only available to universities were given to IoTs. Governing bodies were given significant powers by amending section 7 of the RTC Act 1992. The chief officer was given powers and functions similar to those of a chief officer in a university (O'Malley, 2012).

Published in 2011, *the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, commonly referred to in the sector as the Hunt Report, recommended significant reform of the Irish higher education sector, including the consolidation of Institutes of Technology to create amalgamated institutions.

O'Malley's study which (2012: 114-126) gives an extensive analysis of the Hunt (2011) report, concludes with a statement from the Secretary General at the Department of Education and Skills, the country's most

senior civil servant in education who stated a renewed vision for HE was required¹¹.

She then referred to the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt, 2011) as

An ambitious reform programme which envisages significant system level actions to enhance quality in teaching, learning and research, strengthen external engagement, promote structural consolidation with the system and a renewed focus on diversity and performance. At the heart of this strategy is a new relationship between the State and higher education institutions (O'Malley, 2012: 126).

Here McManus endorsed a new relationship between the state and HEIs and clearly articulated support for the strategic dialogue process, which brought closer alignment between institutional priorities and the broader strategic framework for the sector¹².

The number of IoTs had expanded to fourteen prior to the period of mergers to TUs from 2019 onwards. The creation of a technological university requires the consolidation of at least two institutes of technology. The recalibration of the Institutes of Technology in the second tier, into newly merged alliances of Technological Universities (TUs) has resulted in an expanded research brief and increased funding, while still claiming the commitment to the spirit of regional development, access and responding to industry needs (Houghton, 2020:2). On foot of the regional reconfiguration to TUs, the higher

¹¹ McManus stated 'While our higher education institutions have served us very well, it was widely agreed that a renewed vision and strategic direction was needed to position the sector to meet rapidly evolving needs.' (McManus, 2012: 7, cited in O'Malley, 2012: 126)

¹² McManus called on HEIs for accurate data and promised to reward performance (2012:126). The strategic dialogue process between the HEA and HEIs, as espoused in the Hunt report (2011), were announced in 2013, with HEIs required to submit agreement for the period 2014-2016 and thereafter on a three-year basis.

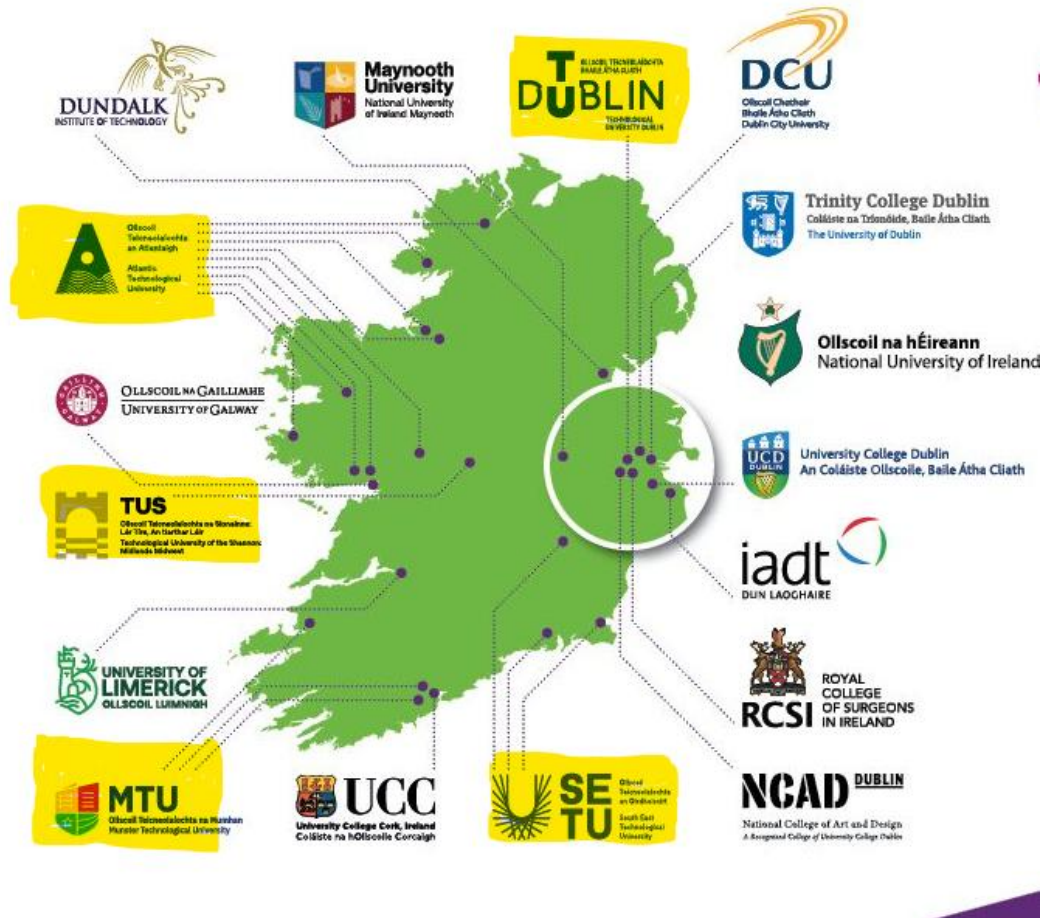
education sector in Ireland now consists of eight traditional universities, five Technological Universities, two Institutes of Technology, and two Colleges. The role and authority of institutions has progressed significantly since initial designation as RTCs with limited authority, to IoTs with delegated authority and awards up to level 10, to TUs with a stronger research mandate, all the while retaining a focus on access and participation, teaching and regional development. It is worth noting that over this time period, there have also been changes in the naming conventions of some traditional universities¹³.

New technological universities were created under reforms set out in Ireland's National Strategy for Higher Education (Hunt, 2011) and subsequently legislated for under the Technological Universities Act, their mission being to address the social and economic needs of their region and to engage in industry-focused research. Technological Universities focus on science and technology programmes that are vocationally and professionally oriented. Their mission and ethos is aligned and consistent with that of institutes of technology with an emphasis on facilitating access and progression particularly through relationships with the further education and training sector, on programmes at levels 6 to 8 and industry-focused research (HEA, Technological Universities, n.d.). There remains a significant difference in the emphasis of academic staff contracts with teaching hours of academic staff in TUs are 16-18 hours per week or 560 hours per academic year. This compares with approximately 150 hours per week for lecturers in traditional universities, although this can vary depending on other factors such as expected research output and supervision of doctoral candidates amongst others.

¹³ In the late 1990s, UCG – along with University College Cork, University College Dublin and Maynooth – were recognised as full universities with looser ties to the NUI under the Universities Act (1997). This led to changes in their legal names to NUI Cork, Dublin, Galway and Maynooth. NUIG changed its name again to University of Galway in 2022.

At the time of writing, there are five Technological Universities which are the result of this consolidation, involving 12 of Ireland's 14 Institutes of Technology. The first TU to be established was Technological University of Dublin (TU Dublin) in 2019, followed by Munster Technological University (MTU) and Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) in 2021 and Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and South-East Technological University (SETU) in 2022. The two remaining Institutes of Technology are expected to achieve TU status in due course (Ó Caollaí, 2022). This recent reconfiguration of the HE sector with various mergers of Institutes of Technology into larger-scale Technological Universities offers an interesting research site to explore EDI enactment.

Figure 3¹⁴ : Higher Education Institutions in Ireland (2025) [TUs highlighted in yellow]



TUs are geographically dispersed, emergent institutions with overlapping groups of people, artifacts and practices. Within each TU contextual factors vary significantly. There are key institutional actors of varying size and significance, with different forms of power, which exert influence over policy development and enactment. I understand enactment as the process by which policy intentions are transformed into operational reality. I will return to this key concept later in the study. In addition to actors, contextual factors within TUs vary and include situational factors such as material contexts (resources, staffing etc); institutional contexts (organisational history of legacy IoT, structures, culture, level of

¹⁴ Adapted from a visual produced by the Government of Ireland to promote awareness of the new single Higher Education constituency (seanadvoter.ie, accessed January 2025).

advancement in new organisational design); professional contexts (values, commitments); and external contexts (broader policy landscapes, societal, political pressures). This complexity creates multiple readings and enactments of policy, ranging from interpretation to translation, from to practice and performance (Ball et al. 2012).

In the Irish HE context, the key structures at the national level are, the Department of Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Skills (DFHERIS) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The HEA is the statutory body responsible for ensuring a high-quality higher education and research system is in place which meets the needs of students and contributes to social, economic, cultural and sustainable development. It is the main funding and regulatory body for HE. Agencies at a national level include research bodies Research Ireland and Athena Swan Ireland. Sectoral bodies at the national level include Irish Universities Association (IUA), Technological University Association¹⁵ (TUA) and unions such as the Teachers' Union of Ireland and the Irish Federation of University Teachers. Although not part of state infrastructure *per se*, Athena Swan Ireland wields significant power over other actors and operates across international and national levels in both closed and invited spaces.

In 1995, the Minister for Education, Niamh Breathnach, published *Charting Our Education Future: White Paper on Education* (Department of Education and Science, 1995) which emphasised the need for institutional autonomy, skills acquisition for a knowledge economy and globalisation and stressed the link between Ireland and Europe. According to Burke (2021: 33), the White Paper 'strikes an admirable balance of placing education for the promotion of human and civil rights, economic and social wellbeing, equality, and diversity in society'. It is

¹⁵ TUA represents TUs and IoTs and replaced Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) in 2025.

worth quoting the text from the section in the White Paper dedicated to HE in Ireland given the nature of this study and its focus on equality:

Higher Education promotes social well-being through preserving, widening and advancing the intellectual, cultural and artistic accomplishments of society; through rigorous, sustained and critical evaluations of the past, the present and the possible futures of society; through commitment to the highest standards of research in the various branches of learning; and through equipping society with the particular skills and qualities necessary for economic growth and prosperity (Department of Education and Science 1995: 91).

This framed the purpose of higher education as a space for critical inquiry and a means to promote social wellbeing. It suggests that HE contributes to a more informed, equitable and culturally rich society, while also reflecting a neoliberal framing of education as a driver of economic competitiveness. This aligns with broader European priorities in the 1990s and straddles social justice and neoliberal positions.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the context of higher education in Ireland and the recent emergence of EDI as an institutional fixture tasked with addressing inequalities in the sector. . The opening section offered an analysis of the empirical context of Irish higher education and raised questions about the extent of neoliberal transformation within the system. I examined the reconfiguration of Irish higher education, with particular attention to TU development, as these institutions constitute both my professional environment as an EDI practitioner and the empirical context for this study. While EDI units represent HEIs' newest institutional approach to addressing inequalities, they build on a lengthy history of similar initiatives operating under different titles such as Access and Participation and Equal Opportunities amongst others. Part

of the development of the EDI fixture entailed the creation of new roles of EDI practitioners. The role of the EDI fixture and EDI practitioners within TUs is further complicated by mergers between former IoTs, all with cultural differences from their legacy institutions and an immense glut of new policy development that goes with being new entities. The TU context reveals how institutional change creates both constraints and opportunities for EDI work, with practitioners operating in spaces of institutional ‘becoming’ rather than established cultures.

Critical Summary

My position as both subject and analyst of TU ‘becoming’, and as a practitioner operating within a field that has historically undervalued practitioner knowledge, remains a condition of this chapter’s analysis rather than external to it. This positioning is further complicated by the epistemological hierarchies that shape the TU sector itself. The perceived lower standing of RTCs/IoTs/TUs has been shaped by their vocational focus, underscoring enduring epistemological hierarchies that position practical knowledge as less legitimate than academic or theoretical knowledge. As an EDI practitioner, whose knowledge of the field is itself grounded in practice rather than formal academic theorising, I am implicated in this same hierarchy: the very form of knowledge I bring to this inquiry has historically been accorded lesser epistemic status than that of academic colleagues. This is not incidental to the thesis but bears directly on it, since scholar-practitioner inquiry as a methodology represents a deliberate attempt to assert the legitimacy of practitioner knowledge as a valid basis for scholarly contribution.

Chapter 3: EDI Policy in Irish Higher Education: Headlines and Hardlines

Introduction

In this chapter I focus on a small number of substantive policy documents in the field of EDI. This work will serve the research by giving an overview and analysis of this suite of documents that are key to informing how discourses of EDI are understood in the HE sector by practitioners and lecturers. This chapter is necessary work in order to later meaningfully situate the participant voice with this policy context to enable critical analysis of discourses and dialogues in the contemporary EDI world in HE. 'Texts can and do talk to us, but their voices are less audible' (Ahmed, 2012:9). She advises the reader to think of 'words as tools for doing things' (2012:21) and that is what I am trying to do in my reading of these documents. I have listened carefully to the voices of these texts, to trace their discourses and identify discursive shifts in language and framing, while being mindful that discourses are set within a history of prior discourses, 'a cemetery of past truths' (Veyne 2010:39 cited in Ball et al 2012:138)

Policy document analysis: discourses and evolution

Policy documents establish EDI priorities for HEIs and focus institutional efforts. As a critical scholar -practitioner, I am interested in analysing policy documents on gender and race as these directly relate to my professional practice. Phase 1 of my critical qualitative approach involves analysing their discourses, underlying assumptions and the institutional logics they draw upon with a view to disentangling the dominant and emergent logics that prevail in practice. The aim of this analysis is to reveal discursive shifts and competing logics within EDI policy frameworks. This serves as vital context for exploring how discourses of EDI are understood and enacted and helps me later to meaningfully situate the participant voice with this policy context.

My approach to analysing these documents was initially oriented by my reading of Fairclough (2001:4) and his theorising of 'language as a form

of social practice’ and his focus on the ways social and political domination is reproduced by text and talk. This guided me to examine how equality is framed, discussed and constructed within the selected policy texts, but also to think about discourses that policies draw upon. I was alerted to critically analyse documents that I was familiar with in most cases through my work as an EDI practitioner. I re-read these documents through the lens of a researcher and went beyond identifying the content, objectives or recommendations and sought out implicit assumptions, indications of power relations, and clues to how equality, diversity and inclusion is situated within broader social, political and institutional contexts. Policies that I had previously read as part of my job took on a new importance. I became interested in the process of text production, including the conditions of how these documents were produced and the social conditions of their interpretation (Fairclough, 2001:21). Critically, this chapter introduces ‘good headlines’ as institutional brand management in EDI work, and ‘hardlines’ as the policy-based enforcement mechanisms that drive accountability. These terms reveal a fundamental tension between HEIs need for positive EDI narratives and the requirement for structural accountability measures that drive genuine change.

I reviewed eight documents from 2016-2022 period as this is when EDI as an institutional fixture became established in Irish HE. I have included one notable exception that is outside of this timeline, an earlier document from 2004, the early harbinger of the need of HEI to generate good ‘headlines’ (HEA, 2004).

Equality before *EDI*

Historically, equality has been a focus of the IoT sector and part of its mandate, more so than the traditional university sector (Institutes of Technology Act, Government of Ireland, 2006). It is important to acknowledge that prior to the recent fixture of EDI being established, that equality concerns, fomented by the labour movement, trade unionism

and worker's rights, had featured strongly and been resourced in Irish HE. Prior to 2015, efforts were largely focused on widening access and participation initiatives for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and providing lifelong learning opportunities for mature students. Fogarty and Scott (2025) state:

Thus, precursors of contemporary EDI teams and actions in Irish higher education, can be found in offices and roles devoted to implementing legislative equality requirements as an aspect of HR, and distinctly, initiatives to promote access to higher education from underrepresented groups (Fogarty and Scott, 2025: 64).

These earlier commitments to equality are referenced by Skilbeck's (2001), *The University Challenged*¹⁶.

Formalising EDI in HE in Ireland

Diversity in the 2000s became largely about HEIs diversifying academic programmes through widening access and participation and lifelong learning. It is important to note that demographically, Ireland in the early 2000s, was markedly less diverse than Ireland 20 years later (CSO, 2002) and this demographic context informed what 'diversity' meant at the time.

From 2015 onwards, following the introduction of the Athena Swan Charter and recommendations in the HEA (2016) Gender Equality

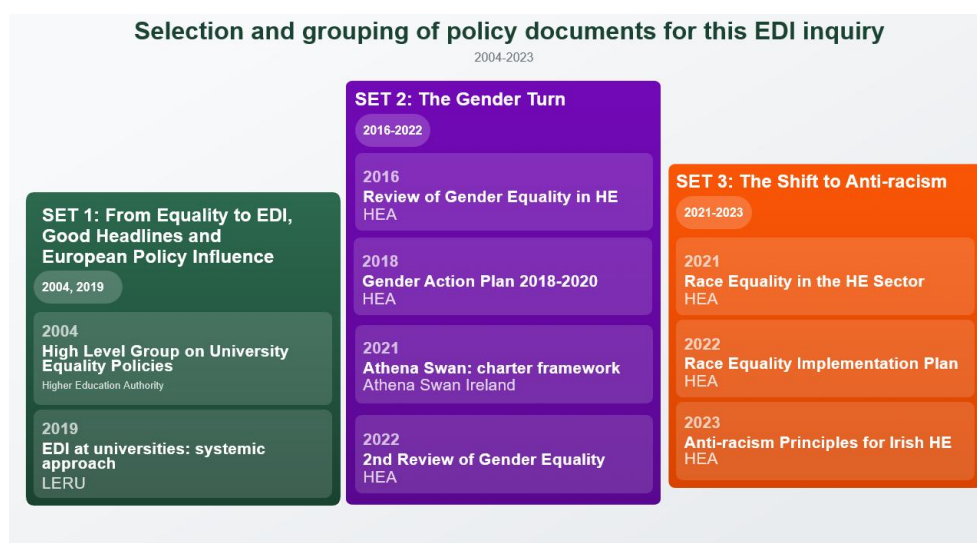
¹⁶ Although centrally concerned with the contribution of higher education to the underpinning of economic growth, Skilbeck also addresses the broader social dimensions of higher education and contains many references to diversity, equality and inclusion. Skilbeck regarded the capacity of higher education to 'improve the quality of life and strengthen the social fabric' (2001: 9) and called for responsive innovation from higher education institutions. He anticipated ideological and political pressures that threaten equality and diversity in HEIs. The OECD (2007) report reference Skilbeck's (2001) discussion of institutional diversity, described as the need to recognise and celebrate different institutional missions rather than push all institutions toward the same research/market model. Although Kelly (2003) asserts that Skilbeck's definition of the university is 'rather narrow' and focused on short-term economic pressures.

Review, HEIs began to create EDI practitioner posts, and the scope of this inquiry is focused on how equality work in HE developed from this point onwards. Despite the broad title of EDI, the initial priority for postholders focused solely on one aspect of EDI: gender. EDI practitioners were tasked with preparing institutional Athena Swan applications and gender action plans. As discussed earlier in chapter 2, gaining an institutional Athena Swan award is required by the HEA and research bodies in order for a HEI to draw down research funding. This is a policy hardline and is largely credited with the move for HEIs to take action to address gender inequality. EDI work in HEIs broadened from 2019 onwards by which time the majority of HEIs demonstrated achievement of Athena Swan Bronze. The HEA expanded its policy and reporting priorities to encompass sexual violence and harassment (2019) and race (2021), and these were included in institutional EDI workstreams, to better reflect the breadth of the EDI remit and for closer alignment with the characteristics protected in equality legislation and the Public Sector Duty.

Rationale and context for policy selection

I grouped the nine policy documents into three thematic sets in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Overview of thematic grouping of policy documents analysed in this study



Documents were selected on the basis of their standing as giving national policy direction to HEIs and steering the discourse in the sector. My work as an EDI practitioner focuses on gender and race and that has led me to focus on these two of the three HEA-designated policy streams for the purpose of this research. The third stream of EDI work, namely, ending sexual violence and harassment, has expanded significantly and has been resourced at a sectoral level by the HEA since 2021 through funding of specific posts for Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Managers in all HEIs. This complex work now includes a depth of evidence-based recommendations, resources, reporting tools, advisory group, implementation plans. Although initially part of the work of EDI practitioners in this study, I have not included policies on ending sexual violence and harassment in the scope of this inquiry as, since the aforementioned roles have been filled, this work outside of the scope of practice of EDI practitioners.

As a critical scholar-practitioner, I am attentive to links between the societal context to sectoral and institutional contexts as such links have the potential to effect discourses and policies. The majority of documents (8 of 9) were published within the last 10 years, with one exception dating back to 2004. Seven of the documents were published by the HEA, the national body which has statutory responsibility for the effective governance and regulation of the higher education system under the aegis of the DFHERIS. Of the remaining two documents, one is published by the League of European Research Universities (LERU), a well-established network of research-intensive universities which disseminates views on research, innovation and higher education through policy papers and strives to shape policy at the EU level. The LERU paper was selected as a comparator to give an appraisal of the wider discourse on EDI at the European level. The other policy document is published by Advance HE on behalf of Athena Swan Ireland, whose aim is to support HEIs in impactful and sustainable gender equality work

and to build capacity for evidence-based equality work across the equality grounds. As mentioned earlier, engagement with the Athena Swan framework is mandatory for HEIs if they wish to be considered eligible for research funding.

Word matters or words matter

Part of the task of analysing the policy documents is to see what language and words are leaned on to do the most work in terms of framing equality, diversity and inclusion, including race and gender. The method of data analysis adopted for this research is based on the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, I have extracted frequency of occurrences of chosen words relating to this study. Some features emerged which are useful to precede the more in-depth discussion of the policy documents.

All policy documents were searched for references to 'equality' in context. Equality features strongly, as would be expected, in all documents, and particularly in the lengthier documents such as HEA (2016), HEA (2018) with 1,091 references to 'equality' and coverage of 11%-29% across all documents. However, it is given strongest coverage in the HEA (2021) and HEA (2023) race documents, and in the HEA (2022) Review of Gender Equality document. Further searches were run under the 'equality' findings from this parent code, for gender, race, diversity, performance, audit, measure, racial etc.

The language of new managerialism and accountability is apparent in words such as 'measure', with the strongest coverage in the LERU (2019) EDI document, the (HEA (2018) Gender Action Plan, the Advance HE Athena Swan Ireland (2021). Occurrences of 'performance' or 'audit' also feature with the strongest coverage in the HEA (2018) Gender Action Plan, the HEA (2016) Gender Equality Review and the LERU (2019) EDI paper. This language of performativity is particularly apparent in the

Gender Equality Action Plan (2018). Coverage of 'racial' is significantly stronger in the HEA (2023) Antiracism Principles for HEIs, the HEA (2022) Race Equality Implementation Plan, with very little coverage of this in the EDI or gender-themed documents. This shows that the framing of EDI and gender-themed documents are lacking in an intersectional approach to equality. A further search on the racial code for references to antiracism, shows the strongest coverage, unsurprisingly in the HEA (2023) Antiracism Principles and (2022) Implementation Plan, with very low coverage of this in the earlier documents. It is apparent that the term antiracism was not in use in policy documents up until 2022 in the HEA Race Equality Implementation Plan and especially in 2023 Antiracism Principles.

From Equality to EDI, 'Good Headlines' and European Policy Influence :
The HEA's 2004 review of equality policies across Ireland's seven traditional universities was commissioned to assess universities' compliance with statutory equality obligations under the Universities Act 1997, the review team concluded that policy statements met 'best practice norms' and could serve as international exemplars (HEA, 2004:8) - a congratulatory assessment given the report's subsequent acknowledgment of an 'uneven picture' and universities 'real gap...as employers' (2004:23, 51). The equality agenda itself was narrowly conceived, siloed into two domains: student access (addressing socio-economic disadvantage, disability, maturity, and ethnicity) and employment opportunities (focused almost exclusively on women's underrepresentation in senior academic roles). The review is evidence of a tension between rhetorical commitment and material practice. Significantly, the report frames universities' equality commitments through the lens of reputation management, noting that institutions 'must set a good headline' and that 'standards they maintain can become headlines for a society as a whole' (2004:19, 23).

This 'good headline' framing is critical: it positions equality not as an intrinsic institutional obligation but as reputational currency - something requiring external visibility and positive public perception. Headlines are performative instruments designed to attract attention and shape narrative, potentially prioritising appearance over substance. The document's humanistic tone (repeatedly referencing 'people' rather than 'stakeholders') distinguishes it from subsequent managerialist policy discourse, yet this more accessible language coexists with an underlying instrumentalisation of equality as institutional branding. The dissonance between proclaimed excellence in equality policy and acknowledged implementation gaps suggests early evidence of what Ahmed (2012) would later theorise as institutional 'non-performatives' - declarations that substitute for rather than produce substantive change.

While the HEA (2004) document frames equality around student access and participation and equality of opportunity for women in promotional rounds, the LERU (2019) document frames EDI holistically as bringing many advantages to the university. It sets out the high-level European university context for EDI and issues for consideration that require systemic action to achieve sustainable change, both institutionally and across universities and the wider higher education community. It uses phrases like 'build community', and links this to 'enhance commitment and performance', in the assumption that this will lead to ensuring the 'long-term relevance in a fast-changing world and increase their already considerable global impact' (LERU, 2019:3). The assumption here is that developing fully inclusive processes and cultures that will provide true equality of opportunity to staff and students, will result in gains for the university in terms of 'fostering social cohesion and at the same time enhance their capacity for creative and original research'. Enhancing performance in the global context to achieve globally relevant excellence in teaching, research and innovation is clearly set out as a *raison d'être* for EDI in the university. This predominantly technocratic understanding

of EDI in terms of academic excellence, with less treatment of the moral argument, can be traced throughout the document.

A foundational argument in the LERU paper is the need for a system-wide and interconnected approach which can address inclusion and advance representation for all under-represented groups is strongly articulated. This puts responsibility for EDI progress on the university leadership and broader community. Words like ‘systemic’, ‘structural’ and ‘comprehensive’ feature strongly in the document and situate that change must occur at multiple levels in universities if it is to be meaningful and sustainable. Changes that are proposed are aimed at institutional policies and practices, structures, leadership, and the prevalent culture that impacts the entire academic community of staff and students. This shows an understanding of the efforts required to capture ‘hearts and minds’ or social norms of staff and students, and the need to reconstitute policies and practices that are barriers to equality in universities. Impediments to EDI progress in universities are identified as: initiatives targeting the needs of underrepresented groups in a siloed way, e.g. gender, race, disability etc.; initiatives that focus on either staff-only or student-only groups instead of viewing the university a whole community; and the centrality of EDI in the curriculum and in research design.

The LERU paper identifies the need for quantifiable goals and metrics to evidence progress. Universities are encouraged to do a ‘self-assessment’ and to reflect on priority issues and develop time-bound and criteria-driven action plans with quantifiable goals to address these issues. The assumption here is that progress in EDI is an ongoing process of assessment, refinement and incremental progress.

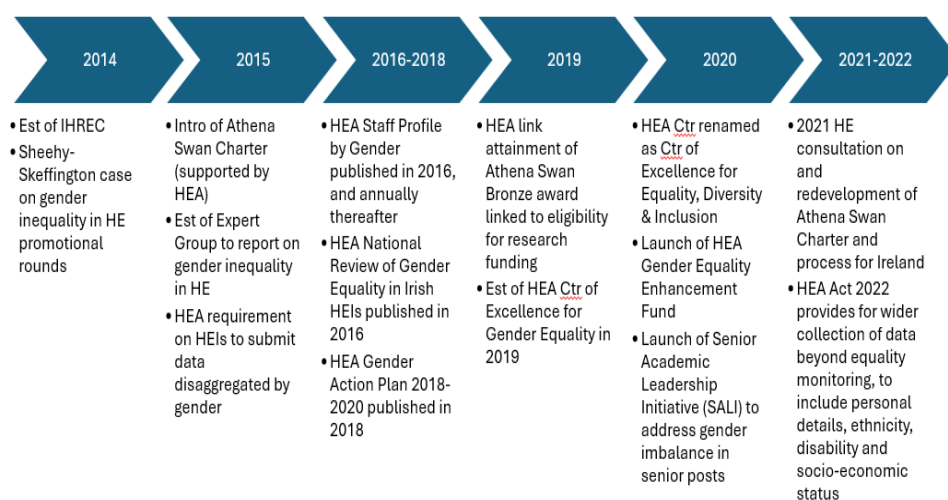
Overall, the LERU document calls for a strategic approach using interconnected, university-wide systemic changes as a way to achieve sustainable progress in EDI (2019:10) which will bring advantages such as enhanced performance, social cohesion, and global impact. This

positions EDI through a predominantly technocratic lens emphasising academic excellence over moral arguments. The document cautions against a one-size fits all approach to EDI in universities, as the nature and extent of EDI issues to be faced are unique to each university and stresses the local and national context.

The Gender Turn and the ‘Hardline’ (c. 2015-2021):

The four HEA documents under consideration that specifically pertain to gender equality are: HEA (2016); HEA (2018); HEA (2022a); and Advance HE (2021) Athena Swan Ireland: 2021 charter framework.

Figure 5: Timeline related to progress in Gender Inequality in HE



Of the three HEA policy documents, the 2016 Expert Group Review is the central and most influential document in this period. The HEA 2018 and 2022 documents draw on the substantive research, evidence-base and recommendations set out in the 2016 Review. These HEA documents are inclusive of stakeholders and inputs were sought from staff across the HE sector, although primarily academic staff.

The high profile Sheehy-Skeffington employment discrimination case (2014) catalysed a rapid policy response that fundamentally reshaped

gender equality discourse in Irish higher education, but not necessarily in emancipatory directions. The HEA's 2016 Gender Equality Review, while comprehensive in its research base, embedded gender equality within neoliberal logics through two key discursive moves. Firstly, it subordinated equality to institutional performance through the business case for diversity: moral and business reasons were declared 'conveniently aligned, as granting the opportunity for talented female staff members to progress on the career ladder will inevitably lead to positive results for the system as a whole' (HEA, 2016:18). This framing - with 83 references to 'pursuit of excellence' compared to minimal treatment of equality as intrinsically valuable, exemplifies what Lynch (2014) describes as the neutralisation of radical potential through incorporation. By tying equality to excellence, performance, and competitive advantage, the policy makes women's advancement contingent on institutional benefit rather than establishing it as a fundamental right. The paternalistic language of 'granting opportunity' to 'talented female staff' further reveals underlying assumptions: women become resources to be strategically deployed rather than members of communities experiencing systemic exclusion. There is also a possibility that this narrative may constitute what Shore and Wright (2015) might recognise as a form of strategic essentialism, whereby the language of 'excellence' is used to package a fundamentally radical challenge to established values hierarchy within the legitimising architecture of scholarly citation and empirical data, precisely because normative claims for equality would be dismissed as ideological or unserious within institutional contexts.

Secondly and critical to this research, the Review introduced what can be termed the 'hardline' approach: 'disruptive policy intervention...coupled with a robust system of follow-up evaluation and performance monitoring linked to funding' (HEA, 2016:23). This accountability apparatus was formalised in the Gender Action Plan

(HEA, 2018) and includes explicit threats to institutional funding. This marks a shift from the 2004 document's concern with 'good headlines' to enforceable performance metrics. The deployment of Athena Swan gender equality scheme from 2015 onwards was a significant factor in this transformation, creating an elaborate audit system where gender equality became legible primarily through KPIs, targets, action plans, and institutional awards.

What gets measured gets done

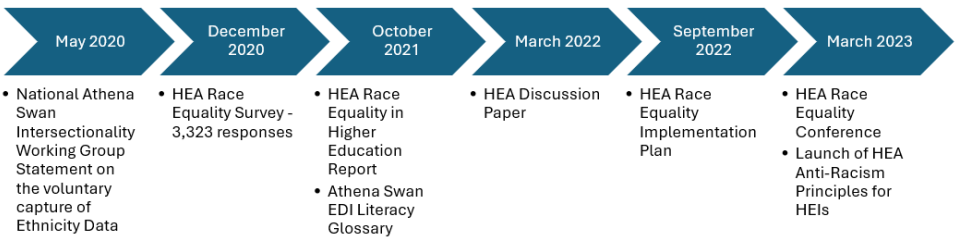
This performance-based approach produces contradictory effects that reveal fundamental tensions in contemporary EDI work. On one hand, linking funding to measurable outcomes generates institutional buy-in that rhetorical commitment alone cannot achieve. The 'hardline' creates accountability where moral arguments fail. Yet this pragmatic effectiveness comes at considerable cost. As Ahmed observes, when diversity 'accrues life value by being aligned with organisational value' (2012:110), it becomes another mechanism for institutional advancement rather than a challenge to institutional power. There is a proliferation of performance language, with 54 references to 'performance' in the 2016 Review; and extensive use of terms like 'reward', 'recognition', and 'criteria' in Athena Swan documentation. This language signals how gender equality has been absorbed into new managerial systems that prioritise measurable outputs over structural transformation. The 2022 Review acknowledges that progress has been 'neither uniform in relation to all indicators, nor across the entire HEI landscape' (HEA, 2022:14). This exposes a key limitation: when equality becomes what can be measured and audited, institutions focus on metrics (increasing women in senior roles), while systemic issues affecting women on precarious contracts or with caring responsibilities remain unaddressed. Did the focus on measurement of progress in areas where progress had been made enable HEIs to helpfully ignore the arguably more serious equality issues? The discursive evolution toward

intersectionality in 2022 documents represents important recognition that women's experiences are not monolithic, yet this more sophisticated framing still operates within the same performance apparatus. Whether an intersectional approach can disrupt or will be incorporated into existing accountability frameworks, becoming another metric to monitor, remains an open question that my empirical research will address.

The earlier discourse on gender equality focused on the business case and pursuit of academic excellence (HEA 2016, HEA 2018) and this shifted to a more nuanced approach to gender equality, acknowledging that women's experiences are not monolithic and reflecting a commitment to intersectionality. The earlier policy documents are primary examples of the hardline approach, linking funding to measurable performance, which is justified by the business case for excellence. They sustain a discourse on the structural barriers faced by women and set out a hardline stance with HEIs to make and keep them accountable for lack of progress in gender equality.

The Shift to ‘Anti-Racism’ (c. 2021-Present): A Transformative Discourse?

Figure 6: Timeline related to progress in antiracism policy



Discussions of race equality in the HE sector have been led and supported by the HEA and three policy documents were published in relatively quick succession from 2021-2023 following consultation and a collaborative approach with key stakeholders including HEIs, HE

representative bodies and individual stakeholders. This rapid development and discursive shift reflects the broader social context in Ireland including increased diversity in national demographics, increased numbers of applicants for international protection, and rising far-right anti-immigration movements.

The HEA's shift from 'race equality' to 'anti-racism' language carries potential significance: where equality discourse can remain procedural and passive, anti-racism explicitly names systemic racism and demands active institutional transformation to 'fix the system, not the individual' (HEA, 2023:5). This structural framing, coupled with deliberate consultation with minoritised communities through the Intersectionality Working Group, ensured that policies were developed with meaningful input from those experiencing inequality and sought to avoid reproducing the very exclusions they claim to address. The 2021 staff survey findings substantiate this concern: minority ethnic staff were twice as likely to report that institutional race/ethnicity policies were 'meaningless' (13% versus 5% of White Irish staff), with respondents noting 'no real implementation and no visible outcomes', rendering policies 'ineffective' (HEA, 2021:24). This evidence of the policy-practice gap, where documents exist but fail to materialise as institutional change, directly validates Ahmed's (2012) and Bhopal's (2020) critiques of diversity work as potentially performative rather than transformative. The explicit acknowledgment that 'race inequality can be experienced differently by different people from similar and different ethnic backgrounds' and attention to intersecting characteristics (HEA, 2023:5) represents more sophisticated theorising than the initial binary framing of earlier gender policy and may signal the maturing of EDI practice.

Yet this apparently transformative language operates within the same accountability infrastructure that shaped gender equality policy, raising questions about whether different discourse can produce different outcomes when embedded in identical institutional mechanisms. The

race equality documents reproduce familiar patterns: emphasis on data collection as prerequisite for action, managerialist language of ‘simplified pathways’ and ‘return on investment’, and crucially, the persistent business case logic linking equality to institutional excellence. Who defines what the full potential of HEIs is and what it looks like is not made explicit. This instrumental framing positions anti-racism not as moral imperative but as logic to optimise performance, potentially rendering race equality contingent on institutional benefit. The accelerated policy timeline which led to three major documents in three years, reflects both a genuine response to Ireland's changing demographics and reactive positioning amid rising far-right mobilisation and anti-immigration protests. The framing of the Anti-Racism Principles as a ‘living document’ suggests genuine commitment to iterative, community-led development. My analysis suggests that it also lacks the ‘hardline’ accountability measures attached to gender equality, such as the link to research funding being contingent on having Athena Swan accreditation. This lack of absorption into a similar accountability framework means that ‘non-performative’ commitments can continue to substitute for structural change. The critical question is not whether the discourse has evolved, it demonstrably has; but, whether different language can produce different material outcomes that can lead to transformative ends.

These three policy documents pertaining to race equality, all published in a relatively short period of time, show the positioning of race by the HEA as a priority issue for HEIs to focus and make progress on. The discursive framing across the three documents evidences the discursive shift from ‘race equality’ to using the language of ‘antiracism’. The term ‘anti-racism’ becomes firmly embedded as a key term in the race equality in HE lexicon in the Implementation Plan (HEA, 2022) and the Anti-racism Principles (HEA, 2023). The prevailing discourse is that race inequality exists in Ireland and in higher education, and that there is a

responsibility on HEIs to take an antiracist stance to proactively address systemic and institutional racism through actions. Discourses are linked to broader social change (Fairclough, 2001) and the accelerated pace of policy work on race equality can be viewed in the context of a number of factors: the increasingly diverse demographic profile in Ireland (CSO, 2022)¹⁷; the rise in numbers of people coming to Ireland seeking international protection; other nationalities taking up residence in the State; and the rise of the far-right anti-immigration political movement in Ireland¹⁸, a trend that has been percolating in Europe for several decades. There has been an escalation in violent far-right activity over the past two years, including protracted anti-immigration protests, arson attacks targeting government housing for refugees and asylum seekers, and riots in Dublin in November 2023 which have been exacerbated by misinformation on social media¹⁹.

This close reading of these documents shows how HEIs can be a site to seed the change for wider society by ensuring this is the language in use and guiding towards a proactive and systemic approach to racism. The language of anti-racism is being used, albeit unevenly, by other government departments and agencies²⁰.

¹⁷ There were almost 632,000 non-Irish citizens living in Ireland in Census 2022, which was 12% of the population. Just under 3.9 million or 77% of people identified their ethnic group or background as White Irish.

¹⁸ The mobilisation and rise of far-right groups in Ireland has been significant with 476 protests between 2022-23. [Irish Ethnonationalism and the Emergence of a Distinct Far-Right Movement - The Soufan Center](#)

¹⁹ [Irish Ethnonationalism and the Emergence of a Distinct Far-Right Movement - The Soufan Center](#)
[\[PDF\] Restructuring Irish Higher Education through Collaboration and Merger | Semantic Scholar](#)

²⁰ A basic search on the main government website in October 2025 found 8 uses of the term antiracism across three government departments, namely, Justice, Children, Disability and Equality, and Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

Conclusion

With the context for higher education established in chapter 2, this chapter analysed the policy documents that constitute key reference points in my professional practice, examining how these texts frame EDI issues and the underlying assumptions they employ. Policy documents from 2004-2023 reveal a clear discursive evolution: from broad equality framing around student access and participation, to gender-focused policies from 2015, to race equality and anti-racism from 2020. This sequential tracing shows how new policy directions are shaped over time, with each equality strand gaining prominence as others are perceived as resolved or having achieved sufficient progress. This pattern suggests that HEIs have institutional capacity to address only one issue at a time. There is a clear case for a more sophisticated approach, otherwise there is a danger of inequalities being kept in siloes and not treated as intersectional, or interconnected forms of disadvantage simultaneously. Also, will separate accountability frameworks for policy strands channel practitioners' thinking into siloes and potentially result in the loss of the complexity, knowledge and unique perspective and that each strand brings? It will be interesting to see if these policy strands enrich each other as EDI capacity and institutionalisation matures over the next five years.

My analysis of policy documents suggests EDI practitioners need dual competencies - the ability to work pragmatically within existing institutional logics while maintaining critical awareness of their limitations and actively seeking spaces for more transformative approaches. In my experience as a practitioner, I see the prescient danger for practitioners is that they can easily get tangled in the institutional weeds, to the extent that not only does the transformative goal of EDI get lost, but distracts practitioners from challenging existing power structures. The achievement of incremental change across policy strands is positive but this needs to be in the context of an overall vision

that motivates people . This is why this practitioner-research is valuable, as it helps practitioners understand why the Irish HE context and its challenges are complicated, and also gives them the conceptual and practical tools to work within this complexity.

A compounding factor for EDI practitioners is the disruption caused by institutional transformation into TU entities, as TUs must actively construct their cultures and practices. EDI practitioners in these contexts must navigate competing legacy cultures while establishing legitimacy for EDI work and also generating a 'good headline'. The analysis in this chapter reveals fundamental tensions that demand deeper theoretical exploration.

Critical Summary

As a critical scholar-practitioner, I am conscious of offering an analysis which applies a predetermined critical theory framework that leads to a predictably negative conclusion about neo liberalisation of HE, without considering the potential benefits of performance-based approaches. In my experience as an EDI practitioner, I regularly observe and use the legitimacy of accountability frameworks to mobilise buy-in from senior leaders for EDI initiatives, most notably in the achievement of an Athena Swan award. There is no greater imperative for action than if the HEA require the institution to do something—I recall a discussion at Academic Council in 2019, where a male Head of Department, after listening to statistics on underrepresentation of women in HEIs as the rationale for applying for an Athena Swan award, asked, 'Do we really have to do this?'. Even if the achievement of the award is later treated like a reputational asset rather than a transformative equality commitment, HEIs would not sign up to the application unless it was mandated by the HEA. But, while instrumental arguments may secure institutional buy-in and resources, they can also fundamentally reshape what equality means in practice and potentially undermine transformative goals of challenging systemic inequalities. This example reflects my own

practice of leveraging exactly the instrumental logics which I go on to critique – I am not describing a system I stand outside of, but one that I occupy and strive to make function. The critique I offer is also, implicitly, a critique of moves I have made in my own practice and my acknowledgment of the pragmatic value of accountability frameworks, including the uncomfortable truth that institutions may only act because they are required to, is a form of knowledge available to me precisely because I have operated within these systems, not despite it. I have sought to hold this tension, rather than prematurely resolve it. I do this by distinguishing in my analysis between my role as EDI practitioner within events, and my role as researcher when reading them retrospectively; and by discussing draft interpretations with my supervisor and critical friend. Even so, my dual position as both an agent within and an analyst of the policy landscape examined in this chapter remains a condition of the analysis rather than one resolved by it.

Looking forward, the theoretical framework developed in the next chapter will explore how different equality theories can support EDI practitioners in navigating these complex terrains, identifying conceptual resources that enable both critical understanding and strategic effectiveness in contemporary EDI work.

Chapter 4 EDI Research and Practice

Introduction

This study aims to explore the experiences of participants with regard to how EDI policy is enacted in HEIs in Ireland, generating a critical analysis of the new 'EDI world' and making a contribution to understanding the challenges, complexity and contributions of EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers to this work. Even though I am surrounded by the language of equality every day as an EDI practitioner, I realised that I needed sharper precision in my thinking about equality and engaged with the scholarly landscape of equality, justice and institutional analysis (Rawls, 1971, Sen 1980, 2009, Crenshaw, 1989, Acker 2006, Wood et al., 2022) as a necessary intellectual journey to map the conceptual terrain. My practitioner experience revealed specific gaps and these theoretical resources helped me reflect on assumptions about discourse, culture, how institutional change happens and my own practice. As a result I came to develop a reflexive disposition, and a deeper critical understanding of EDI and the distinctions and relationship between the E, D and I. This has enabled me to examine realities from an institutional and sectoral stance and also within the larger political, societal and global context. It also focused me to apply to the review of literature the same critical stance as I do to my research data (Kamler and Thomson, 2006).

After broad critical engagement with the conceptual terrain of equality against the realities of EDI practice in Irish HE, I realised I needed a more contextually precise and multi-perspectival analytical framework than any single tradition could provide. The three theoretical frameworks drawn upon in this chapter – Baker et al.'s (2004, 2009) equality of condition, Ball et al.'s (2012) theory of policy enactment and Ahmed's (2012) critical analysis of diversity work – are not deployed as separate or parallel lenses. Rather, following Murphy and Costa's (2022) argument for hybridised theory in education research, they are brought into productive dialogue with each other to construct an analytical

framework fitting to the complexity of EDI enactment in Irish HE. Murphy and Costa argue that social theory should function not as an off-the-shelf conceptual tool applied monologically, but as a responsive resource shaped by the demands of the research, thus ‘placing theory at the service of the research phenomenon’ (2022: 29). They argue that theory is built on the hybridisation of ideas, and that the most intellectually generative frameworks combine concepts across traditions. No single theoretical tradition could account for the full range of questions this study pursues, when combined, the three frameworks constitute an explanatory architecture that is greater than the sum of their parts.

I want this research to examine the EDI ‘world’ from the inside-out, drawing on my practitioner positionality, and from the outside-in, as a scholar. While it takes a multi-perspectival view and draws on the experience of EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers, the research is weighted to the experience of EDI practitioners and how they understand and enact EDI in higher education in Ireland. In the previous chapter I mapped the context for HE in Ireland. In this review of literature over the next two chapters I raise questions about EDI, some of which I will seek to answer in my study. I identify a select number of theoretical concepts which I draw on as a way to make sense of this new field of EDI (Baker et.al 2004, 2009, Ball, 2012 and Ahmed 2012). I later extend these theoretical concepts and articulate how my perspective offers a way to hold these together to enhance the precision and understanding of the EDI world in Irish HE. In the subsequent chapter I analyse the key debates in the field and delimit the empirical literature to help make sense of my research topic. I identify themes in the literature that my research questions and data will speak to and draw out some questions about EDI, in terms of how it is experienced and enacted in the higher education policy context which will be explored in different ways in the

chapters that make up this thesis. As a way in to this, I begin by thinking about my own positionality.

When I started as a lecturer in my HEI in 2001, Ireland had a largely homogenous population. I taught white Irish students who had completed secondary education and were undertaking study at NFQ Levels 6, 7 and 8²¹. My relationship with educational policy was essentially reactive. I engaged with it when required for my teaching practice, assessment, quality assurance and curriculum development, implementing procedures in a compliant rather than critically engaged manner. As noted earlier, in 2019 I moved into the institution-wide role of EDI Manager with responsibility from 2019-2021 of chairing and implementing the Athena Swan gender equality scheme. Significant social change had occurred in Ireland by this time. Nationally, the economic crash of 2008, the bank bailout in 2010 which has been broadly accepted to cost €64 billion, and the recession and austerity measures that followed for subsequent years all had acute impacts on Irish people. The national finances were overseen by what has been termed the Troika (the IMF, ECB and European Commission) from 2010 to 2013. Unemployment rose by 10 %, the workforce shrank by 14%, wages collapsed (Finnegan, 2019:154) and there was a massive negative impact on inequalities and provision of services due to funding cuts related to austerity. Although the Hunt Report (Dept of Education, 2011) only focused on educational reform, the varied factors emanating from the financial crash impacted on how HE policy was conceptualised and shaped towards neoliberal principles and practices, including the restructuring of the HE sector and funding allocation, which led to the establishment of TUs.

²¹ The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) situates educational qualifications at levels 1-10. For example Level 8 is an honours degree, Level 9 a Masters and Level 10 a PhD.

Subsequent to the economic crash of 2008 and recovery period, there was a significant increase in migration. This led to changes in the demographic profile of the population and a more diverse profile of students in HE in terms of age, race, ethnicity. An escalating housing crisis and lack of affordable housing from the mid-2010s onwards remain a pressing social issue to this day. Researchers have documented this as a structural crisis (Kitchin, Hearne & O’Callaghan, 2015) and cite the high natural population growth rate and immigration as contributory factors (McGreevy, 2025). Social movements drove progressive changes through referenda which resulted in legalisation of marriage for LGBTQ+ people and of availability of abortion in the state. Internationally, the rise of global social movements such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter sought to bring awareness of sexual violence and racism to the public sphere and it is reasonable to suggest were, albeit indirectly, influential in terms of HE policy developments in gender and race in Ireland and the broader point of the link between institutional change and social change emerges as something to contemplate in this study.

From 2022 onwards my responsibilities as EDI Manager changed as a result of the merger to a TU to include developing and implementing policies on EDI, race equality and gender identity and expression, the Public Sector Duty and others. In contrast to my role in achieving an institutional Athena Swan award, which was project driven and had high stakes for the institution in terms of funding, in the new expression of my role I noticed the complexity of developing and implementing new policies. Sometimes it worked as it was intended, sometimes it did not. For instance, developing the institutions gender identity and expression policy and procedure proved to be unnecessarily protracted and beset by strategic delays and interruptions. It exposed the tension between institutional rhetoric of inclusion and respect and the pragmatic reality of implementation. This will be explored in the next chapter surveying

the empirical literature with themes such as resistance, institutional gaslighting and limited agency of EDI practitioners.

I begin by examining key equality theories and raise questions about their relationship to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion discourses. I pose questions and trouble the complexity of attaching Equality to Diversity and Inclusion in the framing of these debates. Even though I am familiar with the language of EDI through my work, I thought it necessary to explore theoretical underpinnings and debates of equality to gain insight and precision for this research.

The language of EDI

A starting conviction is that equality is in and of itself desirable and a given in the context of this research. Coming from a social justice perspective, I believe that HE should democratise knowledge, dismantle exclusionary practices, and cultivate inclusive cultures in pursuit of equality (Freire, 1970; Brookfield, 2011). HEIs are microcosms for wider society and sites where systemic inequalities can be both reproduced and potentially challenged. Working as an EDI practitioner raised a fundamental question about the mechanics of institutional change: are HEIs genuinely transformed through top-down policy implementation, such as government/HEA directives, senior leadership mandates, and formal social energy? Or does a top-down model oversimplify the actual dynamics at play? The literature (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992; Apple, 2013; Finnegan & Cox, 2023) suggests that change can come from wider social movements as a driver of policy change in HEIs. My research is concerned with understanding how change actually happens or stalls within HEIs, and though questions about the relationship between institutional EDI initiatives and broader social change provide important context and feature at various stages, they remain at the periphery of this study rather than its primary concern.

Central to understanding these dynamics is examining how EDI itself is conceptualised. This raises the question of how the term EDI is understood and critically interrogated in HE in Ireland. EDI is the preferred language in use in Ireland. On the HEA website, what EDI is, is not defined. Instead, it leads with reference to its initial brief of progressing gender equality, which has been expanded to include all aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion; and offers a description of the background to the Centre *and ‘providing centralised support for institutions, sharing of good practice, and funding for innovative organisational and cultural change initiatives nationally’*²². The terminology of EDI is context-bound to Ireland. In contrast there are different ways of expressing the field in other jurisdictions, such as in the US and Canada, where the term equity is favoured over equality and elements such as justice (JEDI), interculturalism (EDII), indigenisation (EDII) are included and these will be discussed in the next chapter. What appears to be common across the use and understanding of all terms, irrespective of how they are arranged or compacted, is impetus to diagnose and address inequalities. Therefore, I am holding the term ‘equality’ as the key term in EDI, as it implies an approach to inclusion; while diversity relates to distinct concerns that are legislated for and institutionally understood in various ways.

As a critical scholar-practitioner, I want to clarify the varied meanings of equality, diversity and inclusion and their compression into the acronym and institutional fixture of EDI in the HE lexicon in Ireland since 2015. The three terms are distinct but interconnected and most of the literature on equality cited in this chapter implicitly or explicitly refers to diversity and inclusion in its discussion. Of these three terms, equality has been circulating for the longest time in society and in higher education discourses, particularly in relation to formal legislative imperatives for equal pay, access and participation and equal opportunities. Equality is

²² [Centre Information | Policy | Higher Education Authority](#)

the preferred term in Irish HE, and as it tracks the weight of the law, it represents a ‘hardline’ - HEIs, as employers and service providers must legally uphold commitments to equality. Fogarty and Scott (2025) note that the preference for the term ‘equality’ in Irish HE may resonate with a particular strand of Irish scholarship on equality of condition (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009), is discussed in detail later in this chapter. While this body of work has not directly driven policy language adoption, it provides a theoretical framework that aligns with how equality is conceptualised in Irish contexts:

Significant Irish scholarship has retained the term equality, but seeks to move beyond basic and liberal egalitarian conceptions of equality by advocating for ‘equality of condition’ as the objective of a more equal society (Baker et al., 2009). At least implicitly, much recent equality work in Irish higher education has targeted goals of equality of condition, including broadening access to higher education with supports by reference to needs and strong engagement with interculturalism and diversity (Fogarty & Scott, 2025: 66).

While it is widely understood that equal treatment for all persons is a legislative requirement, and discrimination is prohibited across nine protected characteristics, it is nonetheless important to note that the term equality is understood and framed in different ways by scholars, as evident in the extensive writings of Baker et al. (2009) on basic equality, liberal equality and equality of condition.

Equality is, in my view, the most substantive, consequential and ‘hard’ term of the three; and as a concept, generates many different meanings which can mean that there is difficulty in nailing it down. Baker et al. describe it as follows (2004):

Looked at in a very general way, equality is a relationship, of some kind or other, between two or more people or groups of people,

regarding some aspect of those people's lives. If equality were a simple idea, it would be obvious what this relationship is, who it is about and what aspect of their lives it concerns. Unfortunately, none of these is obvious, and that is why there are many different conceptions of equality (Baker et al., 2004: 21).

While the interconnection between terms is obvious, the combination of Diversity and Inclusion serve to dilute the so-called 'hardness' of Equality and arguably ameliorate what some perceive its association with a radical or ideological agenda and make it more palatable to institutional audiences (Ahmed, 2012). Diversity and inclusion are regarded as the lesser or 'softer' elements of the acronym (Ahmed, 2012, Beveridge, 2012, Bhopal, 2020, Bhopal & Henderson, 2021, Kirton and Greene, 2022). Diversity is usually understood as an umbrella concept for the nine protected characteristics. A way for HEIs to understand and effectively address the needs of its staff and students is to gain a clear and reliable picture of the diversity of its population by collecting data, which in Irish HE, apart from the gender, has been weak. Darby (2021) in her study of inclusion and belonging of Black and minority ethnic students in an Irish HEI, asserts that quantifying numbers of students from diverse backgrounds cannot be equated with those students experiencing a feeling of belonging:

While the numbers are an indication of ethnic and cultural diversity, belonging on campus, as a term is more important as the experiences of those who 'fit in' can feel a sense of belonging to the inner circles of society. Higher education as a sector represents one of these inner circles (Darby, 2020:37).

A discussion of the meaning of equality, diversity and inclusion is incomplete without a deeper discussion of the 'hard' versus 'soft' distinction, a terminology that pervades EDI discourse and reveals competing approaches to addressing inequalities. This binary is analytically significant because it distinguishes between binding,

structural interventions with enforcement mechanisms (hard measures such as quotas, legislation, sanctions) and voluntary, cultural initiatives, described as ‘soft spaces’ by Tildesley et al. (2023) (such as training, alliances with external group, community-building events) (Beveridge, 2012). The distinction matters practically as well as conceptually: empirical research demonstrates that accountability-based hard measures produce more substantive equality outcomes than voluntary soft initiatives (Tildesley et al., 2022; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). Moreover, the dominance of soft EDI work has been critiqued for enabling institutions to perform commitment through diversity activities while evading structural change (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal & Henderson, 2019). Understanding whether EDI work operates through hard and / or soft mechanisms is therefore central to evaluating its transformative potential.

Equality, as it has legislative form and is enforceable through administrative or judicial process, is regarded as hard. Diversity and inclusion are regarded as soft terms as they are unlikely to have legal consequences for non-compliance and therefore typically perceived as less effective due to lack of enforcement mechanisms (Ahmed, 2012). Beveridge’s study (2012) examines the relationship between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ measures in EU gender law and policy and challenges conventional assumptions about their relative effectiveness and roles. She argues that the distinction is already gendered in language, with ‘soft’ culturally coded as inferior and feminised. Rather than viewing hard and soft measures as opposing choices, Beveridge demonstrates they often work together and both can contribute to ongoing ‘discursive developments’ that reshape policy frames. The conceptualisation of EDI and EDI measures as hard and soft is something I am interested in exploring in the empirical data.

Ahmed, when writing about HE in the UK, describes diversity as a preferred term to equality or equal opportunities (Ahmed, 2012) because

of its perceived softness and less threatening nature. Diversity can also be used as an adjective to describe an organisation, a quality or an attribute; and also, as a normative term that can be used as 'an expression of priorities, values or commitments' (2012: 52). Ahmed (2012, 2017) and other scholars link the shift to the language of diversity to the spread of US managerial discourse and neoliberalism (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994, Benschop, 2001, Ahmed, 2012; Kirton and Greene, 2022). Diversity and inclusion are identified as terms that warrant management and valuing of diversity as a human resource. Benschop contends that the term 'diversity' derives its institutional currency from its appeal to 'our sense of social justice' (2001:1166), yet this apparent progressiveness may itself constitute evidence of limited transformative intent, with diversity discourse potentially operating as a ruse for persistent structural inequalities. Ahmed asserts that 'diversity can thus function as a containment strategy' (2012:53). A key question in critical policy studies and to a lesser extent in studies of Irish HE (Baker et al., 2009; Lynch, 2014) has been whether equality work has changed to use a logic of containment and possibly conceals the inequalities that it set out to reveal (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019; Bhopal & Henderson, 2021; Ahmed & Swan, 2006; Ahmed 2007; Ahmed, 2012) - this is a key question which my research is going to explore.

Theoretical frameworks of equality

In this section, I examine the sets of theoretical literatures about equality, diversity, inclusion and justice that have influenced this study.

As an EDI practitioner in a large HEI, I am focused on the 'doing'; as a researcher and academic I see the need for a conceptual framing to underpin the 'doing' and to aid sense-making of how change happens. My conception of 'good' theory aligns with Freire's (1970) notion of praxis, the dialectical relationship between reflection and action; and with Brookfield's (2011) emphasis on critical reflection as essential to educational practice. Good theory, from this perspective, is not abstract

contemplation that is removed from the messy realities of institutional life, but rather analytical scaffolding that makes visible the assumptions and power relations embedded in institutional practices, enabling practitioners to act more strategically and reflexively (Brookfield, 2011). This dual positioning as an EDI practitioner and scholar shapes my research approach.

To guide the ‘doing’ of EDI, I need to be clear about how I see and understand the field, so to that end I will examine philosophical theories of equality, justice and fairness, and their underlying assumptions. This ‘focused interrogation and intertextual work’ (Kamler and Thomson 2006:40) helps me identify major debates in the field and their historical development as well as establishing points of similarity and difference to justify and ‘create the warrant’ (Kamler and Thomson 2006: 28) for the research. I chose positions that I thought were most influential and closest to my research interests and will explain the rationale further as I explore the debates.

Following my sense-making of the language of EDI, I pay critical attention to distributive approaches to justice and equality beginning with John Rawls and Amartya Sen as two of the most influential and widely cited contemporary authors concerned with theories of equality and justice. Following this, I move the discussion of equality to intersectional and structural approaches as they offer a crucial bridge between abstract theory and organisational practices (Crenshaw 1989; Acker 2006 and Woods, Benschop & van den Brink, 2022). Subsequently, I look to critical institutional analysis and the work of Baker et al.’s (2004) theory of equality of condition. This Irish-developed framework is crucial because it shifts analysis from liberal notions of opportunity to structural conditions that enable flourishing, and helps me trouble whether EDI initiatives transform underlying institutional inequalities or remain surface-level interventions. I then move to discuss Ball et al.’s work in policy enactment in education (2012) to better understand how policy

works in HEIs, and Ahmed (2012) for understanding the complexities of EDI work and practitioners institutional location in HEIs. Given the research focuses on EDI in HE in Ireland, I chose critical scholars who offer theories and concepts that have precision in the education context; the theoretical work of Baker et al., and in particular the conceptual work of Ball et al. and Ahmed have been especially influential for my practitioner research. While all three engage with educational contexts, their value lies in their analytical precision for understanding institutional dynamics rather than their disciplinary location. This study follows Murphy and Costa's (2022) argument that effective theory-driven research requires not monological allegiance to a single theorist, but the capacity to draw on a range of theoretical resources as the research phenomenon demands. The three theoretical frames offered by Baker et al., Ball and Ahmed are therefore understood as complementary and mutually illuminating for the context of my research: Baker et al. (2004, 2009) provide the normative vista against which EDI commitments can be evaluated; Ball et al. (2012) explain the institutional and contextual processes through which those commitments are translated into practice; and Ahmed (2012) interrogates the performative and often contradictory dynamics through which EDI is lived and resisted within institutions. My departure point to this discussion begins with a wider treatment of scholarly work of equality.

Distributive Justice Approaches

Rawls' theory (1971) made a significant contribution to discussions on what a just and equitable society should look like. Before Rawls' writings, an influential moral and political philosophy in much of the 19th and 20th century across much of the Western world was utilitarianism, evident in the writings of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Although there were and are many different forms of utilitarianism, all have their foundations in a simple premise: a just society organises itself to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people. For Rawls,

utilitarianism did not adequately account for the intuition that people have inalienable rights that cannot be violated for the greater happiness of others. Using his theoretical devices, the 'original position' and the 'veil of ignorance', Rawls (1971) purported that individuals choose principles of justice (original position), from behind the 'veil of ignorance', where they are unaware of the advantages they have in life (talents, monetary, social class etc.). The purpose of this construct was to ensure impartiality and fair decision-making about the basic structures of society. Rawls combined liberal, social egalitarian values with utilitarianism and viewed individuals as rational actors that seek to maximise their share of 'primary goods', such as basic rights, liberties, income, and that they will have a uniform ability to convert these into valuable outcomes. He argued that the only way to theorise a just society is to imagine that we don't know what place we will take in it. The 'difference principle', justified inequalities only if they benefited the least advantaged and posited that the 'higher expectations of those better situated are just if and only if they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of society' (Rawls, 1971:77).

Rawls' theory identified his lack of consideration of the possibility that individuals could lead fulfilling lives beyond resource allocation. Other scholars criticised Rawls for failing to account for intersecting forms of oppression and structural inequalities in relation to gender (Okin, 1989) and race (Mills, 1997) and maintained that justice and fairness in practice cannot be achieved by a sole focus on fair economic distribution and procedural fairness as this ignores wider systemic inequalities (Richards, 2001; Webb, 1997; Liff, 1997). Rawls' focus on fair rules and structures represents a useful departure point for me in thinking through questions about the effectiveness of highly structured and procedural HEIs in addressing inequalities and connects to my

experience of navigating bureaucratic procedures and justifying resource allocation for EDI work.

Whilst the capabilities approach espoused by Sen (1980) in itself does not provide a full theory of distributive justice, it argues that the measure of distributive justice should be capabilities. Sen's approach (2009) was developed out of a critique of both the utilitarian tradition and Rawls' theory. Sen regards equality as a person's freedom and agency to achieve capabilities, or real opportunities to live the kind of life they want to live. Because people's needs differ depending on a range of factors, they will also differ in how they can make use of certain goods, services and opportunities that may be available to them. Capabilities depend on people's health and the circumstances in which they are living; be they universal or culturally specific. He argues that the equal distribution of 'primary goods' does not guarantee real freedom, as individuals have different abilities to convert resources into applications that will affect their wellbeing. Sen advocates the exploration of characteristics that enable conversion of primary goods into outcomes that a person actually has value on and can lead to a fulfilling life, and that societies must decide on this type of life through social dialogue. Sen suggests that the Rawlsian ideal of emphasising justice within social structures is narrow and disregards the need to consider justice at the level of individual conduct. He proposed augmenting justice and fairness in terms of the opportunities and choices that individuals have and how those choices are made and can translate into actual achievements. He eschews the utopian construct of universal justice or the 'perfectly just society' espoused by Rawls (1971). . Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1995) takes a similar view of democracy, freedom and self-determination and focuses on what people are able to do and to be and linked capabilities to human dignity. Nussbaum (2008) co-developed the capabilities approach with Sen, providing crucial philosophical foundations and creating a more institutionally applicable version

through her specification that justice requires ensuring all individuals have access to a threshold level of central human capabilities. But feminist philosopher Young's approach (2014) critiques the focus on individual capabilities and asserts that these may occlude collective dimensions of inequality and as a result, less attention is afforded to power relations and institutional dynamics (Young, 2014). Young emphasises structural oppression and the ways social groups experience systematic disadvantage through what she terms the 'five faces of oppression': exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Acker (2006) contends Sen's approach has limited application in organisations that have 'steep hierarchies' (Acker, 2006: 445), which includes HEIs.

Rawls and Sen represent two foundational and contrasting perspectives on justice and equality. Rawls theorised equality and justice as achievable through fair institutional structures and equitable resource allocation, an approach that underpins contemporary equality legislation and compliance frameworks. Sen (2009) focused on 'ends', or the actual outcomes: whether individuals possess the real capabilities to achieve lives that they value. In terms of the enactment of EDI in Irish HEIs, this procedural versus substantive tension maps directly onto tensions within EDI work between compliance-oriented approaches that ensure fair processes exist, and transformative approaches that ensure equitable outcomes are achieved. In Irish HE, EDI practitioners must navigate both aspects as the procedures for equality and justice must be fair and unbiased; and individuals exercise agency and self-determination in their choices and account for their capabilities. The challenge is that procedures addressing equality do not automatically ensure diversity is valued or inclusion is experienced. However, both liberal theories neglect structural inequality and oppression (Young, 2014). This is a significant limitation for understanding how institutions reproduce disadvantage even with

formally fair procedures. For instance, when I supported a student living in direct provision to attend college and navigate institutional structures and supports, egalitarian outcomes were not derived from procedures and capabilities alone due to their limited scope as they applied to the complexity of the challenges she faced. This theoretical gap directed me to explore intersectional and structural approaches to equality and to extend Sen's consideration of individual lived experience by providing specific analysis of how power systems structure individual experience and actively produce disadvantage.

Intersectional and Structural Approaches

Crenshaw's intersectionality approach (1989) contributes a broad theoretical framework and helps me understand how systems of inequality operate across social contexts. It emerged from critical observations about the limitations of existing legal and theoretical approaches to discrimination and identity in the US. It responds to the inadequacies of single-axis discrimination frameworks and posits that the experience of oppression cannot be categorised solely by gender or race. This approach demonstrates how different social categories interact to create specific forms of oppression that cannot be understood by examining single categories as being distinct and separate from each other. Crenshaw posits that when legal and policy frameworks treat aspects of individual identity in isolation, barriers are created and people with particular lived experiences are treated in discriminatory ways. She argues that intersectionality is an ongoing, dynamic process, and that social categories be conceived not as distinct but as, 'permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power – (emphasising) what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is' (Cho et al., 2013:786 cited in Woods et al., 2022:94). Intersectionality describes the social power dynamics where individuals

might have privilege in some situations but are oppressed in others (Woods et al., 2022:94).

In the Irish context, the legislative framing of protected characteristics in the Equality Acts and the Public Sector Duty, and how EDI in HE has expanded over recent years from an initial focus on gender and now broadening to include race and sexual violence and harassment demonstrates an additive approach to identities as distinct from the intersectional approach espoused by Crenshaw.

Acker (2006) builds on the perspectives of Sen and Crenshaw and pays greater attention to accounting for organisational power dynamics and organisational regimes in the realisation of equality. Acker's 'inequality regimes' represent an extension of intersectional thinking into organisational studies, providing a more structured framework for analysing how intersecting inequalities operate within specific institutional contexts. Acker's focus speaks directly to the research aim of theorising the experiences of participants of discourses of EDI and how these are taken up and enacted in their institutions and through their roles. Acker's approach (2006) asserts that organisations are dynamic, power-laden and highly influential in reproducing inequality. She views work organisations as critical locations for the study of complex inequalities because much societal inequality originates in organisations. Acker defines regimes as, 'loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organisations' (2006: 443). In other words, organisations set the 'rules of the game' for social interaction and are themselves dynamic processes wherein inequality and equality are negotiated. Acker sets out the organising processes that produce inequalities in organisations. These include power and control over goals, resources, outcomes; workplace hierarchies and decisions; opportunities for recruitment, promotion and interesting work; security in employment, pay, rewards and supervision practices; respect; and

pleasure and work relations (Acker, 2006). 'Regime' implies the 'doing' of inequality as it occurs in day-to-day organisational practices, and she maintains that while regimes might vary, they always produce inequalities among social groups. The concept of inequality regimes provides a framework for understanding how inequalities are maintained with organisational structures and is useful when considering institutional culture change that enactment of EDI brings in HEIs. For EDI practitioners, this means that the introduction of new policies occurs within an existing regime that may actively disrupt, discredit or undermine their transformative intent. This organisational focus is critical for understanding EDI enactment in HEIs because institutions are not neutral sites where EDI policies are simply 'implemented' - they are embedded patterns of power, privilege, and resource distribution that predate and often resist EDI interventions. This reveals why procedurally fair policies often fail: they are enacted within inequality regimes that predate and resist equality interventions.

Woods et al. (2022) draw on Crenshaw's intersectionality (1989) and Acker's inequality regimes (2006) as useful for understanding the presence and persistence of inequality, and Sen's capabilities approach for a systems-wide approach, but do not see them as defining solutions for equality. Woods et.al. (2022) see equality and justice as espoused in Sen's capabilities approach as problematic because they see equality as contingent on its intersectional context. Woods et al. (2022) propose intersectional equality as a reconceptualisation of the organising processes of Acker's 'Inequality Regimes' into four comparative dimensions: procedural, discursive, material and affective. These dimensions offer a practical path for EDI practitioners to build coalitions and capabilities where disparities in equality occur. The Intersectional Equality approach posits that organisations can design institutional settings to ensure voice and equal power sharing by improving safe ways to broach experiences or garner honest feedback about established

organisational processes and instruments. Settings can include meeting spaces that encourage exchange and institutionalising open dialogue, demonstrating how intersectional equality generates a specific response and focus. In my practice, I have created spaces for staff and student identities relating to LGBTQ+, racial and ethnic and carer's networks which have been effective fora for imputing into organisational practices and processes, and had a community-building impact.

Woods et.al's approach is noteworthy as it offers a complementary body of work that draws together earlier philosophical and conceptual approaches and conceptualises inequality for organisations. In conceptually framing equality interventions across four dimensions, it provides a new perspective for understanding inequality in organisations and consolidates knowledge from feminist, critical and philosophical literature to align previously fragmented arguments around equality in organisations. It informs this study but does not constitute a primary framework for it in the way that the hybridisation of ideas from Baker et al. (2004, 2009), Ball et al. (2012) and Ahmed (2012).cumulatively provide conceptual and methodological rigour appropriate to the complexity of EDI in HE.

Critical Institutional Analysis

While the frameworks of Rawls, Sen, Crenshaw, Acker, and Woods et al. provide crucial theoretical lenses for understanding equality, they illuminate *what* equality might mean and *how* inequalities operate, but with the exception of Woods et al., offer less guidance on *what* substantive equality requires in practice or *how* to achieve institutional transformation. Baker et al. (2009) address this implementation challenge by developing a comprehensive framework for 'equality of condition' that bridges philosophical theory and institutional practice. This gap between theoretical sophistication and actionable frameworks for change is particularly acute for EDI practitioners working in HEIs, who are tasked with translating abstract commitments to equality into

concrete policies, resource allocations, and institutional discourses. Their approach is particularly relevant for this research because it emerged from engagement with Irish social and educational contexts and explicitly addresses the role of education in reproducing or challenging inequality. It provides a multi-dimensional analysis of how equality can be operationalised across five interconnected dimensions. Baker et al. (2009) firstly present a rigorous account of equality debates and provide a framework for thinking about equality intended for practical and relatively ‘a la carte’ use. Baker et al. (2004) trace 3 types of equality. Firstly, basic equality is the idea that at some basic level all humans have equal worth and importance, and therefore equally worthy of concern and respect. Secondly, liberal egalitarianism assumes that inequalities will always exist between people and aims to provide a fair basis for managing these inequalities, it defines equality in terms of individuals rather than groups (Rawls, 1971; Sen 1980, 2009; Nussbaum, 1995; Young, 2014) and recognises people’s responsibility for their own lives and their ability to make important choices in their own lives. Thirdly, equality of condition aims to eliminate major inequalities altogether or reduce the current scale of inequality, and views individuals as usually experiencing inequality as a consequence of their membership of particular group (2004:42). Baker et al. (2004) identify five key dimensions of equality of condition and use them to differentiate between basic equality, liberal egalitarianism and equality of condition. They argue that there is a ‘natural path’ from basic equality to liberal egalitarianism, and on to equality of condition. The five dimensions of equality are key factors that affect everyone’s wellbeing and quality of life (Baker et al. 2004: 24). Implicit in their conceptualisation is the connection to the hard (2, 4, 5) and soft (1, 3, 4) elements of equality.

1. Respect and recognition
2. Resources (major social and economic inequalities undermine all but the thinnest forms of equal opportunity)

3. Care, love and solidarity (usually neglected by liberals as its seen as a private matter)
4. Power relations: civil and personal rights and liberal democracy, e.g. but economically and culturally dominant social groups have more influence on public policy than disadvantaged groups)
5. Working and learning

Equality of condition, as theorised by Baker et al. (2004), sets out a much more ambitious than liberal egalitarianism. Baker et al. claim that:

it seeks to eliminate major inequalities altogether, or at least to massively reduce the scale of inequality. The key to this is to recognise that inequality is rooted in changing and changeable social structures, and particularly in structures of domination and oppression. These continually create and continually reproduce, the inequalities that liberal egalitarian see are inevitable (Baker et al., 2004:33).

Liberal egalitarianism and equality of condition differ in how equality of opportunity is understood. Liberal equal opportunity is about fairness in the competition for advantage and about the right to compete, not the right to choose among alternatives of similar worth. Whereas equality of condition is about opportunities in the stronger sense, 'about enabling and empowering people to exercise what might be called real choices among real options' (2004:34), not about having equal opportunities per se if a person has no real prospect of achieving anything of value for them. Equality of condition is concerned with people having a wide range of choices, not with their all ending up the same. Evidently, Baker et al. take a more structural approach to equality, focusing on the impact of interconnected systemic conditions on people's choices and actions and how these work to create and maintain inequalities (2004:33).

Equality in education

Baker et al. provide comprehensive treatment of equality's multiple dimensions, emphasising institutional and structural factors affecting equality of condition. Equality in education matters because education is indispensable for exercising people's capabilities and freedoms (2004:141). They relate equality to human rights, social justice, democracy and wellbeing, emphasising education's public role in mediating access to social, political and economic goods. Education is a social and political force with a central role in distributing privilege. As education is integrated into society, we cannot expect equality in education without progress toward equality in broader economic, cultural, political and affective systems. Nevertheless, changing education is vital for these transformations and can counter inequalities in other institutions.

Baker et al. (2004) identify major equality problems across five dimensions: resources, respect and recognition, love/care/solidarity, power, and working and learning. All dimensions are mutually reinforcing and embedded in economic, cultural, political and affective systems.

As education integrates into economic systems, individuals experiencing social class inequality lack resources to succeed educationally or leverage education's advantages. The class system itself must be eliminated to eliminate educational class inequalities. Education holds a contradictory position as both agent of class inequality and potential site for resistance: 'as unquestioning selector and stratifier, it reinforces class inequality; however, as a site of learning and conscientisation, education can and does challenge social class and other injustices' (2004:154).

Education can legitimise or devalue abilities, cultures or identities, impacting perceptions of respect and recognition. The culturally

marginalised are identified as 'other', with dominant group values permeating cultural norms and defining 'common sense' (Baker et al. 2004:154). Marginalised groups may internalise stereotypes; experience non-recognition of identity; or experience subordination, as with the gendered nature of human service work (2004:157). EDI work is also human service work done largely by women. The dimension of love, care and solidarity relates to education's foundation in relational and emotional work, both relevant for contemplating EDI practitioners' work.

Baker et al. assert that education about differences should be core, with oppressed groups included in designing programmes. Inequalities can be challenged by integrating equality into curriculum, ensuring teaching body diversity, and enacting equality procedures.

Regarding power, Baker et al. view education as deeply political. Hierarchy has become routinised and unproblematic (2004:162), affecting teachers, lecturers, students and EDI practitioners. Resolving inequalities requires democratising pedagogical and organisational relations through dialogue replacing dominance, cooperation replacing hierarchy, and active learning replacing passivity (2004:163).

Unlike theories focused on equal opportunities or outcomes, equality of condition demands substantive equality across all domains simultaneously. Baker et al.'s framework challenges institutional conditions creating inequality and argues meaningful equality requires transforming fundamental economic and social relations. This holistic approach encompasses respect, resources, love and care, power, and working and learning and offers a conceptual map for understanding how interventions in one dimension must coordinate with changes across others to achieve substantive rather than merely formal equality. Changing education is vital for social transformation and central to the egalitarian agenda.

The critical review of theories of equality have shaped my understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion. Rawls' procedural focus offers guidance for fair decision-making processes. Sen's capabilities approach provides flexible frameworks for diverse student needs. Crenshaw's intersectionality offers essential tools for understanding complex identity dynamics. Acker (2006) and Woods et al.'s (2022) focus on organisational power dynamics and on the 'doing' of equality and present practical pathways for addressing inequalities in organisations. Baker et al. (2004) give a structural analysis through the framing of equality of condition across five interconnected dimensions and highlight the need for systemic institutional change.

The next two sections identify theoretical concepts that bring precision to this research and are useful as a way to frame the findings. I firstly focus on the conceptual work of sociologist Stephen Ball et al. (2012) and secondly on the scholarly work of Sara Ahmed (2006, 2012, 2017). Ball et al.'s (2012) foundational work on how policy circulates in complex educational organisations and their troubling of the assumption that it is implemented in straightforward ways is explored. Baker et al. do not, by design, fully account for the institutional processes through which equality commitments are (or are not) translated into practice, nor for the political dynamics that shape those processes. For this inquiry, this is where Ball et al.'s theory of policy enactment enters the hybrid frame. Where Baker et al. ask what equality requires, Ball et al. ask how policy travels, how it is interpreted and how it is realised in practice within institutions. These frameworks, in the terms used by Murphy and Costa (2022), stretch the explanatory reach of each other: equality of condition gives policy enactment a normative reference point, while enactment theory gives equality of condition an institutional mechanism.

Theory of Enactment in education

'Policy is easy, enactments are not' (2012: 9)

The earlier writings of Ball (2003) and his seminal work with Maguire and Braun (2012) on policy enactment has been key for this study. Their research, based in secondary schools in the UK, led to a theory of policy enactment (2012) that represents a theoretical reframing of education policy that challenges instrumentalist implementation models and emphasises the interpretive and contextual aspects of how policies become practice. They reconceptualise policy processes through the concept of enactment rather than straightforward implementation. The work of Ball et.al (2012) helped me to understand better the processes behind policy enactment and role of power and I will discuss their theory as it applied to my research.

The aim of policy, putatively, is to address an issue or solve a problem (2012: 2). Ball et al. argue that ‘policy enactment is not a straightforward and rational process – although sometimes it is made to appear so – and its outcomes are not easy to read off from their policy origins’ (2012: 141). The authors contend that it is not easy to identify which will lead to desired outcomes and which will have unintended consequences, nor is it possible to produce a set of ingredients on how to ‘do’ policy in any simple sense. They write of the ‘impossibility of producing a linear model of enactment practices’ (2012: 142). They distinguish between policy implementation and policy enactment. Policy implementation refers to how well policies are realised in practice. Policy enactment is a process in which policy intentions are transformed into operational reality. This is a sensemaking process and not a linear exercise. Enactment theory rejects the notion that policies are implemented as they are written. The policy is both a text and a discourse/ discursive construct - the written policy text interacts with how it is discussed and understood. They recommend taking stronger account of the material, structural and relational contexts to make better sense of policy enactments at institutional level (2006: 148).

One of their key findings and theoretical contributions which is of value to this study is how they conceptualise the context that shapes enactment processes and the significance of different types of contextual factors as constraints and enablers to policy enactment. They theorise how policy acquires meaning in institutional contexts and postulate that policy is interpreted, translated and enacted using tactics which include talk, meetings, plans, events, as well as producing artefacts and borrowing ideas and practices. This process of encoding, decoding, recoding suggests that policy making is a process of understanding and translating. These translations give symbolic value to policy, but they can leak into practices and be reconstructed and remade in different but similar settings. Policy making and policymakers tend to assume the best possible environments for implementation. For instance, it might be assumed that policy would be enacted in ideal buildings, with diligent and interested students and dedicated lecturers; whereas institutional realities may differ and vary and this can derail or delay enactment. I am interested in identifying if there are derailments to EDI policy enactment and what these are and how these change the intent of policy.

Ball et al. frame policymaking in schools as a complex set of processes of interpretation and translation, which are contextually mediated and institutionally rendered (Braun et al., 2011). They take account of potential derailments when they assert that policies will be open to situated changes and may get integrated into the history of prior discourses and either become invisible or be asserted through new technologies and new ways of doing.

Policies call up policy actors and they produce policy subjects (2012: 142) which are permeated by relations of power and possibilities. The authors see power in a relational and situated way whereby actors in the policy process have different imperatives, and take up different positions, including positions of indifference or avoidance (2012: 49).

Their typology of actors illuminates how all are involved in making meaning of constructing responses to policy through processes of interpretation and translation. Policy actors creatively work to fabricate and forge practices out of policy texts and policy ideas in light of their situated realities and this is process of recontextualisation produces some degree of heterogeneity in practice. Understanding this process depends on how policy itself is theorised.

Ball et al. (2012) describes the fluid and subjective nature of these policy actors, and the effect that this has on enactment:

While policy texts are normally written to be authoritative and persuasive and are accretive and intertextual, in enacting these texts, policy actors may draw upon a variety of resources in making their 'readings' and interpretations. Individuals bring their own experiences, scepticisms and critiques to bear on what they see/read/are exposed to and will read policies from positions of their identities and subjectivities (Hall, 1997); thus enactments will be inflected by these different readings and are likely to diverge (Ball et al., 2012:15).

The authors regard policy enactment as part of what teachers do and as ephemeral and changing in nature. They assert that there is an expectation that staff be familiar with and able to enact multiple policies but this doesn't take account of the complexity of the policy enactment environment. This study investigates how EDI policies are understood and taken up by different actors from positions of their identities, professional roles subjectivities within the complex HEI environment through discourses and dialogues in an iterative cycle. In the neoliberal HE climate, a key part of enactment is evidencing what has been enacted in this ongoing cycle of enactment. Ball et al. describe this as encompassing durable and fragile policy responses:

Enactments are collective and collaborative, but not just simply in the warm fuzzy sense of teamwork, although that is there, but also in the interaction and inter-connection between diverse actors, texts, talk, technology and objects (artefacts) which constitute ongoing responses to policy, sometimes durable, sometimes fragile, within networks and chains... Policy is not 'done' at one point in time; it is always in the process of 'becoming', changing from the outside in and the inside out. It is reviewed and revised as well as sometimes dispensed with or simply just forgotten (Ball et al., 2012: 4).

Durable and fragile, although not synonyms are similar to the hard and soft terminology used by other scholars (Beveridge, 2012, Tildelsey et al. 2022). If, as the authors assert, policy is 'never done', the neoliberal university is still required to evidence the stage of 'doneness' it is at. This process of becoming is directly relevant to my work and my research questions makes me think deeply about the mechanics of a policy being 'seen to be done' in HEIs, and what is often required to satisfy evidentiary requirements. I view this as a form of transaction work that EDI practitioners are responsible for and relate it to Ahmed's arguments on performativity and doing the document as opposed to doing the doing.

The policies that count most are those that are counted, although transactors can also be creative accountants and fabricators of policy responses. Their work makes policy 'visible' by 'evidencing' policy activity and effects. All of this has direct and indirect costs. It inflates staff costs and diverts time and effort from first-hand work with students (Ball et al., 2012: 57).

In earlier writings Ball defines performativity as 'a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)' (2003:217). The performances of institutions serve as measures of productivity or

output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection and come to represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or institution within a field of judgement. Ball (2003) concludes that value replaces values as a new form of control. Performance indicators for equality are by their nature problematic and reductive yet do promise embedding of EDI and establish baseline data points. They track the impact of initiatives that staff have to both contend with and compete for. Ball et al. (2012) describe the expectation that staff navigate a cluttered policy environment in UK secondary schools:

What is being demanded of [schools], their contribution to national economic competitiveness and cultural cohesion, is encoded in a series of policy statements, documents and legislation; in short, a form of 'initiativitis' inscribed in a series of 'fast policies' designed to make the education systems 'open, diverse, flexible, able to adjust and adapt to the changing world' (Blair, 2005). Too many competing agendas and initiatives (Ball et al., 2012:9).

The cluttered policy landscape reveals the inherently political nature of enactment whereby certain discourses are prioritised and others are strategically neglected. This study will investigate if lecturers and practitioners in HEIs are caught in a similar complex web of competing agendas and policy documents, through which they are invited to be a 'good' lecturer or practitioner. I explore what these agendas are and how they relate to contemporary neoliberal, global and economic discourses in which we are bound up, which according to Ball et al., are triumphant because most of the time we do not even notice it is there (2012: 139).

For this research, Ball et al.'s, framework offers a rich analytical lens that moves beyond evaluating policy success or failure based solely on fidelity to original intentions, instead examining the complex processes of translation, adaptation, and negotiation that occur across diverse settings. According to Ball et.al, theorising policy enactment was always

going to be complex and slippery and, in many ways, an incomplete and impossible project (2012: 148). Enactments take place at many moments in various sites, in diverse forms, in many combinations and interplays. The policy process is iterative and additive, made up of interpretations and translations, which are somewhat inflected by existing values (personal and institutional), by context and history, and by necessity and they are not interpreted uniformly in institutions. The authors postulate putting policy in context as a way to better understand the processes of its enactment and suggest that future research needs to take context more seriously. Their framework illuminates the structural and contextual processes of policy enactment at an institutional level, revealing why policies produce divergent or unintended outcomes. What it does not foreground however, is the discursive and often paradoxical experiences of those tasked with doing EDI work. Ahmed (2012) provides this dimension of the hybrid frame. Where Ball et al. theorise how policy circulates and is recontextualised across institutional settings, Ahmed theorises what it means to enact equality from a marginalised institutional position, and how EDI discourses can simultaneously acknowledge and contain their own transformative potential. Ahmed provides the critical counterpoint to both Baker et al.'s structural analysis and Ball et al.'s enactment model. Together, all three frameworks address what Murphy and Costa (2022:36) describe as the 'black box' of research practice: the space between conceptualising what needs to change (Baker et al), understanding how change is simultaneously mediated (Ball et al.) and critically interrogating whether change is genuine or merely performative (Ahmed) as discussed in this next section.

Diversity work in higher education

Sara Ahmed is a critical feminist scholar, an academic for over 20 years, a professor and experienced diversity worker in UK higher education sector and her work has been hugely influential for me personally and

professionally and on this inquiry. Her experience as a diversity worker, of bringing about institutional change in universities, speaks to the practitioner locus of this research. She left the academy because the ongoing culture of and poor institutional responses to incidents of sexual harassment. Her critique focuses on university settings in the UK and Australia and uses this as a context from which to theorise diversity, equality, feminism, race and queerness (2012, 2017, 2020). In her research Ahmed explores the experiences of diversity workers in universities, offers intersectional perspectives on exclusionary practices and structures within universities, and takes an active positioning that draws attention to neo liberalisation, managerialism, and the proliferation of audit cultures within higher education (Khoo et al. 2020). Ahmed (2017:93) has written extensively about the challenges and anomalies of diversity work and names actors, situated practices and dynamics that support and conspire against equality work. Her work has given a language to EDI work in higher education. She devises 'sweaty concepts' to illustrate how equality work is messy and complex and to probe barriers and constraints in equality work. Ahmed's oeuvre has much to offer my practitioner-based research which seeks to excavate the as yet unstudied practice and experience of EDI practitioners in Ireland. I will examine some of her various concepts that are foundational coordinates for me and support my thinking about my research, beginning with how she frames the complexity of diversity work as follows:

When we have to think strategically, we also have to accept our complicity: we forego any illusions of purity; we give up the safety of exteriority. If we are not exterior to the problem under investigation, we too are the problem under investigation. Diversity work is messy, even dirty work. Diversity work too generates sweaty concepts, concepts that come out of the effort

to transform institutions that are often not as behind that transformation as they appear to be (Ahmed, 2017:94).

Ahmed takes up a critical position in relation university structures and how these operate and wider cultural phenomena (Khoo et al., 2020:86). She analyses the curious and challenging role of diversity workers in the UK and Australia HEIs, who are appointed to transform the institution but often find out the institution does not wish to be transformed. Ahmed is deeply committed to praxis, defined earlier in chapter 1, and critically reflects on the efforts of diversity workers to transform institutions so that she can generate knowledge about them. Drawing on phenomenological approaches, she conceptualises diversity work not merely as instrumental policy implementation, but as embodied labour performed within institutional power structures. I will now elaborate on specific conceptual devices that offer theoretical insights for understanding the complexities of EDI enactment in higher education contexts. These include her analyses of how EDI work is situated within the institution, resistance to EDI work, performativity and public relations, the role of leadership and the institutional power and esteem which EDI roles contain.

Ahmed has long written about how the understanding of equality in HE has become embedded in an audit culture in that, ‘to succeed at equality becomes an aim that allows organisations to keep doing what they are doing (2012: 105). In the Irish context, since 2024, EDI is represented as performance indicator in the performance agreements between the HEA and HEI; EDI is listed with KPIs (key performance indicator), baselines and targets to present the best view of the institution.

Particularly significant is Ahmed’s analysis of how diversity becomes institutionalised through processes that simultaneously acknowledge and contain its transformative potential and asserts that the appearance of diversity can lead to a lack of action:

if the university has an ideal image as 'being diverse', then this can block action and might even justify a refusal to commit to diversity initiatives... To be seen as 'being diverse' leads to the failure to commit to 'doing diversity', as the organisation says it 'is it', or even that it already 'does it', which means that it sees there is nothing left 'to do (Ahmed, 2006:753).

Ahmed refers to institutional resistance and 'inertia' when it comes to EDI work and how diversity work becomes about the difficulties you encounter. For her, embedding diversity becomes about getting it into the 'organisational flow of things' often in the face of pushing against institutional resistance to policy enactment; 'how organisations circulate matter is a reflection of what matters' (Ahmed, 2012: 38). She describes diversity workers as 'institutional plumbers' as they develop expertise in how systems designed to flow in a particular way get unstuck in the HEI, as well as where they get stuck. As a result, diversity workers come to have a different set of knowledge about institutions; they gain practical insights into the 'blocking agents' or mechanisms that allow some things to happen and not others. She cautions that policy or initiatives that are introduced to unblock a system can also cause it to become re-blocked. She concludes that diversity workers must theorise from their own embodied work and learn from what happens to what is introduced to unblock systems and adapt approaches accordingly. This 'plumber' metaphor powerfully captures the contradictory positioning of EDI workers who simultaneously represent institutional commitments to EDI while experiencing the very institutional resistances that EDI policies purport to address. Her analysis reveals how diversity work produces institutional knowledge about organisational power that is simultaneously vital and marginalised. In this context, the requirement to persist becomes a job requirement in order to counter institutional resistance. EDI work is 'pushy work' and 'wilful work' (2012: 113);

diversity workers have to keep pushing even when policies have been adopted that they themselves brought about.

Institutional resistance is symbolised by Ahmed's concept of the 'brick wall'. This represents the accumulated historical sedimentations of practices and norms that resist transformation, despite formal policy commitments, and offers crucial insights on why structural approaches alone can prove insufficient. She demonstrates how equality policies can simultaneously acknowledge and deflect critique. This capacity means that EDI policies can be used to contain the HEIs policy commitments, but caution that making an institutional commitment does not make equality real (2012: 118) or guaranteed. Her research demonstrates how diversity discourses often function as 'non-performatives', or institutional speech acts that 'do not do what they say' by substituting declarations for substantial change (2012: 118). Ahmed's theoretical framework raises questions about the policy/practice gap for this inquiry. Is it possible that EDI initiatives paradoxically work to repair institutional reputations while leaving structures unchanged? An example of this is her perspective on how writing becomes an end in itself for the HEI (2012: 104), and that being good at writing documents becomes a competency that is also an obstacle for diversity work, as it means that the university gets judged as good because it has produced a good document. It is the very judgment about the document that blocks action and produces what Ahmed (2012, 2017) describes as a kind of 'marshmallow feeling', a feeling that the HEI is doing enough. She argues that the writing of the document becomes a substitute for action and that diversity workers end up 'doing the document' rather than 'doing the doing'. The document gets taken as evidence that the HEI has done the required EDI work and thus equality can become a 'tick-box approach' (2012:106), where statements of commitment are produced, but in effect, are 'non-performatives' in that they do not bring into effect what they name. She draws on Alexander's exploration of how diversity

documents have an ideological function in the ‘manufacture of cohesion’ and create the impression of ‘more diversity’ than actually exists (cited in Ahmed, 2012:14). Writing documents becomes all that the diversity worker has time to do and is taken as evidence that equality ‘is done’. Equality itself becomes a good performance indicator, happy talk – ‘a way of telling a happy story of the institution that is at once a story of the institution as happy’, (2012:10), a way of repairing and protecting the institutional reputation and using diversity as a hook to realise the ideal image of the HEI (2006: 752). Diversity can thus be used as a form of public relations. It becomes about generating the right image for a HEI by correcting the wrong one. It becomes about changing the perception of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of institution. ‘The very appearance of a transformation (a new more colourful face for the organisation) is what stops something from happening. (2012: 105). A new policy can be agreed without changing anything, or as a way of not changing anything.

For Ahmed, the appearance of transformation also happens through the demonstration of leadership commitment and disseminating this commitment through the HEI for EDI to be impactful. If leadership commitment to EDI is unevenly distributed the message is disrupted and does not become embedded.

For those who have most authority and power, repeating words like ‘diversity’, as words that have positive value, gives the words value, or allows them to acquire more currency, which in turn allows them to ‘get taken up’ by others. The commitment of leaders to diversity hence allows such terms to accumulate affective value, which in turn accumulates the values of others who use these terms, such as diversity and equity officers. The importance of the commitment of leaders to diversity is very much about the generation of a public culture or even giving diversity a public face (Ahmed, 2006:761- 762).

Ahmed also makes a significant theoretical contribution by her reconceptualisation of diversity work through a phenomenological lens that attends to the embodied experiences of diversity or EDI practitioners. Ahmed (2017:94) postulates, diversity work becomes embodied in the diversity worker: institutions support this work insofar as they employ somebody to do this. She is critical of university authorities for their focus on appearances and reputation. In other words, an EDI appointment can be a signifier that 'we're okay', we are employing someone to look after this 'equality stuff'. This research will seek to explore to what an extent this may be the case in the Irish HE sector. Ahmed asserts that an appointment of a diversity worker can be about appearance: being given a diversity mandate might be how an institution appears willing to be transformed (2012:94). Ahmed praises diversity workers for not giving up in the face of institutional resistance and regards her book 'On being Included' (2012) as a product of collective labour with diversity workers and a re-telling of their stories. She refers to how diversity workers are perceived by others as 'institutional killjoys', often having a sobering effect on conversations, and alludes to the act of 'smiling' to render oneself pleasant, nonthreatening and with a palatable message, becoming a strategy. ; Indeed, I have regularly had the experience of being referred to as the 'PC [politically correct] police' with a 'woke' agenda in my own institution. Ahmed also reflects on the emotional labour of EDI work within the institution, and I am interested in the extent of such labour for EDI practitioners.

Like Ahmed, in this study I am 'following diversity around' (2012:21) with a view to providing a thick description of what it means to know, understand and 'do diversity' when working in the Irish HE sector. Unlike Ahmed, I choose to stay working in the university and want to gain critical insights into the experience of EDI practitioners and their role in enactment of EDI and its transformative potential for HE. I want to

question how and whether the ‘doing’ of EDI work relates to policy documents that are in circulation and give direction to this work. I want to see how the people responsible for ‘doing diversity’ understand and experience what they do, uncover blocking agents and theorise from these experiences of EDI practitioners. Ahmed’s theoretical framing of EDI illuminates the performative nature of EDI in HE, the pimping of EDI for institutional reputations, the subversion of EDI enactment to serve institutional reputations and potentially occlude inequalities (Bhopal, 2023), the role of senior leadership and understanding the contradictory institutional positioning of contemporary EDI practitioners who navigate between functions and transformative aspirations. Ahmed’s analysis complements structural approaches to equality in higher education, such as Baker et al.’s (2004) equality of condition, which emphasises the need to address both distributional and relational dimensions of inequality or in other language, the hard and soft dimensions.

Ball et al.’s (2012) framing of the complexity of policy enactment is of a process beset by different interpretations and contradictions. As someone who has spent a lot of time implementing and managing policy, Ball’s exploration of how policy circulates and is implemented in complex institutions is really useful to me in my understanding of policy-implementation relationship. Ahmed (2012) gives a discursive critique of diversity and inclusion in higher education. She contends that in the UK HE context, the term diversity replaced equality as the former was less threatening, more palatable and easier to circulate with HEIs than the hard term of equality (2012); she suggests that this increases its chance of getting unstuck and into the organisational flow of things. She asserts that the terms Diversity and Inclusion allow us to move away from equality (hard) to these soft terms that service neo liberal discourses. In the Irish context, the prevalent term in use is Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and includes both hard and soft components. I posit a

questioning approach to the aggregation of the three terms Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Conclusion

Drawing on Murphy and Costa's (2022) work, this chapter has constructed a hybridised theoretical framework for examining EDI enactment in Irish HE, bringing together three bodies of scholarship Baker et al.'s equality of condition, Ball et al.'s policy enactment theory and Ahmed's critical analysis of diversity work, in a deliberately multi-perspectival relationship. In doing so it follows Murphy and Costa's (2022) argument that social theory should be approached as a dynamic, hybridised resource, configured in response to the specific demands of the research phenomenon, rather than deployed monologically from within a single theoretical tradition. At the centre of policy enactment in this study is the HEI. HEIs have significant power to influence society. They can be 'incubators for the thought leaders and social leaders of the future' (Mott, 2022:4). The values and norms of equality, diversity and inclusion should be evident, practised and modelled in the policies and practices of academic institutions. EDI is the preferred language in use in HE Ireland. Disaggregating EDI is critical because the acronym masks fundamental tensions between its constituent terms. 'Equality', carries legal force to address inequalities and is viewed as a 'hardline' response. The softer elements of 'diversity' and 'inclusion' can be seen to function as celebratory constructs that do not challenge existing structures and potentially dilute transformative potential.

This chapter has set out the work of scholars who have been key to informing my analytical approach to this study. The theoretical frameworks examined span philosophical theories of justice (Rawls, 1971; Sen 1980, 2009; Nussbaum, 1995) through intersectional and organisational analysis (Crenshaw, 1989; Acker, 2006; Woods et al., 2022) to comprehensive equality frameworks (Baker et al., 2009), provide essential conceptual foundations for understanding what

equality means and how inequality operates institutionally. For this practitioner-focused study examining EDI enactment in Irish HEIs, two additional theoretical perspectives are necessary: one that illuminates how policy itself functions within institutions, and another that critically interrogates the specific discursive framing of 'EDI' as currently deployed in higher education. Ball, Maguire and Braun's (2012) theory of policy enactment provides the former, reconceptualising policy not as a document to be implemented but as context bound, complex and something actively interpreted and translated by differently positioned actors working within specific institutional constraints. It explains why policies can produce uneven or divergent outcomes from what was intended.

Ahmed's (2012) critical analysis of the contradictory institutional position occupied by diversity workers as they navigate 'institutional walls' and attempt to transform HEIs that do not necessarily wish to be transformed provides the latter. For the purposes of this practitioner-based research, these perspectives collectively illuminate the complex interplay between institutional structures, discourses and everyday practices and focus attention on the experience of EDI practitioners tasked with enacting EDI in Irish HEIs. Together, Ball et al. and Ahmed shift analytical attention from what EDI should mean in theory to how it actually functions as often contested political practice.

The next chapter sets the scene for the critical discussion of empirical research on EDI in practice in higher education.

Critical Summary

This chapter has constructed the theoretical architecture of the study from a specific and declared position: that of a critical scholar-practitioner who has spent over two decades working in Irish Higher Education, first as a lecturer and subsequently as an EDI Manager responsible for developing and implementing equality policy across an

institution undergoing significant structural change. I do not present this as a neutral vantage point, it is a position that has shaped my theoretical choices in this chapter.

The value commitments generated by my positioning as a scholar-practitioner are explicit and were introduced earlier in the thesis. Drawing on Freire's (1970) notion of praxis, Schön's (1983, 1987) theorising of practitioner knowledge and reflection and Brookfield's (2011) emphasis on critical reflection as foundational to educational practice, this study is animated by a belief that higher education should democratise knowledge, dismantle exclusionary practices, and actively pursue equality of outcome rather than merely procedural fairness. These orientations have directed my critical engagement with equality and made certain theoretical frameworks more analytically compelling than others. They are also the convictions of someone who has spent years attempting to bring about institutional change and has experienced at first hand both the possibilities and the limits of that work. I believe my proximity to this inquiry enables a finely grained reading of concepts and their application to the Irish HE context with a degree of interpretive precision that insider knowledge makes possible. All three frameworks (Baker et al. 2004, 2009; Ball et al. 2012 and Ahmed 2012) speak directly to the institutional realities of EDI work in ways that more abstract philosophical frameworks do not, and all three take seriously the relationship between structural conditions, institutional power and the experience of practitioners working for change within resistant systems.

However, this same proximity requires honest critical examination and brings real epistemological risks that cannot be managed by acknowledgement alone. I am bound to name these risks and to work with them. The most significant is the risk of confirmation: that the theoretical framework has been constructed, consciously or otherwise, to validate rather than interrogate practitioner experience. For example,

it would be problematic if I were to use Ahmed's account of institutional resistance primarily as affirmation of what has already been felt, rather than as a critical lens that might also be turned on my own practice and assumptions. A related risk is the difficulty of holding at analytical distance the institutions, colleagues and dynamics that are simultaneously the object of study and the context of my daily professional life. There is also a subtler risk: that strong commitment to equality of condition as a normative framework might predispose the study toward finding EDI inadequate - that the theoretical horizon is set so high that the analytical gaze systematically diminishes the genuine, if partial, transformations that EDI work achieves.

The management of these tensions has shaped the design of the study at every level. The choice of critical scholar-practitioner inquiry as a methodological orientation is itself a response to positionality: it is a methodology that does not pretend subjectivity away but instead expects, names and works analytically with it. The hybrid theoretical framework is designed in part as a counterweight to the risks of insider positioning: across all three frameworks, and consistent with Murphy and Costa's insistence that hybridised theory demands ongoing intellectual accountability rather than settled allegiance, the theoretical architecture of this study is held as a tool for interrogation, including self-interrogation, rather than as a whitewash for vindication.

Chapter 5 Empirical Literature on EDI in Higher Education

Introduction: mapping the field of EDI research

This chapter seeks to map the field of research on EDI in higher education, identify debates and establish which studies are relevant to this research. The central aim of this study is to explore and theorise the experiences of the three participant cohorts as they navigate competing discourses, institutional logics, and professional identities in their EDI work. In particular, understanding how EDI practitioners make sense of EDI requires engagement with a body of international research that raises questions and discusses specific and general solutions that take account of the challenges of structural and cultural change required to ensure enhanced enactment. A counterpoint to the Irish context, discussed in chapter 2, is the current global context and particularly the US, Hungary and Turkey where there has been a decisive move against EDI policies and initiatives in government departments, university funding and more broadly in terms of public discourses. These prescient examples surface how equality and EDI policies can be ‘captured’ (Sullivan, 2021) and their meaning shaped to reflect particular political perspectives. This anti-diversity discourse has been legitimised by the US President²³ and senior leaders and activated through executive orders, such as those terminating diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs in federal contracting, aiming to enforce ‘colourblind equality’ (Tregaryn, 2025).

My dual positioning as a scholar-practitioner offers insider understanding of the tensions between EDI aspirations and institutional realities, while requiring reflexivity about how my own experiences shape what I attend to in both literature and empirical data. This positionality informs epistemological commitments to social justice and

²³ The landscape for EDI/DEI in the US has pivoted in 2025. In his inaugural speech, President Trump articulated a vision for a ‘colorblind and merit-based’ society. In anticipation of President Trump’s stance on EDI/DEI, several companies, such as Meta, Walmart, and John Deere, had already announced rollbacks of their DEI programs. [These 34 major companies have ended DEI programs](#), signalling a shift in how companies approach diversity and inclusion.

methodological commitments to foregrounding the lived experiences of those doing EDI work. Accordingly, this study interrogates how EDI practitioners' subjectivities are formed at the intersection of personal values, professional expectations, institutional positioning, and broader socio-political and economic forces, an inquiry that situates practitioners as knowing subjects rather than mere policy implementers.

The literature reviewed here spans primarily from the mid-2000s onwards, with particular concentration in the 2020s, drawing predominantly from the UK²⁴, Europe, Canada, the US, and Australia. This combination of temporal currency and international scope reflects a semi-empiricist approach to the review: by grounding the inquiry in a broad and recent evidence base, I sought to test and strengthen the study's claims beyond my own position as a scholar-practitioner, enhancing its transferability and validity. These jurisdictions provide instructive comparative contexts due to shared Anglophone traditions, comparable trajectories of neoliberal reform, and earlier developments in professionalising EDI work as a distinct occupational field. The temporal focus reflects the contemporaneous social and political imperatives for EDI research given global immigration patterns, social justice movements, and the relatively recent expansion of dedicated EDI roles within HEIs. The comparative literature from these contexts illuminates patterns, tensions, and dynamics that may manifest differently in Ireland while providing conceptual tools for making sense of EDI practitioners' experiences. I position my study within this landscape, clarifying how investigating Irish EDI practitioners' experiences addresses empirical gaps while contributing to theoretical understanding of how EDI discourses are lived, negotiated, and enacted through particular roles in specific institutional contexts. Key debates and questions include conceptual foundations of EDI; the policy-

²⁴ In the UK, The mid-2000s marked a crucial transition from equality officers embedded within activist and legislative frameworks toward diversity specialists operating within neoliberal governance regimes (Deem and Morley, 2006).

practice gap; the role and impact of equality schemes, performativity and policy capture; EDI practitioner role, identity and agency; and institutional resistance. While empirical research on university governance and the traditional university sector in Ireland offers valuable institutional context, this review prioritises literature that directly addresses EDI practice, practitioner experiences, and the dynamics of equality work within higher education, literatures that are more proximate to the research questions guiding this study. I turn now to examine the Irish research context.

Situating the Irish Context and Research Gaps

Ireland represents a critical gap in this research landscape on EDI. It is important to note that a range of equality policies and practices pre-existed the establishment of the EDI fixture in Irish higher education in the mid-2010s, and in particular the scholarly work of Kathleen Lynch on inequality in education (2012, 2014). The contribution of other scholars such as Grummell (2007) on equality of opportunity in Irish adult education and Devine, Lynch and Grummell and (2011) on gender and identities in senior appointments in Irish education; Lynch, Grummell and Devine (2012) on new managerialism in education; Finnegan (2019a) on the move against and beyond neoliberal higher education in Ireland; and Finnegan, Fleming and Loxley (2017) on access, equality and social mobility; and the extensive work of Baker et al. (2009) as discussed earlier in chapter 3; all collectively scaffold research on EDI in Ireland. Since the establishment of the new institutional fixture of EDI, there has been little research conducted on EDI in Irish HE with some notable exceptions such as Scott on managing and regulating commitments to EDI in HE (2020) and Darby, on inclusion and belonging of minority ethnic students in HE (2021). No studies to date have investigated the role and experiences of practitioners, lecturers and policymakers in enacting EDI in HE. This gap in the literature is partly attributable to the field's recency, but investigating the Irish case offers particular advantages: it provides

insight into how EDI discourses are taken up in a context where the field is still emerging and professionalising; where EDI practitioners are often creating roles and legitimacy simultaneously; and where institutional cultures have not yet fully sedimented around particular approaches to equality work.

A notable contribution is the timely and relevant publication of the first book on EDI practice in HE²⁵ in Ireland in late 2025, entitled, *Transforming Gender Equality and Inclusion Within Higher Education in Ireland*. The book traces a progressive evolution from foundational gender equality work toward increasingly intersectional approaches, moving from initial national policy frameworks and Athena Swan implementation, through practical gender interventions and institutional transformations, to sexual violence prevention, and finally expanding to intersectional issues of disability, gender identity, refugee inclusion, and race equality. It also includes vignettes and key conversations with and between academics, policymakers and EDI practitioners. The volume addresses critical dimensions of this shift in EDI work, including data infrastructure challenges that I examine in my contribution on EDI data gathering practices. The structure of the book reflects Ireland's decade-long journey from addressing gender inequality as a primary concern to embracing a more complex, intersectional understanding of EDI in Irish HE, including a chapter on data gathering practices, which I contributed to, in relation to evidencing EDI work. This publication helps establish EDI in HE as a field and fills an important gap to in the literature.

²⁵ This publication was funded by the HEA Gender Equality Enhancement Fund in 2022. It has over 60 contributors from traditional universities, Technological Universities, Institutes of Technology, Colleges, HEA and students. It used a community of practice methodology to bring together diverse voices across the sector including policymakers, academics, students, and professionals, and aims to combine scholarly analysis with practitioner knowledge.

Conceptual foundations: How EDI is framed

Before I move to debates and key questions it is firstly important to trouble how the language and terminology of EDI in higher education is framed and understood? How is EDI conceptualised through discourse and policy?

EDI language and terminology

In terms of role identity of EDI practitioners, a starting point is to foreground the evolving nature of the language and terminology in use and the considerable variety of job titles, as indicative of role identity, particularly across the various jurisdictions that this literature review spans. Language shifts indicate discursive, conceptual and political shifts. As discussed in chapter 3, I am holding the term ‘equality’ as the key term in EDI, as it implies an approach to inclusion; while diversity relates to distinct concerns that are legislated for an institutionally understood in various ways. Although I could not find research to analyse the breath of language used to describe the various descriptors for EDI work across jurisdictions, a common terminology in the US HE context and in the private sector more broadly is D and I (Diversity and Inclusion) and JEDI (Justice Equity, Diversity and Inclusion); in Canada EDI/I (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Indigenisation) and EDI/D (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Decolonisation) features strongly in the HE context. In the UK and Ireland, EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) appears to be the most common term, with sometime additions of B, (Belonging) and I, (Interculturalism) to the acronym. All have different emphasis and position different aspects with ‘equality’ and ‘equity’, which gives emphasis to the legislative context and protections (Kirton and Greene 2022). The evident shift in discourse from traditional ‘equality’ has moved to the language of ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘belonging’. Kirton and Greene assert, that in the public and private sectors, this discursive shift from equality to diversity and inclusion in recent years has not resulted in any substantive changes to the actual

content of policies (2022: 231). They argue that there are signs within the more recent D & I era, that the language has shifted somewhat beyond the business case for diversity being enough in and of itself, towards a rhetorical emphasis on inclusion and cultural transformation. When analysing empirical studies that follow, I use terms used by scholars in their research in the knowledge that the language in use describes roles that are substantively the same across jurisdictions, despite the variance in language.

Competing rationales: the business case versus the moral case

Having discussed EDI language and terminology, I move to the fundamental tension between the business and moral rationales for EDI that feature extensively as a key debate. Much of the literature has come from business and organisational research as distinct from higher education. The two discourses that emerge for the case for equality are the business case and the social justice or moral rationale. The tension between ‘business case’ and ‘moral case’ framings is not merely rhetorical but envisages the role of EDI practitioners differently as either strategic advisors advancing institutional interests and ensuring hardline obligations are met, or as social justice advocates challenging structural inequalities (Kirton and Greene, 2022). How EDI practitioners and lecturers negotiate this tension, which discourse they inhabit or resist, fundamentally shapes their professional identities and everyday practices.

As discussed in previous chapters, EDI work as we currently understand it emerged in Irish HE in the mid-2010s. In the 1980s, the equality agenda in higher education was framed around the moral case for equality (Deem & Morley, 2006; Fleming, 2010), which, buttressed by legislative hardlines and a rationale for social good, strived for everyone to be treated equally (Murphy, 2012:32). This approach contributed to the emergence of equal opportunities programmes in the workplace. These programmes elicited some backlash and coupled with the rising trend of

new managerial approaches discussed in the preceding chapter, spurred the reframing of the diversity argument around the business case, which is premised on voluntary commitment of the organisation to diversity, based on enhanced business outcomes, rather than a legal requirement. Van Dijk et al.(2012) usefully surface the inherent tensions between these two positions:

The inconclusive findings with regard to the validation of the business case add fuel to the fire as they weaken the arguments of the business case and provide equality scholars with an additional argument to warrant against an instrumental take on diversity. Indeed, the contingent nature of the business case perspective can easily turn into an argument against diversity the moment diversity appears to have a negative impact on organizational performance (Van Dijk et al., 2012:75).

Kirton and Greene's foundational critique (2022) provides essential context for understanding these debates on EDI policy and practice in wider organisational contexts. They offer a critique of the business case approach to diversity in organisations and explore fundamental questions associated with its rationale. These include whether it treats diversity as inherently instrumental and as an end in itself; if it makes equality dependent on economic performance; and if this means it supports only profitable aspects of diversity for which reputational and public relations benefits can be reaped. Their work suggests that the tension between genuine equality, profit and reputational enhancement is not easily reconciled. Kirton and Greene (2022) contend that for progress to be sustainable and uncompromised in times of economic instability, there must be critical vigilance to prevent the erosion of progressive, justice-based approaches.

Similar to Kirton and Greene (2022), Dahanayake et al.'s (2017) qualitative case study is situated in wider business and organisational context and examines four Australian organisations across different

sectors and how they approached diversity issues. They contend that sustainable diversity management should integrate justice and fairness principles. They explore approaches to 'diversity management' and distinguish between the business and moral cases for diversity and focus on the link between diversity management and justice and fairness. They argue that 'justice and fairness principles should be applied in identifying relevant dimensions of diversity that warrant focus, in managing diversity through organisational interventions and in determining outcomes from diversity management' (2017:484). Dahanayake et al.'s assumption is that 'diversity' is an organisational issue that needs to be 'managed', as opposed to a natural and productive facet of working life. Their reconciling of business and moral cases may underestimate the impact of structural inequalities.

By its nature, the 'diversity management' proposition is aligned to the business case for diversity and is underpinned by new managerialist approaches. Although theoretically grounded in Sen's capabilities approach, Dahanayake et al.'s (2017) proposal of diversity management as an alternative that could meet equality as well as economic outcomes, is practically challenging, and more research is needed to support this claim. They advocate for capabilities development and stakeholder involvement. Their data on senior managers' superficial understanding of equality does not support their premise or give cause for optimism and is similar to findings from Milian and Wijesingha (2023) which found that lecturers' had a tenuous understanding of EDI. Broader critical scholarship reinforces these concerns, challenging the business case discourse and arguing that institutional commitment to diversity often depends more on individual managers' personal values than on legal compliance or genuine organisational commitment to addressing structural inequalities (Deem and Morley, 2006; Tatli, 2011; Tatli et al., 2015; Kirton and Greene, 2022; Bhopal, 2023; Greene and Kirton, 2024).

The ‘business case versus moral case’ framing of EDI reveals how neoliberal rationalities have restructured equality discourse in higher education, whereby market logics prevail and equality claims must increasingly justify themselves through accountability frameworks rather than appeals to social justice or rights. This discursive transformation is not merely rhetorical but epistemological, determining which research questions get asked: in business and organisational settings, studies proliferate on ‘diversity’s impact on performance’ while questions about structural redistribution of power and resources become marginalised as ideologically suspect or methodologically intractable.

The current global context amplifies the urgency of understanding EDI practitioners’ experiences. Rollbacks of EDI programmes in the United States, Hungary, Turkey and elsewhere reveal the fragility of institutional commitments and the ease with which equality discourses can be captured and redirected (Tregaryn, 2025). These developments underscore that practitioners work within contested terrain where the meaning and legitimacy of their roles cannot be taken for granted. Mapping this landscape to understand how equality is framed and understood in the context of institutional commitments is necessary work, as this impacts how practitioners are enabled or constrained to do their work and becomes crucial not only for scholarly understanding but for supporting the survival and development of equality work itself.

The neoliberal EDI policy turn: from equality to diversity management

Having analysed that the rationales used to frame EDI shape what EDI work becomes, I now turn to examining to what extent has HE shifted its logic and operational framework toward a neoliberal system. Deem and Morley’s (2006) extensive study on *Diversity in the Academy* is a foundational contribution to debates on how EDI policies are enacted in higher education. Their inquiry involved qualitative case studies in 6 UK HEIs in the context of recent UK and European Union legislative changes

on equality and employment. They explored views about equality and diversity issues and perceptions of equality policies held by employees from various roles and levels in the HEIs and conducted 25 focus groups and over 60 individual interviews. – of the 60, 35 were senior managers but also included people in other roles including cleaners to get different perspectives. They adopt a critical sociological perspective drawing on Fraser's (1997) distinction between recognitional and redistribution approaches to inequality and posit that most institutional efforts focus on the former and neglect the latter. Deem and Morley (2006) propose that there was an earlier moment of transition in UK HE from equality and social justice-oriented discourses of the 80s and 90s, characterised by social phenomena such as strong workers' unions engagement, strikes and legislative changes, to managerialist approaches of the noughties.

Deem and Morley (2006) identify four features evidencing a shift from social justice to managerialism in conceptualising UK higher education inequality. First, the late 1990s brought increased recognition of institutional discrimination across multiple grounds. Second, terminology shifted from tackling structural roots of inequality towards celebrating diversity and emphasising recognition of different social groups 'without there necessarily being any underlying notion of social justice or strategies dealing with underlying economic disadvantage' (2006: 187). Third, equality became a generic, mainstreamed concept applied uniformly across policy areas - a departure from the targeted, group-specific strategies of the 1960s-70s. Fourth, new managerialism introduced markets, audit cultures, and performance targets into public services. They examine how positioning equality within this managerialist framework impacts outcomes.

There is a danger that diversity could be subsumed into the audit culture as another depoliticised performance indicator that does little to effect substantive qualitative changes. It is also questionable how even recognitional diversity can flourish in a

mass system regulated by audit's need for standardisation. A major challenge is how to hold organisations to account for equality issues without reducing this to the demonstration of visible performativity (lacking underlying commitment or buy-in) often required by audits of quality (Deem and Morley, 2006: 194).

The authors trouble whether diversity can get absorbed into the values, and not merely the procedures, of the audit culture. They assert that the turn to neoliberalism is evident in the conceptualisation of students as consumers and the use of student opinion as a performance indicator. They centre power relations in their analysis and find that the views of senior management were consistent with a 'diversity management' and recognitional politics approach. They found that almost all senior managers were reasonably knowledgeable about equality matters, but it was unclear whether they actually held values that supported the pursuit of equality. 'Diversity was seen as a desirable organisational characteristic in its own right, which could be achieved by changing human resource practices, rather than something connected with tackling structural inequalities in society' (2006:196). The authors concluded that there was little sense of connection to underlying notions of social justice amongst senior managers. Rather, the views expressed were consistent with 'a deep politicised view of diversity as a managed organisational strategy' (2006: 197), with an emphasis on recognition and tolerance, and a virtual absence of views on the structural basis of inequalities and the need for structural responses. They assert that current managerialist approaches to EDI have largely lost the radical commitment to social justice that characterised earlier equality movements, 'in favour of an approach to staff inequality which is marked by management-initiated, top down policies, legislative and funding body compliance, a concern to avoid litigation, recognitional strategies and a celebration of organisational diversity per se' (Deem and Morley, 2006:198). The authors conclude that for genuine equality to be

realised, structural inequalities must be addressed, rather than seeking to 'manage' diversity in the same way that other instrumental organisational issues are managed. They argue that the discursive shift from social justice to managerialism in HE frames how EDI is understood and shape what is possible in enactment.

These conceptual foundations, EDI language, the dominance of business case rationales, the discursive shift from equality to diversity management and embedding of EDI within neoliberal audit culture, create particular conditions for enactment. The following section examines the impact of this framing on policy and practice.

The enactment gap: from policy to practice

Critical scholars articulate the performative nature of EDI and how this can have the effect of undermining its purpose and creating a gap between policy intent and practical application. Scholars claim (Bhopal, 2023, Ahmed, 2012) that this can make EDI work appear tokenistic, shallow and virtue-signalling and leave itself open to being co-opted for institutional posturing purposes and subverted in the presentation of diversity data to impute that inequalities are or have been addressed. Managerial frames that quantify and report on EDI objectives in multiple and sometimes overlapping frameworks can obfuscate transformative change and in addition colonise EDI practitioners' time as it becomes taken up with reporting. Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) sought to understand this phenomenon in their analysis of Athena Swan gender equality scheme implementation which will be discussed later.

Lecturers and EDI practitioners familiarity with EDI policies

A recent study by Milian & Wijesingha (2023) which sought to find out the root cause of why EDI policies in a Canadian university are bound to fail, contributes to the debate and finds similar issues manifest across a temporal span of almost twenty years since Deem and Morley's (2006) study. These issues include a lack of buy-in from staff, various issues in

terms of the acceleration of new managerialist practices with a particular focus on accountability, reporting mechanisms and expanding workloads for academics.

From data analysis of 23 in-depth interviews with instructors (lecturers), they showed similar findings to Deem and Morley (2006) that lecturers had only a superficial understanding of EDI policies and their participants also believed that their colleagues had low familiarity with these policies. The authors, not unreasonably, seem to connect this low awareness of policies to lecturer pedagogical practices in the classroom, although this was not explored in the study. The authors ‘found no evidence that EDI policies are faithfully inhabited’ (2023:458), and this was regardless of length of tenure of instructors, who were also ‘skilful in developing accounts to justify their inadequate knowledge’ (2023:455). Another study by Vander Kloet (2024) based on 15 interviews with academic developers in Canadian universities supports this claim about the reluctance of academics. In the absence of formal policy, Vander Kloet found that equity work was done ‘off the side of the desk’, on a voluntary basis and in addition to their formal portfolio, and found that participants observed that, ‘when they step up to do diversity work...that their colleagues often hang back’ (2024:2). Can this disengagement from lecturers be construed as a form of resistance or merely lack of priority? Milian & Wijesingha’s (2023) study found that participants believed the implementation of EDI policies at university was hindered by the absence of coercive enforcement mechanisms, a finding mirrored by Tildesley et al. (2022). Coercive methods are used to drive behaviour and encourage acquiescence to mandates; if these are lacking, the likelihood of a policy being enacted dramatically decreases. Routine institutional messaging on EDI is negated when it is at odds with actors at ground level who are not incentivised or forced to comply with institutional messaging. The authors describe this as ‘a textbook example of loose coupling between formal structures and individual

behaviour' (2023: 456). Although not taken up by the authors, this suggests that managerialist accountability measures and metrics can aid the practical implementation of EDI policies.

Similar to other critical studies (Deem and Morley 2006; Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal and Henderson, 2019, 2021; Bhopal 2023), Milian and Wijesingha's (2023) study also found there was widespread scepticism about the authenticity of EDI efforts, amongst participants. Indeed, participants perceived inconsistencies between the ethos of EDI policies and the actions of the university, leading to a view that policies were 'window dressing' (2023: 450). If scepticism about EDI authenticity remains widespread across different institutional contexts and time periods, what conditions would need to change for practitioners and other staff to perceive EDI efforts as genuine rather than performative? This is an open question which my research will explore.

And yet, the study found that lecturers also expressed frustration about the over-regulation of work which sometimes led them to be most attentive to the policies which were most rigorously enforced, and relegating other policies that were perceived to be more weakly enforced such as EDI. This supports the earlier point on the absence of coercive enforcement mechanisms as a means to engender action. Additional findings from Milian and Wijesingha (2023) show that participants who tried to engage in EDI efforts were put off when they encountered unresponsive bureaucratic infrastructures to support enactment, which prompted 'irritation and further cynicism' (2023: 450). The authors also found that lecturers reach a 'tipping point' whereby they became aggravated and began to ignore any additional demands put on them, even when they agreed in principle with the content of the directive. This backlash to EDI policies is not unprecedented (Dobbin et al., 2015) and poses an issue of concern given the ever-expanding brief of university staff and will be explored further in the findings. The non-engagement of lecturers contributes to the EDI policy-practice gap. Milian & Wijesingha

(2023) propose steps to ensure that EDI policies are more effective: firstly, engage in concerted and empirical efforts to map how stakeholders not only perceive but how they experience EDI policies; meet EDI problems with thoughtful and well-resourced efforts to address identified issues; propel a university-wide holistic commitment to EDI policies as a way to drive EDI efforts forward. Furthermore, they propose streamlining the provision of supports for instructors wishing to engage in innovative EDI efforts to boost EDI and empower individuals to promote enactment within bureaucratic environments (2023:459).

Milian and Wijesingha's study of lecturer uptake of EDI policies together with Bhopal's (2023) study which focuses on EDI practitioners working in universities in England, gives a picture that relates to two of the cohorts of this study. Bhopal's work concludes that EDI practitioners lack power and resources to promote real change, whereas Milian & Wijesingha's work on the other hand, concludes that lecturers', 'appear to be generally missing in action' (2023:458) suggesting ambivalence, which may be accounted for by other factors such as heavy workload and competing work priorities. These studies suggest an uneven picture between EDI practitioners whose role is to enact EDI policy, but experience reduced power to instigate change; and lecturers who have a limited grasp of EDI policies and appear largely absent from enactment scenarios. This also indicates the need for EDI practitioners to be highly visible and deploy relational strategies to ingratiate themselves in key organisational networks in order to wield influence (Greene and Kirton, 2024) and mobilise the necessary social energy for EDI work.

Similarly, Tildesley et al.'s study (2022), which is discussed in detail later in this chapter, found evidence that individual social capital, high-level support and an organisational structure in the HEI that allows allies to be brought in, can legitimise the equality unit and its work and are important for creating visibility and to raise consciousness. 'Resistant actors might be more open to gender equality norms and policies when transmitted

by peers than by the equality unit' (2022:903). There are some parallels between Milian & Wijesingha's work and my inquiry, notwithstanding the differences in studying a singular research site versus an inquiry across five large HEIs; and the extended focus of my study to include not only lecturers but EDI practitioners and policymakers. The findings from their study suggest that both enforcement mechanisms for EDI policies and the fomentation of social energy amongst wider staff for EDI work is necessary for progressive enactment of EDI and to mitigate the policy-practice gap. This association of enforcement mechanisms with progressive enactment poses a curious counterpoint to the more jaundiced view of new managerialist ideologies, often regarded as performative and a drain on social energy by their very nature.

Values

The question of organisational values reveals a fundamental tension in EDI work's capacity to address or perpetuate inequalities. Pemberton and Kisamore (2023: 47) identify a critical distinction between espoused institutional values (publicly declared commitments to EDI) and enacted values, which are revealed through 'day-to-day choices made in the organisation, including normative behaviours, accepted standards, and regular operations'. They observe that these 'are often not congruent'.

This incongruence operates as a mechanism through which EDI initiatives can paradoxically sustain inequalities while appearing to challenge them. When HEIs espouse progressive EDI values in policy documents, mission statements, and external communications while simultaneously enacting contradictory values through recruitment practices, accommodations for students, resource allocation, and workplace culture, the espoused values provide symbolic legitimacy and protect the HEI from criticism, functioning as what Ahmed (2012) terms 'non-performative' speech acts, or statements that do not bring about what they name thus rendering inequalities invisible. This can be experienced by practitioners when they are recruited for EDI roles only to

find out when in situ that they are without any real authority regardless of the position title. Howell et al., (2012) found that when espoused and enacted values are not congruent, employees are less likely to be emotionally committed to the organisation. Pemberton and Kisamore conclude that institutional leaders should undertake deep reflection, assess readiness, and commit to providing adequate structure, resources, and support for EDI roles prior to hiring these professionals (2023: 47).

These literatures reveal that policy-practice gap exists due to structural resistance, lack of buy-in from staff, values incongruence. An institutional response to the policy-practice gap has been the adoption of equality schemes such as Athena Swan. Such schemes are positioned as accountability mechanisms that will translate equality rhetoric into action. The following section examines these schemes and their contradictions.

Equality schemes, performativity and policy capture

Current debates on EDI in higher education question how performative schemes can simultaneously advance and undermine equality goals. Although a small body of literature, several empirical studies (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020; Bhopal and Henderson, 2021; Pemberton and Kisamore, 2023; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Armstrong and Sullivan, 2025) focus on the effectiveness of prominent gender and race schemes such as Athena Swan or the Race Equality Charter as a way to enact EDI in HE. These studies raise important questions such as: under what conditions do equality schemes enable or constrain transformation? And how do EDI practitioners navigate the tension between working within and against institutional structures?

Bhopal's study of EDI staff in 33 English universities (2023) uses the concept of Whiteness and White privilege to argue that within the framework of White normative practices, the role of EDI staff is used as

a smokescreen to perpetuate a system of White privilege. In the UK, universities can elect to become a member of the Race Equality Charter (REC), ‘a national accreditation scheme that aims to improve the representation, progression and success of ethnically minoritised staff and students in higher education’²⁶. Universities in Bhopal’s study were not members of the REC and she argues that in order for racial inequalities to be addressed, policy making such as the REC must be mandatory (otherwise HEIs simply give the appearance of addressing inequalities under the Equality Act, 2010). Of particular relevance to this study is Bhopal’s claim that (2023: 328) EDI policies and schemes can be used to obscure structural inequalities (Ahmed, 2012, McVittie et al. 2008) and used as a smokescreen to either address or challenge real inequalities in the workplace (Ahmed, 2012, Kalev et al 2006, Wrench 2005). Other studies suggest that reporting and bureaucracy associated with doing EDI work does not result in real change, but is a tick-box exercise (Ahmed, 2007, Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020); some suggest that employers only address issues of EDI for their own benefits (Bhopal, 2020; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Kirton and Greene 2022); emphasis on EDI can be seen as a means to improve the reputation rather than making meaningful change. This means that employers only address EDI issues because they have to due to legislation. Thus, Bhopal asserts that EDI policies can have the opposite of their intended effect, of increasing rather than decreasing inequalities, resulting in poor performance outcomes.

Tatli (2011), Ahmed (2012) and other critical scholars identified the gap between the equality and diversity discourse and what happens in practice. Bhopal (2023) concludes that without being a member so the REC, universities could justify why they did not need to focus on a specific race equalities agenda. This resulted in EDI staff lacking power

²⁶ The REC was established in 2015 in the UK to support and recognise commitment to tackling racial inequalities. [The Updated Race Equality Charter | Advance HE](#)

and authority in their roles and the prevailing diversity discourse is then based on compliance rather than the need to have a social justice equity approach.

A focus on equality and diversity as a generic term is used to obscure and create an illusion that all aspects of equality and diversity are being dealt with, when in reality higher education institutions are able to pick and choose those which matter most to them. This discourse of diversity is used as mechanism to present the illusion that inequalities are being dealt with, but in reality they showcase and tick boxes to comply with the Equality Act (2010) (Bhopal, 2023:336).

Kirton (2009) is of the same view that the rhetoric of diversity could be used to conceal organisational 'non-action' on discrimination and inequalities and that this kind of thinking underpins policy and practice, unequal outcomes can easily be represented as simply different. Ahonen et al. (2014) state in their critical review of diversity research, the loss of a social justice focus within diversity management is of concern because: 'diversity is no longer linked to histories of discrimination, colonialism, diaspora and economic exploitation, but rather to individualizable, productive sources upon which competitive advantage can be secured' (2014: 272)

Tzanakou & Pearce (2019) undertook 13 semi-structured interviews and four focus groups with participants from four UK universities to critically analyse the gender equality scheme Athena Swan. The scheme requires organisations to submit a detailed application, including policies to a third party for ranking. They argue that Athena Swan is a product of neo liberalisation within the UK's academic environments, reflecting the tendency towards accountability, metrics and the performative 'doing' of equality work. It can serve to reinforces neoliberal academic practices (such as the emphasis on quantification and data capture), individualise systemic problems and increases academic administrative burdens on

women. Tzanakou & Pearce conclude that it was ‘a benchmarking exercise which reproduces logics of quantification and rankings within organisations, making gender equality another marketable product’ (2019: 1055). Despite this, Tzanakou & Pearce (2019) contend that AS can lead to benefits and achievements in terms of culture change and institutional initiatives. They look at the limitations and potential of gender interventions for transforming the power relationships in the academic sector and argue that a logic of strategic moderation underpins Athena Swan in the context of the neoliberal university. They posit that the bureaucratic box-ticking exercise that is undertaken for Athena Swan applications can be creatively employed as a feminist strategy to ensure commitment from senior management for data collection and action development. They conclude that AS can be a moderate tool that pursues radical ends (2019: 1207) and propose utilising Athena Swan as a site of resistance and a means to foster collective solidarity to work against neoliberal practices. They conclude:

If moderate feminism is to be a vehicle for change within neoliberal institutions, it is vital for campaigners and diversity workers to think strategically about how best the potential of equality scheme can be realised while working to minimise their impact upon the very people they are meant to support. This must be a feminism that works within and against neoliberalism (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019: 1207).

The authors’ moderate feminist positionality is useful for this research as it raises questions about how the enactment of EDI initiatives and policies in higher education can also have transformative impact, while situated in the neoliberal framework. Can EDI practitioners build on moderate and institutionally legitimised EDI objectives (like Athena Swan) and keep the momentum going to develop plans that are progressive and more impactful in scope?

Armstrong and Sullivan's recent study takes a different view (2025) of the Athena Swan scheme as a vehicle for EDI enactment in their examination of its effectiveness and risks. They focus on a documentary policy analysis and review of four Athena Swan submissions from academic departments and two UK-based institutional Athena Swan gender action plan responses, all of which is in the public domain, to create an assessment of how Athena Swan functions as a 'policy-scoring scheme'. Armstrong and Sullivan (2025) posit that the implications for rewarding plans that merely show improvement (as opposed to real change) have not been widely understood (2025:226). They conclude that outsourcing of equality work to schemes such as Athena Swan, does not encourage evidence-based prioritisation and discussion of the needs of competing protected characteristics and find that it 'exclusive focus on policy scoring over objective measures has led to misleading awards: for example, as we document, this has led to departments with a history of sexual harassment receiving awards' (2025:227).

While Armstrong and Sullivan (2025) briefly acknowledge the benefits and limited impacts of Athena Swan for HEIs in terms of raising awareness of gender inequality, and developing initiatives and policy to tackle it, they give extensive treatment to the schemes negative features such as its resource intensive nature, perception of box-ticking and that work falls mainly to female academics. They are particularly concerned with the shift towards the promotion of what they see as a contentious ideological perspective on gender, which they interpret as conflicting both women's rights and academic freedom; specifically they cite guidance from Athena Swan from 2016-2020 was to seek data gender identity instead of sex, (thereby denoting that gender is on a spectrum) which they assert was developed in consultation with trans-rights organisations but not with women's groups or data experts. The guidance for the Athena Swan programme was changed in 2021 and reinstated the recommendation to collect data on sex, while also

recognising gender as a spectrum. They assert that Athena Swan has ‘provided a ready vehicle for policy capture, which activists have been able to exploit’ and cite Tzanakou and Pearce’s study (2019) about the potential to use Athena Swan as a ‘site of resistance and means to foster collective solidarity to work against neoliberal practices’ (2019: 1191). To find an explanation of policy capture I returned to an earlier article by Sullivan (2021) where she referenced Murray and Blackburn (2019) to explain ‘policy capture’ as certain factions having an unduly directive influence on policy production; ‘the process whereby lobbyists representing a particular political perspective develop close relationships with governmental organisations, allowing them to co-produce policy without due consideration for competing interests’ (Sullivan, 2021: 639).

The actors involved in this co-production of policy can serve as an example of Ball et al.’s (2012) various interpretive lenses (translator, interpreter etc.) from their theory of policy enactment and relate in part to Tzanakou and Pearce’s (2019) moderate feminist position of working within institutional structures to effect change. Armstrong and Sullivan (2025) conclude that the Athena Swan model has led to policy capture, groupthink and poor prioritisation and conclude that HEIs should not participate in such schemes and that funders should not mandate that they do so, asserting that, ‘outsourcing judgements on policy to a single external body tends towards the imposition of a monolithic viewpoint on the sector’ (2025:239). The authors propose a lighter-touch model that would mandate data harmonisation and public data sharing of universities equalities data and argue that this would offer cost savings and allow for easy objective comparisons between HEIs and should be extended to capture characteristics other than gender. This research is of interest to this study as it offers critical scholars a counter-perspective on enactment when policy is used to progress social change within the confines of a formal, peer-reviewed scheme like Athena Swan,

that is supported by the sector through government departments, relevant agencies and research bodies.

Efforts to tackle gender inequality in Ireland and indeed the EDI agenda more broadly, were mobilised by the adoption of Athena Swan charter. It has been a significant conduit for enactment of EDI (McIlrath et al., 2025), and remains the behemoth for EDI practitioners, the standard bearer for the HEA and a criterion for awarding of research funding. Counter-critiques on its purpose are useful for their provocativeness and will be explored further in the findings chapter on resistance.

Social energy for EDI

Marom's (2023) case study of a Canadian university focused on the ways in which academics and administrators involved in EDI/D²⁷ processes navigated tensions and relations at the institution. She interviewed 15 participants in different fields and positions, all of whom had either formal leadership roles in EDI/D or were involved in promoting EDI/D processes at the university. She acknowledges that the language of equality is evolving continuously and purposely chooses the term EDI/D to acknowledge the relations between EDI and decolonising as not seamless and to reference that EDI has been criticised for sidelining the journey towards decolonisation (Thobani, 2022). Marom's study analyses equity, diversity, inclusion and decolonising (EDI/D) in Canadian universities through the lens of relationship building and maps three concentric institutional layers of EDI/D. She concludes that for EDI/D to be transformative, HEIs must ground it in the difficult process of relationship building. This raises again the question of social energy amongst actors which is of interest to this study. Marom found that participants reflected an understanding that while academics can (and should) express diverse views, those views can be put under scrutiny and criticised by colleagues and students and noted that growing

²⁷ EDI/D refers to Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Decolonisation, the acronym used for EDI at this Canadian HEI.

divisiveness in HE was making it harder ‘to engage with colleagues in nuanced conversations, in which people can relate to one another across difference’ (2023:1095). She also finds that it was largely the same pocket of staff and that EDI/D discourses did not expand to wider circles of participation.

Marom contends that these institutional layers of EDI/D reveal ‘institutional gaslighting tactics’ (MacKenzie et al 2023) that derail meaningful engagement with EDI/D efforts. This denotes the attempt at a systemic level, to get an actor to believe a reality different from the one they were experiencing or observing. The prevalence of EDI/D discourses can act as ‘institutional gaslighting’, a way to performatively embrace EDI/D ‘while simultaneously deploying strategies that prevent dismantling systemic inequalities’ (MacKenzie et al 2023:1) and a concept I will return to later in the chapter.

Marom concludes that for EDI/D to be transformative it must change the culture of HEIs, and a change of culture requires a change in relations and arguably a heightening in the social energy. The debate around academic freedom is, Marom asserts, used selectively against what some academics such as Armstrong and Sullivan (2025) regard as the ‘woke agenda’. ‘The wide support for EDI on a performative level does not open space for institutional transformation’ (2023:1102). She concludes that the institutional containment of EDI/D leads to silos that promote ‘identity-based fragmentation’ which can lead to the creation of spaces that reproduce power relations only with different players (Marom, 2023:18). Marom concludes:

In an atmosphere of growing societal divisiveness, EDI/D must be grounded in reciprocity while acknowledging differences and power hierarchies. If not centred on relation building, EDI/D is at risk of remaining the newest educational buzzword, without offering real structural changes (Marom, 2023:1103).

Marom's article highlights the importance of social energy to engender the will and appetite for EDI enactment and makes a meaningful contribution to the debate. Equality schemes do not implement themselves; they are enacted by EDI practitioners, who must navigate the contradictions analysed above. The following section turns attention to EDI practitioners, examining their institutional positioning, role identity and everyday experiences to make sense of how and whether EDI work can achieve meaningful change in HEIs.

The EDI Practitioner: role, identity and agency

The limited literature reveals that a pattern of marginalisation experienced by EDI professionals, reflecting broader power dynamics that limit the effectiveness of EDI initiatives. Pemberton and Kisamore (2023) synthesise research from Tatli (2011), Wilson (2013) and Young (2019) and conclude that diversity professionals in the US and UK are overwhelmingly women and people of colour. Greene & Kirton (2024) suggest that this profile is unsurprising given the conceptual and professional roots of the EDI field lie in equality activism (2024: 181). Tatli (2011) suggests that this profile may be the result of a strategic approach by powerful institutional actors that seek to appoint EDI actors who experience a lack of perceived power in the roles, which will impact their ability to progress the EDI agenda within the institution.

Organisations choice of women and ethnic minorities for equality and diversity roles may suggest a more cynical reality such as the uneven distribution of the burden of dealing with the marginalisation of diversity and equality issues along gender and ethnic lines (Tatli, 2011: 244).

The literature documents how EDI practitioners face an expectation to engage managers and colleagues in difficult conversations about inequality, a burden made more complex by the fact that many practitioners have personally experienced the racism and sexism they

are tasked with addressing. This effectively requires them to draw upon their own experiences of harm in order to educate others and challenge destructive workplace systems.

The psychological stress of having to explain systems of oppression coupled with organisations relying on D&I professionals to be the ‘diversity experts’ could be viewed as a job demand that results in burnout, most notably emotional exhaustion (Pemberton and Kisamore, 2023: 40).

Individuals from minoritised groups face heightened vulnerability to tokenism if they are positioned as the singular representative expected to speak for and embody all members sharing that identity, rather than being recognised as individuals with diverse perspectives and experiences. This pattern of having EDI roles populated by individuals with lived experience of discrimination or inequality creates a vicious cycle whereby those most affected by inequality bear disproportionate responsibility for addressing it, while those in powerful institutional positions can remain largely uninvolved. Notwithstanding this, there is a lack of empirical evidence to confirm whether the minority identities of EDI practitioners, as evidenced in Bhopal’s findings (2023) and earlier research (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2009; Bhopal, 2023; Pemberton and Wisamore, 2023), are related to how they experience a lack of power and agency in their roles as compared with other institutional actors.

EDI roles are often positioned at the periphery of institutional power structures, meaning that EDI practitioners have reduced impact and limited authority to implement meaningful change. Bhopal agrees with earlier findings from Tatli & Ozbilgin (2009) that, equality and diversity staff have little power to instigate real change. Bhopal argues that ‘through a discourse of inclusion, real concerns about structural racism and inequalities becomes silenced, in which the role of equality and diversity staff become in part, invisible. Hence, real structural change does not take place’ (2023: 336). This invisibility impacts not only on the

respect and esteem within which EDI practitioners are afforded, both by themselves and others, and also unsurprisingly contributes to the frustrations and emotional burden associated with EDI work. According to Bhopal (2023), the HEI, by being seen to ascribe to a discourse of inclusion, absolves itself from making structural changes to address inequalities. This positioning reflects what Bhopal and other scholars (Ahmed, 2012) identify as a fundamental contradiction within neoliberal higher education: the simultaneous embrace of diversity rhetoric and resistance to redistributing power and resources. For EDI practitioners, the lack of perceived power also their ability to generate social energy for the work, which is subliminally deemed peripheral and institutionally unimportant.

Key to an analysis of the lack of power and agency of EDI practitioners to effect change, is the support given to them by senior managers. Kirton and Greene (2022) contend that EDI practitioners must be empowered in order to have time, resources and commitment from senior managers to instigate real organisational change, however there is often a significant lack of commitment and buy-in from this cohort. Bhopal (2023: 332) finds that there doesn't seem to be a 'will' from senior managers to invest or make changes in the organisation that would support EDI practitioners in EDI work, so the burden falls on individuals. The 'burden' of diversity work will be taken up later in this discussion.

As is the case for EDI practitioners in this inquiry, in wider HE context of the US, UK, Europe, Canada and Australia, a significant proportion of EDI roles and units were created from mid to late 2010s. Similarly, recent empirical studies suggest that many D&I professionals are the first to hold their position in the organisation (Aguilar and Bauer, 2017). Therefore, it is likely that many of these individuals are responsible for helping to establish the expectations for the role within their organisation and this makes sense of their experience of role ambiguity. Pemberton and Kisamore (2023) define role ambiguity as a lack of clarity in role

expectations and obligations and is most likely to occur in a new position where tasks and scope have not yet been clearly defined. A lack of a previously existing structure may contribute to prolonged role stress and subsequent burnout among individuals in D&I roles. (Pemberton and Kisamore, 2023: 40). The experience of role ambiguity is consistent with Bhopal's (2023: 331) and other scholars findings (Tatli, 2011, Greene and Kirton, 2024) that there are 'no formal qualifications required' for EDI roles in HEIs, thus signalling that EDI roles 'require little expertise' and are therefore not important or less important than other roles. It seems fair to conclude that despite HEI claims that EDI work and EDI roles are important and drivers of institutional culture change, within the institutional ecosystem, EDI roles do not appear to be valued. This affects how the roles are perceived by colleagues and external actors, adding to the notion that issues of EDI are not worth investing in.

Other empirical research from organisational/private sector contexts supports these claims and shows that D&I professionals report entering the profession from a wide range of occupational and educational backgrounds, affirming the suggestion that EDI as a profession is neither highly specialised nor well-defined (Tatli, 2011; Paikeday et al., 2019). Kirton and Greene (2022: 225) contend that in the private sector, diversity specialists are expected to have a broader business and management background, rather than a background in equality activism or HR, which was previously required for the precursor roles of equality officers. Furthermore, they link this evidence to a business and management background to their findings that diversity specialists espouse the business case as the main driver behind diversity work and what they thought the organisational priorities should be (Kirton and Greene, 2009). They point out that this did not mean that D&I professionals did not also have social justice goals, but that they saw the business case as the vehicle for achieving those goals. 'While many diversity practitioners use the business case to argue for EDI initiatives, their personal

commitment to diversity often also has a moral basis that shapes how they use their agency within organisational settings to influence diversity outcomes'. (Kirton and Greene, 2022:225). This positions EDI practitioners as 'tempered radicals' (Swan and Fox, 2010) within organisational contexts; a position which often tracks conflict and tension as EDI practitioners temper radical ideals and objectives in order to be taken seriously by management. It is indicative of the range of paradoxes, tensions and dilemmas in EDI work (Swan and Fox, 2010, Kirton and Greene, 2022). Similarly Vander Kloet's study of Canadian academic developers found that participants' choices to engage in equity work, 'were intentional and deeply connected to their politics and identities' (Vander Kloet, 2024: 5). This inquiry is interested in exploring whether these findings from organisational contexts can be extrapolated and supported in the Irish HE context.

Emotional labour and burnout amongst EDI professionals

Current debates appear to support the notion that there is a significant emotional and personal costs to EDI work, this is particularly acute for practitioners from marginalised groups. Questions on the emotional toll on EDI practitioners on leading and enacting EDI in HEIs are important to this study. EDI practitioners have to navigate institutional resistance, manage others' discomfort with discussions of inequality, and maintain optimism in the face of slow or non-existent progress (Ahmed, 2012, Bhopal 2022). Mirza's (2006) influential study identifies the 'emotional burden' carried by racialised women practitioners who simultaneously represent institutional diversity while experiencing the very inequalities they work to address. This dual positioning creates what Ahmed (2012) calls 'diversity fatigue', the exhaustion resulting from repeatedly encountering institutional resistance while maintaining professional composure. Kirton and Greene's (2016) research further reveals how practitioners develop emotional management strategies to navigate organisational resistance and to avoid being labelled as 'difficult' or

‘angry’ demonstrating the gendered and racialised dimensions of emotional performance in equality roles. As noted earlier, according to Ahmed (2012), ‘smiling becomes a strategy’ that can work to neutralise the EDI ask.

The literature indicates that the emotional labour expended by practitioners in doing EDI work extends beyond individual experiences to institutional dynamics. Rollock’s (2019) research on Black female professors builds on earlier work by Mirza (2006) and highlights how senior racialised UK academics often perform significant ‘invisible labour’ supporting institutional equality initiatives beyond formal responsibilities. Her study with twenty Black female professors reveals how emotional labour becomes unequally distributed through informal expectations that reproduce rather than challenge existing power relations. In a similar vein, Pemberton and Kisamore’s study (2023) with 64 full-time EDI professionals in the USA surveyed how unique features of diversity and inclusion (D&I) work related to burnout. A large proportion of respondents were working in higher education. The study measures levels of burnout among D&I professionals and explores how D&I professionals’ levels of burnout are related to their perceptions and experiences of role ambiguity, role conflict (the expectation to meet multiple, competing demands), subjective experiences of tokenism, and top management support. The authors define burnout as a psychological syndrome experienced by employees who endure prolonged stress at work and as being comprised of three dimensions – exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach, 2017).

Findings from Pemberton and Kisamore’s study evidence that D&I professionals experience significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion but also significantly higher levels of professional efficacy than the general working population. This suggests that certain aspects of D&I work are more likely to produce prolonged strain than are aspects

of other professions on average. This data concurs with findings from Marom's study (2023), which found interactions where EDI practitioners endured overt resistance 'as emotionally and psychologically taxing' and led to high workloads, mental exhaustion and took away from their ability to focus on systemic changes (2023: 11); and supported by other scholars Bhopal (2023) and MacKenzie et al. (2023). Results, however, also show that aspects of D&I work may lead professionals to experience a greater sense of accomplishment and job satisfaction (Greene and Kirton, 2024) than professionals in other fields are likely to experience. These results indicate that the D&I profession is a high stress, high reward occupation.

The experience of EDI practitioners cannot be fully understood within examining the institutional resistance they encounter; the following section theorises this resistance.

Resistance

A key question that I am alerted to in this research is do EDI practitioners experience institutional resistance, and if so, what form does it take and how do they respond? Debates view the persistence of institutional resistance to EDI work as reflecting what scholars identify as deeper cultural and structural barriers and the imperative within neoliberal higher education to sustain the status quo (Ahmed, 2012, Bhopal 2022). A body of research asserts how and the extent to which universities' embrace market logics can create organisational cultures that prioritise efficiency, competition, and individual achievement over collective responsibility and social justice (Baker and Lynch, 2009; Devine et al., 2011, Lynch, 2014).

Theorising resistance

MacKenzie et al.'s (2023) study entitled, 'How Universities Gaslight EDI&I²⁸ Initiatives' offers a conceptual frame for thinking about how resistance manifests in institutional contexts. It is based on close examination of two specific EDI&I initiatives in university contexts in Canada and explores forms of resistance to institutional change, centring on resistance to gathering intersectional data related to EDI&I in particular. They purport that such data is critical, as :

a lack of such data can enable and legitimise shorter-term initiatives focused on personal education and training to the exclusion of structural change. Without institutional, structural transformation, the challenges of 'baked in' systems of oppression remain unaddressed. Structural EDI & I work requires evidence-based initiatives for the long-term study and correction of deeply embedded normative foundations of institutional practices, policies and systems (MacKenzie et al., 2023: 3).

They identify two common features of institutional EDI&I initiatives that often serve to sustain rather than challenge problematic structures: firstly, the over reliance on individual as opposed to institutional transformation; and secondly an overreliance on staff and students who do the bulk of EDI&I work, in addition to other work responsibilities (2023: 5). The latter commonly serves to exhaust and alienate individuals with lived experience and dissuade them from engaging in meaningful work towards systematic change. Consistent with critical analyses by Ahmed (2012), Tatli (2011), and Bhopal (2020), MacKenzie et al. (2023) posit that diversity work functions paradoxically in universities, whereby it can be publicly celebrated yet strategically deployed to deflect demands for meaningful structural change. They characterise this pattern as 'institutional gaslighting', whereby the appearance of

²⁸ This is the terminology in use in the institutional context; it denotes equity, diversity, inclusion and Indigenization.

commitment obscures active resistance to transformative action. They describe gaslighting as a gendered phenomenon in which feminised subjects are made to question their positions by those with more power, typically men. It is a form of manipulation using strategies of denial, misdirection, contradiction and lying, to create doubt in the mind of the individual (2023: 10). They define institutional gaslighting as including strategies to resist critiques of the institution or discredit evidence that undermines the authority or desired image of the institution. They cite Kennedy-Cuomo (2019) who concludes, ‘when someone expects to trust the judgment of an institution, but the institution then betrays justice, survivors are gaslighted’ (in MacKenzie et al., 2023: 10). They identify four specific forms of gaslighting: the slowdown, the pushback, the shutdown and the blowback. For the purposes of this research, it is worth explaining this conceptualisation of different forms of institutional gaslighting further as a means to critically understanding the nature of forms of resistance to EDI work.

MacKenzie et al. theorise that slowdown is one of the most common and powerful types of institutional resistance. It can take the form of drawn-out consultation, endless environmental scans, comprehensive review of policies, entrenched barriers to accessing data and requirements for approval from multiple people and offices. MacKenzie et al. surmise that ‘Slowdown strategies are powerful because they constitute an effective veto of structural change in the form of requirements that appear reasonable’ (2023: 11). Pushback encompasses tactics that undermine the intellectual, methodological or ethical validity of the research (or EDI initiative) implying that the work is being done incorrectly or that expertise is lacking. It may present in the guise of messages of support that raise questions, add requirements or propose changes that serve to alter the nature of the project. The authors distinguish pushback from slowdown by its questioning of the legitimacy of the work. The shutdown is articulated as a form of pressure that is applied to make the EDI

practitioner stop their work immediately as the work is not deemed acceptable, appropriate or permitted. This tactic is aimed at ‘stopping a conversation, halting a project, and distancing and delegitimising research in ways that are silencing’ (2023: 12). Lastly, MacKenzie et al. explain blowback as forms of harsh social pressure for scholars to abandon their work and to make them stop talking about it. The authors distinguish it from shutdown: ‘Unlike shutdown, which refers to the institutional obstacles designed to stop research initiatives, blowback refers to the forms of peer or public pressures on scholars to stop what they are doing and to ‘pipe down’ (2023: 13). Blowback tactics may involve questioning and attempting to delegitimise the professionalism of individuals engaging in EDI&I work, the clear message being that it is in their best interest to stop doing this work.

There is much to take from this conceptualisation of institutional gaslighting as an explainer for how EDI&I initiatives, even when they are supported by leaders and resourced, can be frustrated by the everyday practices and processes of academic administration and governance. They authors conclude that ‘institutional gaslighting is a failure of the institution, and not a failure of individuals’ (MacKenzie et al. 2023: 15). They propose building partnerships, which can help by way of ‘applying political pressure needed to counter attacks on the reputation or to give in to internal critics demanding slowdowns’ (ibid). They also propose data collection as a tool for shifting university culture and pushing EDI&I initiatives beyond rhetoric. They contend that data can help validate the perspectives of minority groups and undermine institutional claims of ‘nothing to see here’ in terms of inequalities or lack of institutional commitment to equality.

Power struggles in implementation

Tildesley et al.'s study (2022) offers another conceptual frame for understanding power struggles²⁹ between status quo and gender equality actors over the implementation of gender equality policies in five Spanish universities, drawing on data from 25 semi-structured interviews with individuals responsible for implementing gender equality policies, from 2019-2020. As evidenced in other contexts, the neo liberalisation trend is evident in Spanish HE sector, including new managerial approaches, the adoption of targets, benchmarking and mergers for the purposes of achieving efficiencies.

Tildesley et al. (2022) assert that the implementation of gender equality policies 'is the result of a power game between resistance and counter-resistance' (2022:2). They identify both the forms and types of resistance that hinder reform efforts and the counter-resistance strategies that seek to drive implementation forward and achieve institutional change. In accordance with Ball et al. (2012) Tildesley et al. assert that policy implementation involves conflict and negotiation, and that gender equality policy implementation is by its nature particularly complex and characterised by power struggles between status quo and feminist actors (2022:881). Leaders have 'power over' and their actions have the capacity to undermine gender equality efforts. If resistance comes from senior decision-makers, their decisions and actions are likely to lead to institutional inertia, with consequences of devaluing gender equality work as 'institutional housekeeping' and relational work (2022:883). 'Power to' is defined as an individual's capacity to act in spite of, or in response to the power wielded over them by others. Gender equality actors lacking in positional power may resort of explicit and possibly

²⁹ Tildesley et al. (2022) use an analytical framework based on Lukes's (2005) theory of power that encompasses both domination (power over) and individual (power to) and collective (power with) to bring power struggles to the forefront of gender equality policy implementation and offer an account of the possibilities of a feminist politics of implementation.

confrontational strategies or implicit, behind the scenes ones, such as 'disguising transformative agendas within institutional logics, by either adopting institutional politics or strategically employing mainstream discourses to their advantage' (2022: 84). 'Power with' is the ability of a collective to act together to attain a common goal and involved coalition establishment to achieve a common purpose.

Tildesley et al.'s study (2022) study found that the most common forms of resistance from institutional leaders (power over) who seek to maintain the status quo were refusal to accept responsibility, trivialisation of GE work and denial of the need for change. The former was enabled by the lack of internal and external enforcement mechanisms and facilitated by neoliberal tendencies that see gender equality as an instrument of marketised benchmarking (2022: 890) and incompatible with meritocracy. They found senior leadership commitment lacking and accompanied by a tendency to isolate EDI practitioners:

At the highest ranks of university management, resisting actors make gender equality actors, especially those in charge of equality units, feel excluded. Gender equality actors express having been subject to oversurveillance and hostility, experiencing prejudice about women not being able to lead adequately or being too bossy (Tildesley et al., 2022: 897).

Counter-resistance strategies from individual actors (power to) include reasserting the equality unit's positional power, strategic framing, engagement with global feminist campaigns and other public or private institutions, inclusion in high-ranking decision-making bodies, playing the resignation card and signing agreement with other public institutions. Forms of counter resistance by collective gender equality actors (power with) include rescaling, decentralising the equality structure and forming strategic alliances with feminist academics,

individuals in power positions, students, interuniversity forums and external actors.

Conclusion

This review of literatures presents key debates and questions that reveal significant tensions between EDI aspirations and the realities of implementing initiatives within higher education contexts. Several striking patterns emerge across this international body of research.

Firstly, despite consistent scholarly critique of the limitations of the business case rationale and documented failures to produce structural change, it remains the dominant rationale through which EDI is articulated and justified in HEI settings. This suggests that its persistence perhaps functions primarily to render equality claims legible and acceptable within neoliberal institutional logics. Yet dismissing all engagement with business rationales as capitulation oversimplifies EDI practitioners' strategic navigation and positions them as victims of institutional manipulation. Secondly, the marginalisation of EDI practitioners appears remarkably consistent across all contexts studied, whether UK, Spain, US, Canadian, or Australian universities, manifesting in peripheral structural positioning, lack of formal authority, absence of qualification requirements, and limited resources, suggesting that marginalisation may be intrinsic to how neoliberal institutions incorporate equality work rather than incidental to particular institutional arrangements. Thirdly, a fundamental paradox structures EDI work across contexts: institutions simultaneously embrace diversity rhetoric while deploying various strategies, such as what MacKenzie et al. (2023) term 'institutional gaslighting', creating what scholars identify as an enactment gap between policy aspirations and realities. Fourthly, EDI work is consistently gendered and racialised, undertaken disproportionately by women and people from minoritised backgrounds who must perform emotional labour to educate others about the very systems of oppression they personally experience, creating what Mirza

(2006) and Ahmed (2012) identify as ‘diversity fatigue’. Fifthly, despite documentation of high stress, burnout, and institutional resistance, research also reveals that EDI practitioners report high professional efficacy and job satisfaction. These findings suggest that understanding EDI practitioners’ experiences require attention not only to structural constraints but also to how practitioners exercise agency within those constraints.

Finally, across jurisdictions and institutional types, the research reveals what has been termed a ‘performativity paradox’ (Ahmed, 2012): equality schemes, policies, and initiatives can simultaneously enable progress by creating legitimacy and constrain transformation by rendering equality amenable to audit logics instead of structural change. These patterns suggest that while specific manifestations vary contextually, certain tensions appear endemic to how EDI operates within contemporary neoliberal higher education. Understanding how Irish practitioners experience and navigate these widely-documented tensions becomes crucial both for scholarly understanding and for supporting the development of EDI practice in an emerging field.

My selection of literatures reflects the semi-empiricist approach taken as I sought to test and strengthen the study’s rigour beyond my own position as a scholar-practitioner. It addresses the research questions and my commitment to understanding EDI work as it is actually experienced and enacted by EDI practitioners, alongside lecturers and policymakers, while connected to broader structural analysis. It is to these lived realities in the Irish higher education context that the methodology and findings chapters now turn, examining how these actors navigate competing discourses and institutional logics as they negotiate their professional identities and enact EDI work in an emerging and contested field.

Critical Summary

Reviewing this literature as a scholar-practitioner, I am necessarily implicated in many of the tensions it identifies: the strategic navigation of the business and moral rationales, the experiences of peripheral institutional positioning and the gendered and racialised labour the literature describes. These are not solely objects of study but facets of my own professional positionality. I view this proximity as analytically productive rather than merely a limitation to be managed; it is precisely what motivates the semi-empiricist approach adopted, whereby engagement with a broad, international and recent evidence base serves to test my own assumptions against documented patterns elsewhere. At the same time, this positionality shapes what I am predisposed to notice and how I interpret it: my reading of the enactment gap, the performativity paradox and practitioners' reported agency amid institutional constraints, is inevitably inflected by own experience of and investment in EDI work. Rather than viewing this as a threat to validity to be eliminated, I understand my positionality as an epistemological resource, which is disciplined through reflexive engagement with the literature. In the next chapter, I present my methodological framework and choices that surface perspectives and evidence beyond my own.

Chapter 6 Methodology

Introduction

This inquiry asks how identity, policy discourses, institutional power structures, and resistance shape EDI enactment in HEIs. To answer these questions, I developed a methodology capable of consolidating and analysing the on-the-ground knowledges, one that could make sense of EDI enactment through lived practitioner experience, which is an under-researched yet significant area of knowledge generation in this field.

This chapter establishes the methodological framework for the research. I begin by reviewing the research questions that frame this inquiry, then situate the research within the critical paradigm, discuss the ontological and epistemological positions that informed my approach, outline the qualitative methods adopted, and examine both their potential and their limitations. The latter part of the chapter details the research setting, participant selection and recruitment, data collection and analysis techniques, and ethical considerations.

Beyond the interview data, critical analysis of key policy documents forms an essential component and contributes to the rigour of this study. Chapter 3 examined sectoral EDI policies and how discourses are constructed and circulated within the HE sector, establishing necessary context for understanding EDI practitioner experiences. My rationale and approach to documentary analysis, guided by critical theory, is outlined briefly here and developed more fully in that chapter. This combination of critical analysis and interviews activates the central theoretical concepts deployed throughout the study, enabling deeper analysis by rendering visible how EDI operates within institutions. By making these forces visible, approaches to EDI enactment can be refined for enhanced impact and transformative potential.

This study documents and analyses the experiences of participants with regard to how EDI policy is enacted in HEIs in Ireland, generating a critical

analysis of the new 'EDI world' and making a contribution to understanding the challenges, complexity and contributions of EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers to this work. I endeavour to make sense of how EDI is known, understood, and enacted in HEIs through documents and dialogues with these three participant cohorts and use critical theory as a frame.

The experience of EDI practitioners is especially important in this study of how EDI is enacted in Irish HE as they work across the institution and collaborate with external agencies and with the wider sector; their voices have not been heard before. The research examines realities from an institutional and sectoral stance and to a lesser extent within the larger political, societal and global context

The research contributes to a greater understanding of how the new institutional fixture of EDI has been constructed and experienced by actors in HE. I explore this through three research questions.

1. How is EDI constructed and represented within sectoral policy documents and what does this reveal about the assumptions and priorities underpinning the field?
2. How do participants, especially EDI practitioners, experience, understand, and enact EDI work within Irish HEIs?
3. What do research participants' perspectives reveal about the challenges, dilemmas and complexities of this emergent field?

As referenced in Chapter 1, the research questions are ordered to reflect the analytical sequence the study. The critical analysis of EDI policy documents (1.) was conducted first, both to interrogate how EDI is constructed at sectoral level and to inform the design of the interview questions used to explore participants' experiences (2. And 3.). In addressing these questions in detail, within the critical paradigm (Ahmed & Swan 2006, Ahmed, 2007, 2012, 2017; Deem & Morley, 2006; Lynch 2012, 2014; Lynch et al. 2012) and the theoretical framework of equality

(Baker et al. 2004), I examine how language, policy, people and power effect the institutional fixture of EDI and its potential for realising transformative change. The research adheres to a strong social justice perspective and explicitly seeks to influence EDI practices within HEIs, which will be outlined in the recommendations sections of chapter 10.

From Professional Experience to Research Paradigm

Ontologically, this inquiry is situated within the critical paradigm, which understands social reality, including the institutional structures through which EDI is enacted, as shaped over time by relations of power, practices and hierarchies that are historically produced and open to change. This ontological position underpins the study's epistemological commitment to practitioner knowledge as a legitimate and analytically central source of understanding - if institutional realities are historically produced by powerful actors, then practitioners' situated accounts are not peripheral to that reality but constitutive evidence of how it is sustained and contested.

My path to this research began not in theoretical texts but on the ground, in the daily work of EDI practice and in the lecture hall. After years of navigating institutional resistance, witnessing the gap between policy and practice, and watching well-intentioned EDI initiatives falter on implementation, I wanted to understand why this was happening; not just as a practitioner looking for better strategies, but as someone who believed the work mattered. It was this practitioner frustration led me to critical theory as it was the framework that best made sense of what I was experiencing. Critical theory insists that research is political and context bound, that power shapes both knowledge production and institutional life, and that inquiry should aim not just to interpret the world but to change it (Brookfield, 2011). These weren't abstract principles to me; they named what I already knew from practice. Thus, my commitment to critical inquiry rests on several deeply held convictions shaped by my dual role. EDI practitioner knowledge matters

as much as academic knowledge. EDI practitioners learning on-the-job, leads to particular types of knowledge, from navigating institutional resistance, building coalitions, and attempting change within constrained conditions. This experiential knowledge is often dismissed or undervalued in academic research, treated as ‘anecdotal’ rather than analytical. I witnessed this firsthand from academic colleagues when I moved from an academic role to a practitioner role; less so from practitioners and administrators.

My epistemological stance deliberately places practitioner knowledge in dialogue with academic knowledge as equally valid ways of knowing (Schön, 1983, 1987). This inquiry is designed to surface, validate, and theorise from that practitioner knowledge. Through this research, I want to generate critical understanding that can transform practice and help practitioners, policymakers, and academics see their work differently and do it better. This aligns with the critical paradigm’s commitment to conducting research ‘for the emancipation of individuals and groups in an egalitarian society’ (Cohen et al., 2011:26). Critical theory also supports my epistemological commitment to the feminist insight that knowledge is partial and situated and reflects the particular perspectives of the knower while maintaining that systemic oppression has real, observable effects (Fraser, 1989).

Brookfield’s (2011:23-30) articulation of critical theory resonates because it describes what I was already doing as an EDI practitioner before I had academic language for it. He gives an account of five distinctive characteristics of critical theory which are useful to revisit here as they connect to the research methodology.

Firstly, critical theory is firmly grounded in political analysis of power and structures. For practitioners, EDI work is inherently political. Every initiative navigates institutional power, challenges existing hierarchies, or gets co-opted by them. You cannot do this work without analysing who

holds power, whose interests are served by the status quo, and how resistance operates.

Secondly, critical theory is concerned with generating knowledge that will change, not just interpret the world. I did not become an EDI practitioner to document inequality³⁰; I became one to challenge it. This research extends that commitment.

Thirdly, it breaks down the separation between subject and object, or researcher and researched, found in traditional theories, and requires assent on the part of the research subjects whose perspectives it recognises. In this research, I am not a detached observer studying my participants. I am part of this community, researching my own field of practice. My participants are peers, engaged in critical dialogue with me.

Fourthly, my research is normatively grounded, it criticises contemporary society and envisages a fairer and more democratic world. I am not neutral about EDI. I believe in equality of condition (Baker et al., 2009), in dismantling structural barriers, in creating more just institutions. These values shape my research questions and my interpretation of findings. Critical theory legitimates this normativity rather than requiring me to pretend objectivity.

Fifthly, as Brookfield notes, the truth of critical theory can only be established when the world it envisages is created and 'we can judge its relative humanity and compassion' (2011:29). The value of this research will not be determined by traditional academic criteria alone, but by whether it helps transform how EDI is understood and practiced in HEIs.

³⁰ Ahmed's 2006 article '*You end up doing the document rather than doing the doing: diversity, race equality and the politics of documentation*' describes how diversity work becomes about producing 'good', well-written documents. These are then conflated with the institution being regarded as 'good at' doing race equality.

This critical orientation shapes every methodological choice I make, from who I interview to how I conduct those interviews and to how I analyse what they tell me.

Bridging Practice and Theory

As I have said in chapter 2 Literature Review, I am sensitised by Brookfield's emphasis on the emergence of knowledge through critical dialogue and democratic participation (2011), Schön's writings (1983, 1987) on being a reflective practitioner, the work of Fairclough on discourse analysis (2001). I am influenced by Baker et al.'s conception of equality of condition (2004), Ball et al.'s (2012) work on policy, and most especially Ahmed's (2007, 2012, 2018, 2019) theorising of diversity work and of how discourses of EDI are framed in HE. The work of these scholars orient me to analyse power, knowledge and the shaping, uptake and effects of EDI discourses. I utilise these theoretical concepts as critical interpretive devices which provide the key analytical tools with which to address this project's research questions. I am bringing together scholars across a transdisciplinary range and extending these concepts to create a new armoury and robust critical frame in which to make sense of and make visible this new field of EDI. My conceptual framework is transdisciplinary precisely because EDI work is transdisciplinary; it requires understanding policy, discourse, power, institutional culture, and lived experience simultaneously, and is rooted in my experience of lecturing and as an EDI practitioner. Importantly, this framework is grounded in practice first, theory second. I started with practitioner experience, my own and my participants', and sought theoretical tools that could sharpen, deepen, and make visible what we already knew tacitly.

My commitment to critical theory emerged from years of watching EDI work fail in predictable ways that EDI practitioners understood but could not seem to name or change. Critical theory gave me language to name what I knew tacitly, that knowledge is shaped by power, that HEIs resist

change structurally not just individually, that transformation requires political analysis not just policy reform. The knowledge this inquiry produces will be situated in my perspective and my participants' experiences, shaped by the historical moment and institutional context in which we work and can prompt other discussions and policy changes.

Denzin and Giardina's (2009) articulation of the transformative paradigm resonates with my research precisely because EDI practitioners in HE occupy the contested space between equality and social justice ideals and institutional resistance.

The pursuit of social justice within a transformative paradigm challenges prevailing forms of human oppression and injustice. This paradigm is firmly rooted in a human rights agenda. It requires an ethical framework that is rights and social justice based (Denzin and Giardina, 2009: 12).

While it's not a foregone conclusion that it will have an emancipatory effect, the purpose of the inquiry is to make meaning with participants of their stories and experiences with a view to effecting transformation in how EDI is enacted within HEIs.

Applied to this research, practitioner knowledge emerges from specific practice environments, develops through accumulated experience, emerges through praxis and deepens through reflection and integration of experiences (Edward and Cranton, 2012). EDI practitioners need to have an understanding of the complexity of the world and of knowledge in EDI and reveal a capacity for reflection which is developed over time through consciousness-raising and critical dialogue. EDI practitioner knowledge must therefore be critically examined, including the assumptions it rests upon and whether it serves to maintain or challenge existing power structures. This design of the research methodology is further outlined below and the outcomes are discussed in the presentation of findings (chapters 6-9).

This research sought to explore the knowledge and experiences of key actors through authentic dialogue and connect this to theory (Brookfield, 2011; Schön, 1983, 1987; Fairclough, 2001, 2010; Ball et al. 2012 and Ahmed 2017,). From this framework this project generates theory from experience; that is to develop a shared language and lens through which practitioners analyze and work towards the amelioration of EDI implementation in HEI. The intention of this inquiry, therefore, is to explore in a reflexive way, the professional field of EDI practice. I do this by creating the conditions for authentic and reflexive conversations that give expression to extant discourses and participant experiences of enacting EDI, with a view to fusing these to theoretical work. The generation of new knowledge through critical reflection on discourses and dialogues that frame EDI, has the potential to be transformative by identifying how current practices in the field of EDI might be enhanced.

My interests as a practitioner are at the heart of this research. What EDI practitioners have to say about the realities they face as they seek to bring into view and enact EDI within their HEIs and whether and how their experiences connect with policy discourses is the key dilemma to be investigated. My values, intellectual curiosity and professional experience in the research context are key drivers for me. Additionally, the process of research continues to have a transformative impact on my personal development and praxis.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

This section establishes my positionality as a practitioner-researcher and the reflexive methodological stance that underpins this inquiry. As both an EDI practitioner and lecturer engaged in researching my own field of practice, I occupy multiple, intersecting positions that shape the research process. Rather than viewing this as a methodological problem to be solved, I engage critically with the epistemological implications of insider research, demonstrating how reflexivity transforms potential limitations into analytical assets.

My commitment to equality and my discomfort with institutional structures that entrench difference did not emerge from theory but from formative personal experience. I grew up in rural Mayo, one of six children, in a household with no tradition of attending higher education and that encouraged self-determination and autonomy, yet existed within a wider culture, underpinned by church and state, that had little tolerance for difference of gender, race, or sexuality. This early tension between an egalitarian home life and an intolerant social order gave me an enduring sensitivity to the gap between stated values and lived structures, a sensitivity that later became central to how I read the enactment gap in EDI policy. This was sharpened during postgraduate study in Belfast during the first year of the Northern Ireland ceasefire, where I experienced first-hand how rigid social categorisation of ‘the other’ along sectarian lines could be swiftly and often unconsciously deployed, and how precarious open, critical dialogue could be in a context of entrenched positions. This taught me to read context and power carefully, and to value spaces where competing perspectives could be voiced without immediate judgement, a value I carried directly into how I approached interviewing participants in this study. Subsequent years spent living and working across the UK, Australia, and the US further shaped a disposition of curiosity toward divergent viewpoints and a reluctance to settle on a single, totalising perspective on institutional life. Re-interpreted through my later professional trajectory as a lecturer and then an EDI practitioner, these formative experiences of egalitarianism, contested identity, and cross-cultural difference converged into a professional identity strongly oriented toward equality of condition and structural change, rather than toward diversity as a matter of individual tolerance or awareness alone.

This research is also influenced by a critical feminist epistemological stance, operating at three levels. First, in determining whose knowledge counts, I follow feminist standpoint thinking in treating partial, situated

knowledge as a source of insight rather than a deficiency to be corrected (Fraser, 1989). In my study, the knowledge of EDI practitioners is disproportionately produced by women, who perform the invisible, emotional and relational labour of EDI work, labour that is systematically undervalued within traditional academic knowledge hierarchies. Centring this knowledge is itself a feminist methodological commitment (Lather, 1992), not just a design choice. Secondly, this stance shaped how data was generated in that my approach to interviewing was oriented towards listening relationally rather than an extractive or data mining model (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). Thirdly, this feminist commitment is inseparable from my own standpoint as a white, able-bodied woman, mother and EDI practitioner, who has moved from an academic to a practitioner role. I am working within the field which I study and my perspective on EDI work is not an external vantage point, but one that is constituted by the same gendered dynamics this literature documents (Ahmed, 2012). Rather than bracketing this standpoint, I have treated it as a resource for interpretation, disciplined through the reflexive practices.

Insider Status and its Implications

Social research of this nature cannot be objectively observed from outside; it is best understood from the point of view of those who live in this 'world' (Mack, 2010; Schwandt, 2000). As a scholar-practitioner currently working in an EDI role in an HEI, I am already deeply implicated in the ongoing activity I study. Macintyre Latta and Wunder (2012) state that the practitioner inquirer 'has a role that precedes the inquiry and has relationships to the setting and the people in it. She is, therefore, a central participant in the socially constructed reality, and deeply invested in the consequences of her own actions and those of the social actors around her' (Macintyre Latta and Wunder, 2012: 91-92).

I am an insider in multiple, overlapping ways. Institutionally, I have worked in my HEI for over twenty years. Experientially, I have been a

lecturer for over twenty years and an EDI practitioner for six years, giving me direct experience across two of the three participant cohorts. Sectorally, I am a member of national EDI groups and have contributed to policy through various consultation exercises. This multi-layered insider status enabled me to directly relate my experiences as both lecturer and EDI practitioner with those of participants, facilitating rapport and depth of engagement. Despite its challenges, insider research has potential for 'challenging, confirming, and extending current theory and for identifying new dimensions of administrative practice for study' (Anderson and Jones, 2000:430).

However, I am conscious of how my insider status, biases, and positioning influence the interview process and subsequent data interpretation (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993). Power relationships arise from my dual roles as EDI manager and researcher, potentially impacting colleagues (BERA, 2018:13). I am also mindful of my privileged position as a white, middle-class, able-bodied employee on a permanent contract, and have sought to understand the challenges others face as they navigate university structures. I have strived to be self-reflexive, continuously reflecting on my role and position in relation to participants and the research context, addressing imbalances openly and honestly.

Reflexivity as Methodological Stance

Reflexivity is central to this inquiry's methodological integrity. Drawing on Reay, Kamler and Thomson (2006:67) define reflexivity as:

looking for the social in the individual account, asking how particular events, categories and assumptions might have been produced through discourse, culture, political affiliations, and/or social practice. It means interrogating how we might be perpetuating ways of naming and discussing people, experiences, and events. Reay (1996:60) emphasizes its

continual nature: ‘the continual consideration of how the researcher's own social identity and values affect the data gathered and the picture of the social world produced’ (Kamler and Thomson, 2006:67).

Arber (2006) describes the imperative for reflexive researchers to scrutinise their own beliefs and assumptions, maintaining meta-awareness and self-management as a researcher. Brookfield's (2017) work has been instructive in this regard. He proposes that we become reflective practitioners by viewing our actions through four complementary lenses: student eyes, colleagues' perceptions, theory, and personal experiences. Fostering critical reflection requires examining presuppositions (not just experience), moving beyond ‘technical reflection’ to deeper interrogation of assumptions.

Throughout this research, I have applied to my own work the same critical stance, interrogative questions, and refusal to take things for granted that I apply to research data. This reflexive disposition is ‘profoundly about the being and doing of scholarship’ (Kamler and Thomson, 2006:66). My consciousness of being embedded in the research sharpened the design rigour of the research tool and sustained awareness of assumptions through all research phases. Following Ahmed (2017:94), when thinking strategically about institutions, we must accept complicity: ‘we forego any illusions of purity; we give up the safety of exteriority’. Diversity work is messy work, and I am part of the problem under investigation.

I maintained meta-awareness of my dual role throughout the research process. This enhanced my practice and helped me make sense of what it means to work in an EDI role in HE and understand the wider field's impact. Over the course of the inquiry, I challenged the construction of EDI within my own HEI and examined my part in developing and maintaining that construction as EDI Manager. Colleagues consistently

brought to my attention the gap between stated policy and lived experience, a gap this research investigates systematically.

Navigating Multiple Positionalities

My positionality as lecturer, practitioner, and researcher means I reflect in a practically oriented way with the aim of doing something for practice. I am committed to praxis and its transformation imperative as framed by Freire. Both the outcome of the inquiry and the problem that initiated the inquiry are connected to my practice. I wanted to examine how practitioners enact policy discourses and work within and against dominant practices in HEIs to achieve transformative impacts.

When I stepped into the researcher role, I had to step outside of the policy implementation role and view EDI multifacetedly from different positions. EDI surfaces in different ways across these positions; what is common is that no one understands the full context of each position. EDI practitioners interpret national policy and lead its enactment in their HEI; lecturers make EDI tangible for students in the classroom through curricula, pedagogy, and practice; policymakers interact with senior HE leaders and develop frameworks that drive HEI responses. My researcher position brings these variable positions into conversation with each other. This has value because I have experience of many of these positionalities - my professional career is refracted through this research.

In my role as a practitioner researcher I see the interconnection and distinction between roles and where context drops out and things get misunderstood. No single participant cohort has the full context, and this research exposes these gaps in understanding as a first step in addressing the challenges faced by EDI practitioners. This is part of my position as a critical researcher - breaking down the separation between researcher and research focus (Brookfield, 2011) and demonstrating the

value of researchers within HEIs undertaking this work. It is not the only way to do this research, but it has distinct value.

From my experience and the literature (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal, 2023), practitioners are not regarded by the wider institution and senior academic leaders as having parity of position within the academy. This suggests practitioners occupy the unique position of being appointed to transform the institution without necessarily having its support (Ahmed, 2012). Practitioners also occupy a vulnerable and somewhat isolated position as EDI work necessitates putting oneself 'out there', leading equality and identity work for underrepresented groups, without necessarily being supported by institutional structures or held in parity of esteem with other institutional fixtures. Understanding who the participants are is also about understanding myself as a practitioner-inquirer and the challenges I have faced in pivoting to the EDI Manager role, a role I am deeply committed to. I must be at once present in the research and a witness outside of it (Macintyre and Wunder, 2012:91-92). Discovering that similar challenges have been faced by other EDI practitioners has been gratifying and validates the importance of this inquiry.

Practitioner Experience as Knowledge

This study focuses on the overlooked knowledge of EDI practitioners, their situatedness, and their understanding of the 'special nature' of EDI problems (Heaton and Swidler, in MacIntyre and Wunder, 2012:96). As these scholars note,

problems of and for practice are not about finding the holes in the wall, nor creating the missing bricks. Rather, problems of practice for practitioner inquiry are guided by understanding phenomena within practitioners' situated worlds in which they are deeply implicated and in which they have a deep investment in the consequences of the work.

This epistemological foundation positions practitioner knowledge as a legitimate and valuable form of understanding that complements but cannot be reduced to traditional academic or scientific knowledge. Schön (1983, 1987) has written extensively on practitioner knowledge and reflection, arguing that it is valuable because it addresses the complexity and uniqueness of real-world problems, of which there are many in EDI. I contend that practitioner knowledge is key to a critical understanding of EDI in HE, and I include my own knowledge in this, leveraging it to claim my position as a critical and egalitarian practitioner-researcher influenced by equality studies.

Ryan and Walsh (2018) are attentive to the value of experiential knowledge as a means of understanding systems and engendering systemic change:

To make occluded knowledge explicit including that which exists among the participants is a key aspect of understanding the system. The lived experience of learners constitutes important sites from which different, oppositional or novel knowledge can emerge. Expert knowledge has a role but not at the top of a hierarchy of understandings. It is instead one of a number of ways of knowing all of which are vital to the creation of knowledge (Ryan and Walsh, 2018:9).

One of the purposes of this inquiry is to surface occluded knowledge of EDI practice from multiple viewpoints to generate critical knowledge for transformative change. Through collation and analysis of participant experiences in interviews, this inquiry generates new perspective on and appreciation for the complexity of EDI practice and its transformative impact. This study foregrounds and values lived experience as data, as knowledge to be articulated and analysed. In paying particular attention to EDI practitioners' voices, I make space for their accounts of EDI complexity in the HE environment and generate knowledge that will not just interpret but can effect change in this context.

EDI practitioner experience is especially valuable for this project as they work directly with policies and people; their experience represents knowledge developed through direct engagement with the complexities and challenges of implementing EDI initiatives. Lecturer experience is valuable as it shows how EDI comes into view and is enacted through teaching and learning. Policymaker experience contributes knowledge on the processes of producing EDI discourses in policy. I explored the experiences of this range of actors on how they perceive and enact EDI in their roles and wider institutions.

The new knowledge produced through this research serves dual purposes: expanding the field of EDI and enabling transformative action aimed at practitioners, academics, and senior management communities in Irish HEIs. I cannot be a researcher without thinking directly about my role as an EDI practitioner and the real-world institutional and sectoral HE context in which I work and strive to make progress. This commitment to reflexivity and being attuned to the dual role of researcher-practitioner required me to be open and forthright about my personal and professional identity being enmeshed within this practitioner research, making it part of my praxis. This focus on practitioner experience as knowledge informed the research design.

Research Design

Yin (2001:75) describes a research design as a ‘logical blueprint... the logic involves the links among the research questions, the data to be collected, and the strategies for analysing the data – so that a study’s findings will address the intended research question’. In this study, research design was an iterative process both in terms the refinement of the focus of this study and of the methods used, therefore my intention was to give early attention to some design features but to let the initial field experiences (and hence early data collection) influence the study’s direction (Yin, 2011:77). Yin describes this process as ‘recursive’, meaning that portions of the design can be put into place as a study

proceeds and that these design features also can be revisited more than once as a study proceeds. This recursive element can lead to questions of the researcher integrity and potential effect to influence the findings and will be discussed further in the ethics section.

I particularly wanted to elicit the experiences of participants in this relatively new EDI world, that would be attentive to the context and the evolving culture of EDI in HE. MacIntyre and Wunder posit that the methodological skills required to do practitioner inquiry are different from traditional research in two significant ways:

First, the purpose of the inquiry emerges from the desire of the practitioner- inquirers to make use of the findings within their own practices. Second, practitioner-inquirers must be aware of and intentional about their own roles as both the tool of and object within the inquiry. They must, therefore, learn how to position themselves in relationship to the inquiry as both practitioner and researcher. (2012: 93)

The personal and the institutional are interconnected and the research methods in this inquiry are used to explore this cycle of re-interpretation and processing of how EDI is taken up in the context of institutional structures in HEIs and how actors, structures and social energy contribute to enactment. Ahmed (2017:93) asserts that ‘it is through the effort to transform institutions that we generate knowledge about them’.

In chapter 2, I employed documentary analysis of selected policy documents to establish a comprehensive overview of the Irish higher education context and policy landscape. The overall qualitative research design, however, is weighted heavily toward semi-structured interviews, which serve as the primary method for exploring how participants experience and implement EDI initiatives in higher education through critical dialogue. I used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyse the interview data. This aligns with the study’s critical

framework and enables in-depth examination of how institutional and sectoral discourses interact with everyday practices (Souto-Manning, 2014). The semi-structured format gives sufficient structure to the interviews while not being restrictive or stifling of unexpected insights. I was conscious of power relations in research processes and took account of different positionings among those involved in the research. The lines of questioning in my research explored the experiences of lecturers, practitioners and policymakers of discourses of EDI and how these are taken up in their institutions and their roles.

Research Setting

This section sets out the research context, sampling approaches and selection criteria for participants. ‘Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 3). I view the means and ends of research as connected and enmeshed in specific contexts and power dynamics (Grummell & Finnegan, 2020) in the case of this research, in the context of HE in Ireland, with a particular focus on EDI in the emergent technological university (TU) sector discussed in detail in chapter 2. At the time of writing, there are five Technological Universities which are the result of this consolidation which involves 12 of Ireland’s 14 Institutes of Technology. The first TU to be established was Technological University of Dublin (TU Dublin) in 2019, followed by Munster Technological University (MTU) and Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) in 2021 and Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and South-East Technological University (SETU) in 2022. The two remaining Institutes of Technology are expected to achieve TU status in due course (Ó Caollaí, 2022). This recent reconfiguration of the HE sector offers an interesting research site to explore EDI enactment.

Figure 3³¹ on page 52 illustrates the HEI landscape with TUs highlighted in yellow.

Sampling Approaches

Sampling approaches were applied to the document analysis and to the semi-structured interviews. I firstly critically analysed a selection of policy documents (chapter 2) in order to trace the terrain and policy arc over a period of time and to frame the social realities of EDI practice with a view to informing how discourses of EDI are understood in the HE sector by practitioners and lecturers. I bring insights generated from the documentary analysis to bear in the interviews to better understand and analyse how participants enact EDI in their roles and institutions.

In order to address the research questions, I decided there were three cohorts of participants that I need to dialogue with whose positionality and role had a bearing on the enactment of EDI in higher education. I recruited participants who worked in the five newly merged dynamic entities to participate in the semi-structured interviews.

All participants except for one were recruited from outside the researcher's university and a mix of snowballing and purposive sampling techniques were used. I interviewed 16 people from 8 different organisations involved in HE in some depth; five of these organisations were TUs, the remaining three were government departments or agencies involved in EDI in HE. Using data from these three cohorts enhanced the validity of the research by including diverse perspectives based on roles and experiences of enacting EDI practices.

I use the term 'participants' to describe all the individuals who were involved in the research. Participants included people working in EDI roles in HEIs, lecturers with a proven interest in EDI (this was determined

³¹ Adapted from a visual produced by the Government of Ireland to promote awareness of the new single Higher Education constituency (seanadvoter.ie, accessed January 2025).

based on their engagement with EDI offices and EDI work) and EDI policymakers in the broader HE sector. Although all are ‘practitioners’ of sorts involved in the practice of EDI, this varies from different vantage points of their professional roles, such as the classroom, initiatives or policy, I use the term ‘EDI practitioner’ to describe individuals who work in institutional EDI roles. Correspondence with all participants was conducted through the researcher’s Maynooth University student email account.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants in cohorts one and three (EDI practitioners and policymakers). Purposive sampling is deliberate and focuses on selecting participants possessing characteristics associated with the research study. The sampling of participants was strategic as each was relevant to the research based on identification of the professional roles that they occupy and resultant ability to provide rich and relevant information. The first (EDI practitioners) and third (policymakers) cohorts are a smaller and specific subset and were approached directly to participate. Participants in the second cohort (lecturers) were recruited by using a snowballing technique, by recruiting participants via EDI practitioners. The third participant cohort consisted of policymakers in the HE sector; the purposive sampling strategy used accounted for some variance in terms of the policy body type, size, role.

All participants were asked to complete and sign a detailed Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendix 1) prior to partaking in the semi-structured interviews. The Information Sheet set out the purpose and aim of the research, the role of the participant and their right to withdraw at any stage from the research process. Additional information on how data would be collected, stored, anonymised and retained was also included. Participants also received a Research Participant Interview Guide (Appendix 2) with an overview of topics to be discussed, researcher contact details, the deadline for reply and a statement that

there was no compulsion to participate. The following section describes each participant cohort.

EDI practitioners

This cohort comprised of people who had formal leadership roles or were involved in promoting and implementing EDI initiatives in HE. Five participants were contacted from Technological Universities in Ireland and all agreed to participate. EDI practitioners were also asked to act as the initial liaison to the lecturer cohort with whom they had worked with on EDI initiatives.

All of the practitioner participants held institution-wide roles and were involved in developing institutional EDI policy, implementing national EDI policies and initiatives and reporting on implementation to government or aegis bodies that control funding. Despite these similarities, there was some variance across the sample of five participants in terms of their titles, roles and positional power as defined by their individual institutions. Titles include Officer, Manager, Director, VP; roles may be oriented to policy development, initiatives or applications for awards. I purposefully used the term ‘EDI practitioner’ as it serves to smudge details of job titles and thereby preserve the anonymity of participants. The knowledge and experience of this cohort is critical to see how broader discourses of national and European/international EDI policy is reflected in the institutional context.

No research to date exists on this cohort. I applied a purposive sampling strategy to recruit EDI practitioners, using theoretical knowledge and the research aims to identify participants who could provide rich, relevant and contextually bound insights. I sent an initial email from my Maynooth University email account with information on the study and invitation to participate.

Lecturers

This cohort comprises of teaching academics. The participants who took part in the research were drawn from TUs other than my own institution. This was to avoid issues of power imbalance and any potential conflict of interest. There are over 4,500 lecturers and researchers in Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities in Ireland (TUI, 2023:3). This cohort is important to the research but most potentially distant from the generation of EDI discourses. Yet because of their situatedness in the classroom, lecturers have the most potential for immediate impact with students. This group generated knowledge on how EDI policy and documentation was interpreted and reflected in teaching and learning practices and in the wider institution. To avoid any potential issue of power ‘over’, the inquiry did not include lecturer participants from my institution.

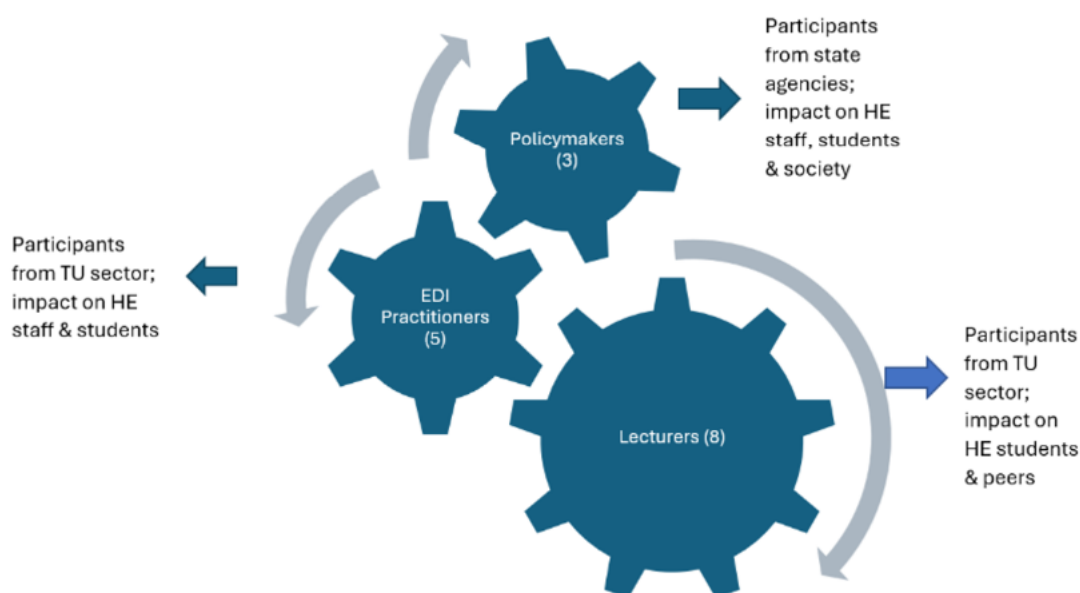
Access to this cohort was through an indirect mode: participant EDI practitioners were asked to correspond with up to 3-4 lecturers from a range of disciplines in their TU with whom they had collaborated with previously on EDI initiatives or who had shown interest and commitment to EDI in teaching and learning activities. EDI practitioners forwarded an overview of the research project to this subset of lecturers (Appendix 3). Interested lecturers then contacted the researcher directly to express their interest in participating in the research. I corresponded by email to inform potential lecturer participants of the purpose of the research and asked that they contact me if they wished to be involved. The correspondence included a broad outline of the purpose of the research and methods in a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form, a Research Participant Interview Guide and my email details and deadline for reply. The Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form also made clear that there was no compulsion to participate. Seven participants were selected from STEM and AHSSBL disciplines across various campuses from three geographically dispersed TUs. Using this

technique ensured that lecturers who were recruited had a proven interest and commitment to EDI in their work, as distinct from the general population of lecturers. The pilot interview provided rich data and was deemed suitable for inclusion in the sample. The participant in the pilot is the only participant employed in a traditional university.

Policymakers

This cohort comprised of people who write and develop sectoral EDI policy documentation to guide and monitor HEIs. All participants were involved in leading the development of sectoral EDI policies and had significant knowledge of institutional HE structures. The sample of three participants constitutes a representative group in terms of government, aegis and charitable bodies that have a directive policy role in Irish HE. Similar to other cohorts, I contacted national policymakers directly by email, gave an outline of the research project and invited them to participate. Participants responded to indicate their participation and I sent an outline of the purpose of the research, Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form and subsequently arranged an interview time. This small subset of individuals in the policy area may exert latent power and influence over senior members in the HEI where I work, is also noteworthy in terms of hierarchical relations of domination and subordination (Fairclough 2001:11).

Figure 7: Three participant cohorts for the research study



The reason for seeking out three populations was to garner a 360-degree data capture from diverse perspectives, to see the concerns of all three groups and how they align: from lecturers who have to implement EDI in the classroom; EDI practitioners who lead on institutional initiatives and policies; and policymakers who write national policies and guiding documents in this area. There are many other individuals working in HEIs that I did not meet or talk to, in particular, the students who study in institutions and other members of staff who are the subjects of policy.

Research Participants

Criteria for inclusion of participants across the three cohorts is based on:

- participants working in the ascribed roles of EDI practitioner (EDI Manager/Officer/Director/VP or cognate role), Lecturers (Assistant Lecturer, Lecturer and Senior Lecturer) and policymakers (various – from Principal Officer or equivalent)

- being employed on a secure contract of employment (to ensure there is no job insecurity/power imbalance/perception that there may be professional repercussions for not participating)
- length of time in role (both long and short duration – to ensure a variety of perspectives across career lifecycle are included)
- interest in issues pertaining to EDI
- geographical location (urban and rural)
- membership of formal or informal communities of practice (national/sectoral/institutional)

I have given participants pseudonyms that are names of Irish origin, to denote the specificity of the Irish context.

Table 1: Overview of participant background and pseudonyms

Cohort 1: EDI Practitioners	Sinéad	Sinéad is an EDI Practitioner with prior industry experience and five years' experience in HE.
	Cian	Cian is an EDI Practitioner with related prior experience in professional roles in other jurisdictions and fifteen years' experience in Irish HE.
	Aoibheann	Aoibheann is an EDI Practitioner with over twenty years prior academic and professional experience in other jurisdictions and five years' experience in Irish HE.
	Aoife	Aoife is an EDI Practitioner with prior academic and professional experience, with twenty years' experience in Irish HE.
	Ciara	Ciara is an EDI Practitioner with related prior experience in professional roles in other jurisdictions and five years' experience in Irish HE.
Cohort 2: Lecturers	Saoirse	Saoirse is a STEM lecturer with over thirty years lecturing experience, after an initial career in the engineering industry. Due to retire soon.
	Caoimhe	Caoimhe is a Humanities lecturer with over twenty years lecturing experience.
	Niamh	Niamh is a Humanities lecturer with over fifteen years lecturing experience.
	Róisín	Róisín is a Humanities lecturer, with experience of precarious work in HE, with five years lecturing experience, and prior professional experience in the creative arts.
	Oisín	Oisín is a Humanities lecturer with over five years lecturing experience, and prior professional experience in social care.
	Aisling	Aisling is a STEM and Humanities lecturer with experience of precarious work in HE, with over five years lecturing experience and prior professional experience.
	Clodagh	Clodagh is a STEM lecturer with over twenty-five years lecturing experience, after an earlier career in the manufacturing industry.
	Áine	Áine* is a Humanities lecturer with over fifteen years lecturing experience and experience in the creative arts.
Cohort 3: Policymakers	Liam	Liam is a policymaker with related prior experience in professional roles in other jurisdictions and five years' experience in Irish HE.
	Eimear	Eimear is a policymaker with related prior experience in professional roles in other jurisdictions and five years' experience in Irish HE.
	Orla	Orla is a policymaker with related prior experience in professional roles and ten years' experience in Irish HE.

*Aine was the pilot interviewee and is the only lecturer from a traditional university. All other lecturers and practitioners are from the technological university sector.

In summary, all participants were adult professionals working in their chosen area/discipline of HE and were not deemed vulnerable. Nobody on temporary or casual/hourly paid teaching staff was approached to take part in this study. This was to reduce power differences and democratise the process so that participants and researcher were viewed as equals. Although there was no reporting line between participants, as researcher, the onus was on me, ethically and practically to neutralise any perceived power relationship between participant and researcher and vice versa to engender trust, create rapport and guard against bias³². This diverse sample allowed me to study the perceptions and enactments of EDI policies from the viewpoints of individuals across a variety of professional roles, with unique life experiences and contrasting social positions.

Research Methods

This section sets out the two methods used, documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews. As this inquiry is heavily weighted to practitioner knowledge, and documentary analysis has been dealt with in detail in chapter 2, the interviews receive most treatment here.

Methodology for documentary analysis

Document analysis is a core part of the research. As referenced earlier, in chapter 2, I explored how ‘hardlines’, ‘softlines’ and ‘sidelines’ manifested through a critical documentary analysis of nine EDI policy documents as a way to illuminate continuities and shifts in the discursive framing of EDI and explore how key terms are deployed. This necessary critical analytic work, influenced by Fairclough (2001)

³² I did this by stating the separation between my professional role and my role as researcher, avoiding small talk about sectoral developments, referring to my doctoral supervisor and the ethical approval process and by using my student email and MS Teams account for all correspondence and for conducting the interviews.

contributes to the methodological approach, as participant experiences need to be interpreted within the policy context for a holistic analysis of discourses and dialogues of EDI and the contemporary EDI world in HE.

Semi-structured interviews

From October 2023-February 2024 interviews with eight lecturers and five EDI practitioners were conducted. In November 2024 I conducted an additional three interviews with policymakers. These interviews typically lasted 50 to 75 minutes and covered an array of topics associated with EDI.

For me as researcher, fostering a reflexive space for myself and participants in the semi-structured interviews was essential; it foregrounded that we are all, participants and researcher, shaped by our own lived experiences, identities and social positioning and acknowledged that EDI work is political, relational and context-bound.

Merrill and West propound that critical theory offers a means of using individual stories to understand and explain how 'uninterrogated yet oppressive scripts, alongside harsh material realities, can shape what people say and do' (2001:68). Building on the analysis of 'scripts' in EDI documents, the interviews yielded experiential insights into what participants say and do and how EDI is taken up by institutions and individuals in practice.

I was guided by Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006) as a method for analysis of conversational narratives. Souto-Manning (2012:163) proposes that when individuals make sense of their experiences through narratives, they bring together the personal and social or institutional. This approach contributed to seeing how EDI is taken up and enacted. I aimed to ensure that interviews were conducted as focused conversations between equals and believe that the more comfortable, safe and respected a participant feels with an interaction, the more useful the data that will be garnered. Qualitative methods, such as semi-

structured interviews, legitimate subjective knowledge as a valid source and thus link to epistemological and ontological affinities with the critical paradigm. I developed different interview guides for each cohort and refined these to critically reflect the research objectives and emergent themes garnered from the documentary analysis. This ensured that each guide was nuanced and specific to the role of each cohort. As I anticipated, there were different conversational textures between the three cohorts given the varying priorities of each. I believe interviewees are more likely to engage in a meaningful and authentic way when research is conducted on a one-to-one basis using this method. For example, interviews with policymakers had a stronger focus on processes for accountability and institutional structures. This cohort may have had a greater degree of concern about the intent of and intended audience for the research, and the level of intrusion, interpretation and voice (Plummer, 2001:173) exercised by the researcher. Efforts to address these concerns were made in the Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent.

Initial questions, such as those listed were asked; participants were also invited to identify elements they thought were missing and a plethora of useful data was captured. Participants were questioned about their understandings of prevalent discourses of EDI; how they related what they practice and how they enacted EDI in their roles within HE; and how policy was diffused and enacted within their own settings. This included participant perceptions, knowledge, experience and values which underpin institutional approaches to EDI. After an initial pilot interview, I made some minor changes to the research questions to ensure validity and close orientation to the research questions.

The fact that three different cohorts of research participants had been chosen allowed for exploration of how EDI might have varying associations and be taken up differently by different actors within organisations. I started with broad questions and revisited the

sequencing of these after the pilot interview in October 2023. I allowed scope for participants to specify experiences in more detail as they saw fit. After each interview, I reflected on the value of specific questions, how they were phrased, the context offered to participants, the depth of responses received, and the contribution of participant responses to answering the overall research question and made adjustments as appropriate. The pilot interview elicited rich data and was deemed suitable for inclusion in the data set.

I had hoped that most of the interviews would take place in person, and if this was not practical for participants, that some might need to take place via MS Teams. It transpired that all but one participant expressed a preference to conduct the interview remotely via MS Teams.

Methodology for interview analysis

All interviews were analysed using a multi-stage process of listening to audio files and reading transcripts. My approach was premised on close and careful reading of transcripts and the subsequent identification, collapsing and condensing of codes in line with phases 1-4 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach detailed below. After initial coding and identification of themes, I developed a recursive practice of listening back to interviews and building my analysis. This approach is informed by a feminist research praxis that recognises listening to participants (rather than focusing only on transcriptions) and this is important to me as a practitioner-researcher in order to consider the social and relational networks in which the subject was situated as well as the relation and dialogue between interviewer/interviewee (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). The analysis of interviews was shaped by my reflective position as a critical researcher who shares something with the interviewees. I did not adopt this position to be 'strategic' and successfully extract better data, rather, my positionality demands and taking seriously participants' commitment to telling difficult stories about their work (Thwaites, 2017).

I looked for themes that cut across cohorts, and also for patterns that emerged from within cohorts. Data gathered from these three cohorts facilitated exploration of participant knowledge, experience and differences in how EDI is understood and enacted across different roles and capacities, through dialogue in a critically reflective space and how personal and institutional discourses are interweaved.

The type of data collected included biographical and sensitive data on participants, as well as their views on institutional values and EDI enactment. All interviews were transcribed and sent to participants for approval, with two weeks generally allowed for review. Every effort was made to ensure participants are not recognisable in published work and to this end, some personal details have been smudged to maintain anonymity. Records and personally identifiable information have been stored carefully.

Data analysis of interviews

Thematic analysis is a methodology for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within data, organizing and describing data in rich detail (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis aligns with my ontological and epistemological outlook in the critical tradition. I have actively reflected on how my own prior views and experiences may have influenced analysis and interpretation. Most notably, I am an EDI practitioner and formerly a lecturer in a Technological University, have participated in many of the initiatives recounted by participants, and been a protagonist in similar professional settings and power dynamics.

Thematic analysis creates categories of meaning, with relationships between categories derived from data through inductive reasoning. Through a top-down coding approach (Boyatzis, 1998), analysis can be driven by the researcher's analytical interest toward research questions and theoretical assumptions. I was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020) six-step approach to understand and make meaning from

qualitative data, involving a phased approach to coding and generation of themes outlined in Table 2.

Codes are labels that assign symbolic meaning to segments of data (Miles et al., 2014:71). I applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach: after assigning codes to data chunks, I clustered similar codes to create categories and constructed interrelationships to develop higher-level analytic meanings. Coding enabled me to retrieve meaningful material, assemble related data chunks, and condense the dataset into analysable units (Miles et al., 2014:73). This process pushed me toward meaningful reflection and deep analysis of data meaning.

Once transcripts were approved, I uploaded them to NVIVO and began coding. Coding is not merely technical work but pushes toward meaningful reflection and deep analysis of data meaning. Based on the premise that analysis is inherent in coding, I took an active decision to interweave presentation of findings with analysis in chapters 6-9. This aligns with my ontological and epistemological outlook. As Miles et al. (2014:70) postulate, interweaving data collection and analysis from the start 'makes analysis an ongoing, lively enterprise.' I went back and forth between thinking about existing data and generating new data. This helped me maintain focus on policymaker interviews, which were scheduled nine months after the other two cohorts. During that time, I coded and did preliminary thematic analysis on the initial thirteen interviews based on Braun and Clarke's stages 1-4, coming to understand the depth of data gathered. This grounded me in analysis and focused me to further hone the discussion guide for policymakers.

After the final few interview transcripts were approved, I uploaded the data into NVIVO software and returned to analysis. Themes emerged both from the theoretical frame (e.g. performativity, enactment,) and from the experiences shared by participants (e.g. resistance, power, agency).

Table 2: Analytical Hierarchy to Data Analysis

Analytical Process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).	Braun and Clarke Practical Application in NVivo	Strategic Objective	Iterative process throughout analysis
1. Familiarising yourself with the data	Generating transcription of data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas in annotations. Import data into the NVivo data management tool. Link to Appendix 4	Data Management (Open and hierarchical coding through NVIVO) 	Assigning data to refined concepts to portray meaning 
2. Systematic Data Coding	Phase 2 – Open Coding- Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collecting data relevant to each code. Link to Appendix 4 II		Refining and distilling more abstract concepts 
3. Generating Initial Themes from Coded and Collated Data	Phase 3 - Categorisation of Codes – Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. Link to Appendix 4 III	Descriptive Accounts (Reordering, 'coding on' and annotating through NVIVO) 	Assigning data to themes/concepts to portray meaning 
4. Developing and Reviewing Themes.	Phase 4 – Coding on - Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis. Link to Appendix 4 IV		Assigning meaning 
5. Refining, Defining and Naming Themes	Phase 5 - Data Reduction - On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story [storylines] the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. Link to Appendix 4 V	Explanatory Accounts (Extrapolating deeper meaning, drafting summary statements and analytical memos through NVIVO)	Generating themes and concepts 
6. Writing the report	Phase 6 –Generating Analytical Memos. The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. Link to Appendix 4 VI		

Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke – six stages of analysis (2020).

Using NVIVO Qualitative Analysis software

NVIVO is a recognised qualitative data analysis software tool. After surveying other similar tools, I decided to use this tool, given its efficiency, availability within my institution and that supports would be available to me as an institutional user. Using the tool involved uploading all approved interview transcripts to the NVIVO software package and setting up relevant folders, files, codes and queries to probe the data. Fielding and Lee (1998:167) postulate that qualitative researchers ‘want tools which support analysis but leave the analyst firmly in charge’. The software records the iterative nature of data movements and coding patterns and helps to map conceptual changes and thought progression (see Appendix 4 for thought progression) and makes all stages of the analytical process traceable and transparent (QDA Training Manual, 2013). It can hold a large corpus of data and allow quick access to specific themes / participants, can run queries, and produce a comprehensive and verifiable trail to show how my thinking was developing as I progressed with thematic analysis and more broadly in terms of my research questions.

Possible disadvantages of using a data analysis software tool like NVIVO, are potential data loss and over-coding. I addressed data-loss by backing up data files after each session and over-coding by following the analytical strategy mentioned above. I regularly reflected on the decisions I am made regarding using the software and the ways I queried the dataset. Setting up queries required clarity on what and why I was asking particular questions of the data, a useful requisite for maintaining focus and sustaining a reflexive approach.

Ethical Issues and Implications

Ethical issues can stem from the kinds of problems being investigated by social scientists and the methods used to obtain valid and reliable data

(Cohen et.al.2011:76). My primary ethical obligation is to the participants in this research. I am attuned to the rights and dignity of all human participants and the need to act with an ethic of respect and equality throughout all research activities.

Ethical clearance was obtained from Maynooth University and from Atlantic Technological University where I am employed in October 2023. Munster Technological University also required a separate ethical process for staff to participate and this was completed and approval granted in November 2023. The nature of this research addresses how EDI is understood and enacted in universities and there are ethical concerns in relation to the recruitment of participant cohorts.

I described earlier measures I took to address any perceived power imbalance with EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers. In relation to the third cohort (policymakers), Cohen et.al (2011:53) discuss the tension between researchers and policymakers and cite the works of Thomas (1991) and Cook (1991) that ‘the impact of research on policymaking depends on its degree of consonance with the political agendas of governments and policymakers anxious for their own political survival and the promotion of their social programs’. Research is used if it is politically acceptable and can too easily become an affirmatory text which exonerates the system (Wineberg, 1991 cited in Cohen et. al 2011:53). Research can be used by those who seek to hear in it only echoes of their own voices and wishes (Kogan and Atkin, 1991 cited in Cohen et.al. 2011:53). I was attentive to build trust and rapport with this policymaker cohort and other participant cohorts and sought to neutralise power relationships to ensure authentic and meaningful engagement.

Participants were invited to engage on the basis of anonymity to ensure disclosure. The essence of anonymity is that information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity (Cohen et.al.2011:91). To keep the identity of participants confidential, I used pseudonyms and

omitted some identifying markers when presenting the findings as presented in Table 1 above. However, it was a concern that some data, by the nature of the discussion and context, may uniquely identify an individual or organisation, therefore some additional details were smudged to maintain anonymity. Participants were informed of the limits of anonymity.

The principle of informed consent (Cohen et.al, 2011) was applied to the research tools and permission was sought in advance from participants to transcribe the interviews (DiCiccio-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). 'Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical behaviour as it respects the right of individuals to exert control over their lives and to take decisions for themselves' (Cohen et.al 2011:77). Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were provided with an information sheet outlining their involvement in the study and all signed a consent form. This clearly explained the nature of the research, the data collection methods, what was to be done with the data, how it would be reported, anonymity of participants, and potential risks and benefits associated with taking part in the research. I offered to answer any enquiries about procedures; and advised participants that they were free to withdraw consent and to discontinue participation in the research at any time without prejudice to the participant. Participants were sent transcripts of interviews for review and had a 2 week period after the transcript was sent to them to advise the researcher of omissions, inaccuracies or of text they wished to have redacted or changed. Three participants reverted with edits and redactions to transcripts. To this end, participants had control over the research and were given an 'opt out' if they felt there was a chance that the information they gave might have negative consequences for them.

One of my concerns as researcher was that by seeking formal informed consent, some participants might become more guarded in what they disclose as they may think their responses will reflect poorly on them or

their institution and this might lead of a narrow range of data being gathered. The effects of this might lead to the research eliciting ‘safe’ and ‘acceptable’ responses. I discussed the research with participants and addressed an concerns in an open and honest way if the any participant felt that the data could be perceived as coming into conflict with aspects of institutional policy or management styles that might identify HEI and/or the participant. Participants were enthusiastic to contribute to the study given their proximity to the topic, the rigour of methods, guarantees of confidentiality, analysis and dissemination of findings.

In line with EDI values, I created a safe environment during interviews where participants were actively encouraged to express views and concerns about both the research process (including power dynamics and ethical issues) and the experiences recounted. I viewed interviews as collaborative and attentive engagement, not extractive knowledge creation. I was transparent about my dual roles as peer/colleague and researcher and proactively foregrounded potential professional repercussions from disclosures with participants. I was cognisant that research consequences may reverberate in EDI professional communities and continuously assessed ethical implications of my actions and decisions. I worked to establish clear boundaries and mitigate conflicts of interest through open discussion. This meant ethical decision-making became actively deliberative, ongoing, and iterative (BERA, 2018:2). An additional ethical consideration, addressed in an earlier section, is my proximity to this topic, given I have contributed in my role as a lecturer and as an EDI practitioner. This insider status, the fact that I know many of the participants (some of whom will be senior to me), was foregrounded to participants to mitigate against groupthink and being a member of an ‘ingroup’.

Conclusion

In chapter 3, I have brought together theoretical concepts across a transdisciplinary range and extended these concepts to create a critical frame in which to make sense of and make visible the new institutional fixture of EDI. In this chapter I have outlined my commitments as a critical researcher and detailed the methodological framework, research design, methods, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews and fostered critical dialogue with participants in a safe, trusting research environment. Participants have various relationships to EDI as practitioners, lecturers, and policymakers, and the interviews provided rich data to interpret. As a practitioner-researcher, I am especially interested in the experience of EDI practitioners - a cohort occupying roles in relatively newly created institutional fixtures, trying to make sense of complicated work in new TU institutions. I am one of these people and inhabit the same social reality of working in a sometimes contested field.

I have consciously adopted a critical stance to my research, continually considering how my positionality and values affect the data gathered and the picture of the EDI world produced. As an EDI practitioner, my relationship to EDI policy was like a 'hardline', I had to implement schemes or measures as this was my job. Through my interviews, analysis and viewing my practice through the lens of a critical researcher the 'softlines', 'sidelines' and the marginal silences that accompany policy documents have come into view and generated crucial new knowledge. The recursive, over and back nature of the relationship between theory, data, research questions and interpretation has been central to the design of the research and generated rich insights and new knowledge in the field. These methodological choices enable the critical examination of the EDI world and recognise the centrality of the experience of EDI practitioners to this. The research establishes a

critical body of work in the field of EDI and on the under-researched role of EDI practitioners in Ireland in particular.

In the following four chapters, I analyse the findings from the empirical research. If the interview excerpts in the chapters that follow seem lengthy, it is because participants gave comprehensive responses. I wanted to represent the full sense of flow from the participant and the interviews did not lend themselves to bite-sized chunks.

Critical Summary

This chapter has established a methodology in which ontology, epistemology, positionality, and values are inseparably linked. Ontologically, this research is situated within the critical paradigm, which understands the institutional structures through which EDI is enacted as shaped over time by relations of power and hardened into practices that appear fixed but are historically produced and open to change. This grounds an epistemological commitment to practitioner knowledge as legitimate and analytically central: if institutional realities are sustained through the accumulated practices of those who inhabit them, practitioners' situated accounts are evidence of how those realities are maintained and contested, not peripheral commentary on them. This stance is inflected by a feminist orientation operating at three levels: in valuing the situated, often invisible labour of EDI work as a legitimate source of insight; in generating data through relational, listening-oriented interviewing rather than extraction; and in my own standpoint, since my perspective on EDI work is partially constituted by the same gendered dynamics this literature documents. Finally, my own subjectivity is part of this design, not incidental to it. The values I bring: a belief in equality of condition, a discomfort with the gap between stated commitments and lived structures, a reluctance to settle on any single totalising perspective, were formed through an egalitarian upbringing set against an intolerant wider culture, through direct experience of contested identity in Belfast during the ceasefire, and through years of

cross-cultural work that sharpened my attentiveness to how viewpoints are rooted in lived experience. I have treated this positionality as an epistemological resource, examined it critically and made it visible throughout the research process, consistent with the critical paradigm's reflexive and transformative commitments.

Chapter 7 Findings on Identity

Introduction

In the next four chapters I present the findings and interweave a discussion of literature. This presentation and discussion begins with a detailed exploration of personal, role and the formation of an institutional and broader EDI identity. In the next chapter, I will explore findings on how EDI comes into view in TUs³³; in chapter 9, ways in which EDI is enacted in TUs will be investigated; and in chapter 10 participants experiences of resistance to EDI work is attended to. While these four components build incrementally upon one another, they also intersect and overlap, particularly regarding resistance, which manifests throughout all stages. This framework provides a schematic for understanding how EDI work gains traction on higher education agendas, how it is supported and experienced by individuals and institutional structures, and how this connects to the social transformation it seeks to achieve.

My insider status and situatedness as a practitioner has heightened my attentiveness to the being and the doing of scholarship. (Kamler and Thomson, 2006:66). This reflexive stance that has sharpened my awareness of the ways in which participants and I narrativise the identities that we produce and reproduce, guarding against taking these constructions for granted. It also means interrogating established ways of naming and discussing people, experiences and events. I have strived to maintain critical self-interrogation (Brookfield, 2001; Kamler and Thomson, 2006:67), attending carefully to the interplay between participants' personal and role identities and the broader institutional construction of EDI identity.

As I invite the reader to engage with the discussion of findings, I want to advise that in some sections of this chapter, I have made an active

³³ One of the research participants, the pilot interviewee, is employed in a traditional university.

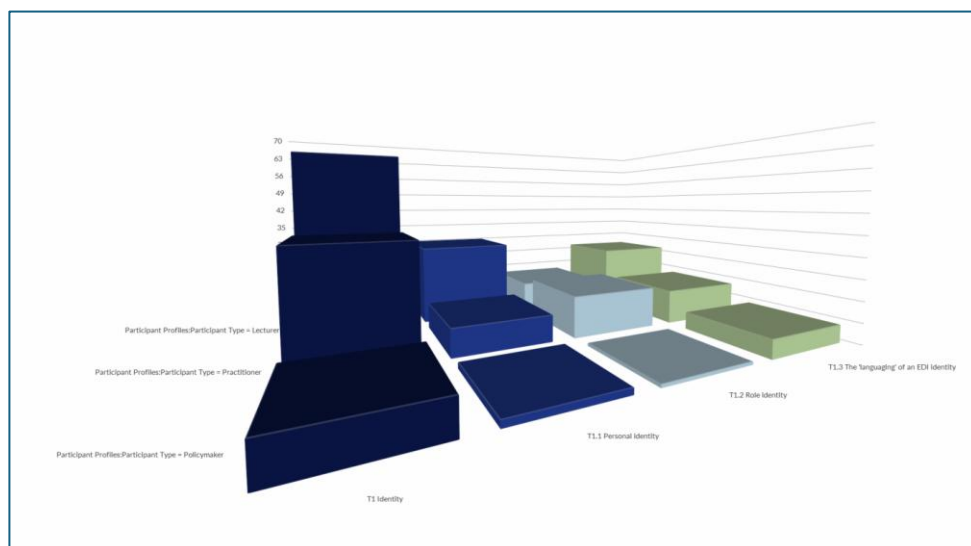
decision not to identify participants by cohort, either where supply of sensitive information might compromise the anonymity of participants or where no pattern emerged in the data to differentiate cohorts. Whereas the lecturer cohort in TUs nationally comprises of over 4,500 possible participants and anonymity is easily maintained, the practitioner and policymaker cohorts nationally are significantly smaller, and this could potentially make participants more easily identified. In some cases where patterns from the data demand identification of cohorts for sense-making purposes, care will be taken to smudge certain identifying features to protect anonymity. In subsequent chapters and where appropriate and in adherence to my ethical commitments, findings will be attributed to each cohort to identify meaningful patterns in the data.

Based on what emerged in the data from the research participants - EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers – I propose that for this study, identity has three components: firstly, the personal identity of participants; secondly their professional role identity in higher education; and thirdly the identity of EDI as a new domain and institutional fixture in higher education and more broadly in organisational and public life. Identity emerged as a theme in participant responses to a question about how they came into EDI work. Participants spoke at length about their personal and professional backgrounds and personal factors that had alerted them to inequality and the impact of this awareness on their life and professional choices. Findings on identity echo findings from empirical research in the literature review (Deem and Morley, 2006; Milian and Wijesingha, 2023; Marom, 2023; Bhopal & Henderson, 2019; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Bhopal, 2023; Ahmed 2012). I will discuss how I understand these three aspects of identity and how they pertain to this study.

Figure 8 maps the distribution of identity- related themes across participant groups, revealing distinct patterns in how lecturers,

practitioners and policymakers animate their engagement with EDI. The visual representation illustrates where each participant type concentrates their discursive attention: lecturers foregrounded their individual values and the evolving language of EDI; practitioners emphasised the relational dimensions of EDI work, particularly focusing on people and perceptions; while policymakers also focused on the language of EDI, though from a strategic and institutional positioning. These differentiated patterns of emphasis are significant, as they suggest that identity formation occurs through varied entry points and concerns shaped by professional role and institutional positioning. Figure 7 thus provides a schematic overview of the multidimensional nature of EDI identity construction, demonstrating how personal values, relational dynamics and institutional discourse intersect differently depending on one's location within the HE landscape.

Figure 8: Levels of animation by participant type, theme (Identity) and subthemes (Phase 5, Braun & Clarke, 2006)



Personal identity is socially and culturally formed (Brookfield, 2011:27) and shaped by upbringing and lived experiences of inequality or privilege that influence how people interpret and enact EDI policies (Crenshaw 1991, Collins, 2019). Role identity is constituted through professional positioning, role function and expectations and institutional

conditioning to dominant discourses, all of which may constrain or enable transformative practice (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Both personal and role identities are formed over time and continually constructed and reconstructed through social processes that are embedded in existing power relations (Alheit and Dausien, 2000). The data suggests that participants do not simply adopt professional roles; rather personal and role identities are malleable and soft and bleed into each other and exist in the context of prevalent HE discourses. A third aspect of identity that has surfaced from this study is the emerging identity of the relatively new institutional fixture of EDI, or how it becomes institutionalised with the HEI, and constituted by EDI practitioners, lecturers, policymakers, key institutional leaders and actors and the language in use. The data suggests that 'EDI' as a fixture and field of work becomes known through the language and structures and these work to create an EDI identity which enables institutional actors to know and understand EDI work. My tripartite organisation of findings on identity integrates personal, role and EDI identity, and emerged over time through recursive engagement with and reflection on the data. It foregrounds the embeddedness of these three aspects when it comes to creating new a new EDI institutional function tasked with egalitarian and social justice goals (notwithstanding the level of institutional support received to do this).

Personal Identity

In this section, there is no differentiation across cohorts in the presentation of findings as it was not significant which role participants occupied. It is clear that commitment to EDI emanates from a values-based commitment irrespective of the professional role occupied.

Participant journeys into EDI work vary greatly in detail but have a commonality in that they all have some experience of inequality, either for themselves or for a close loved one, which has been formative in developing their EDI values and beliefs. My analysis of the data collected

strongly foregrounds participants' lived experiences and connects the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives to the social world around them and in their HEI (Miles et al., 2014:11). Biographical reasons for driving EDI engagement vary greatly and emerge from not from abstract principles but from encounters with inequality and can be clustered as follows: personal experiences, that relate to identity such as sexism, racism, ableism, identifying as LGBTQ or a minority group; work and family circumstances, such as precarity at work, caring for children with special education needs, health and fertility issues; issues of class and socio-economic inequality; and academic disciplinary epistemologies³⁴. What unites these diverse experiences is their functioning as disruptive moments that fundamentally reorient participants' understanding of institutional structures. They become the primary lens for recognising and challenging institutional inequalities. A majority of participants articulate that they experienced a transformative shift either through cumulative lived experience or at a distinct moment in their lives. Across all participant cohorts, individual lived experience of these issues has been a catalyst to orienting them to EDI work and to enacting change to improve the experiences of identity groups and individuals in higher education.

A number of aspects of individual identity emerge as significant in the data. While these are all enmeshed and intersectional, it is useful to draw them out and name them. While these are identifiers, they are not indicative of the whole story. They include initial values formation, experiences of discrimination, precarity at work and caring responsibilities. While these mechanisms function intersectionally and rarely operate in isolation, their disaggregation exposes how EDI orientation develops through specific structural encounters rather than

³⁴ Lecturers are oriented to disciplinary epistemologies. Research has shown that STEM disciplines are less likely to have an EDI lens than humanities disciplines (will rephrase and get refs here)

general awareness. In the following section, participants name examples of each of these aspects of individual identity and often why this shapes how they interpret EDI. Participants talk about how they became 'EDI aware' and made sense of their own experiences, identities and biographies with and through the challenges they faced with their loved ones.

Initial values formation

Values formation begins long before professional entry and is rooted in family socialisation, educational experiences and early exposure to social justice concepts. Participants reflect on their upbringing and how they absorbed values in their household and through their lived experiences. Róisín talks about her working-class upbringing as instructive on her value formation and her understanding of equality:

So, I actually come from a background where I would be hyper aware of some of the issues of equality diversity and inclusion, when it comes to class issues. I suppose it does go back to my own upbringing again, that I understand what it's like to be marginalised, I understand what it's like, and it's not even really about deprivation or poverty. I think if you've experienced that side of ...I formed an understanding where equality, inclusion, it isn't like a buzzword, it's actually a life approach. Do you know what I mean? That it's almost as... but it's actually a value that comes from my own upbringing, and to be honest, and also my parents, would have been very open minded. My sister is autistic, and you know, I think it's a whole life approach, but also, ...I've got three children myself and I don't want them disrespected when they're in college...

Caoimhe also relates her commitment to EDI to her upbringing.

I mean I was drawn [to EDI] I suppose from a personal history where, I suppose we were brought up to value education, but we

were also brought up to help and bring the person behind you with you. So, I think I've had, when I reflect on my career, like that's a key part of it.

The data suggests that participants' upbringing, their social environments and the values that were modelled by their parents or caregivers in their homes were the foundation on which their commitment to equality and social justice was based. Another participant Ciara echoes the importance of her upbringing to her values-based commitment to EDI more broadly.

So, I guess I've always had a very strong social justice lens, stemming I guess from my childhood.

This suggests that upbringing and lived experience shape how participants interpret and enact EDI. Where Ciara's account positions lived experience as the particular condition that enables EDI consciousness, Cian reframes it as a shared human condition that can bridge resistance. Cian suggests conceptualising EDI through a discourse of lived experience for wider HE audiences. He proposes this as a way to translate the specificity of marginalised experience into an accessible entry point for those in more privileged positions. He believes this framing of identity and lived experience in a personal and applicable way could make EDI work resonate with staff and create an empathic understanding of diverse needs of identity groups.

We all bring our own self and we're a minority in something that we do, be it on gender, race, age, disability, sexual orientation, we're all unique combinations and we're all in a minority group in some respect, and I think if you can get that message through to people, they're more... can be more welcoming to the broader message, yeah.

In a similar vein, Áine speaks about how conditions for EDI are created when people are allowed to bring their full identity to work, and when

identity is accepted and the person affirmed, ultimately this works to the benefit of the HEI in terms of the return the institution will get from staff. She intimates that the converse is also true, if the institution does not value the individual, the individual will limit their efforts to the strict contractual confines and not exceed this.

I think if people are allowed space to bring their lived experience in and not have to just have a professional mask and demeanour - obviously we need that right? We need to get certain things done, but I have found there's more space and more value for EDI when people ...when you meet the whole person, when the whole person is invited in. And I suppose some of the hurt or injury can happen, and I've experienced this, and we've talked about that, like in terms of various things, you know, "we don't want to know about that" .. do you know, and it's fine, you know, you'll get less out of me then.

Experience of inequality / discrimination

Nine of the sixteen participants cited experiences of discrimination. These varied in extent, duration and forms of discrimination, the most predominant being directly encountering sexist behaviours and attitudes at work³⁵. The second most frequent cited was indirect experience of ableist behaviours which were directed at students and staff. Lived experience by its nature includes experience of discrimination, and this is another aspect that features in the data. Cian cites his own experience of discrimination as a jumping off point to working in EDI:

So, I've had a long-standing input or contribution towards equality in different environments that have worked in. And I suppose a lot of it stems from an innate interest in social justice and fairness, you know, growing up in [] as [] ... you know, I got to experience discrimination to an extent. I would have been brought up in a

³⁵ 13 out of 16 participants in this inquiry were women.

household where the politics would have been left of centre, would have been about society, would have been about less fortunate and those are the sort of values that run through me and come through I hope in the work that I do, that's certainly my intention. It's not just treating everyone the same, it about giving everybody the same opportunity and appreciating the starting points, are different.

Orla speaks about her experience of discrimination and regards the importance of working with people who are different to us in a collaborative way as instrumental to informing her values.

I suppose, like, lived experience in terms of sexism, I think, would be quite important as kind of a motivating factor for me, but also in terms of experiences of precarity. I would have been quite aware of this and noticed it and experienced it myself. But what's really, I think, informed my views and values much more, is working with people with different lived experience to mine... but it's only in kind of sharing and understanding different points of view and experiences that we can really have an approach that's going to work, for many more people. So yeah, I really value the collaborative, non-competitive approach in EDI.

Áine describes how experience of being a parent of children with additional learning needs surfaces in her empathic responses to students in the classroom and understanding of equity in the classroom:

My own lived experience, that is a big motivating factor you know, of having kids who are excluded in education... and having to.. and it is exhausting ... you don't walk away ...if you will need to walk away ...you find another path, ...and that's like, and I would like to do the same for any student that comes on my program or my door.

My analysis suggests that initial values formation, lived experience of inequalities and meaningful relationships with people who have different lived experience are instructive in authentic identity formation.

Caring responsibilities

Three of the participants link their commitment to EDI to their role as parents or carers of children with disabilities and they describe how their loved ones have been discriminated against and how they, in their role as parents or caregivers, have been motivated to take action on their behalf. They articulate how systems and structures are not fit for purpose to respond to the needs of people with disabilities and recount the exhaustion and despondency that this engenders for both the person living with a disability and the caregiver when repeatedly slamming up against dysfunctional support systems, and the forbearance and patience needed to continuously articulate a case for equality. Clodagh's response typifies this as she describes the lack of equality for her son and the personal advocacy role she has adopted in her role as a mother and in her professional life:

Look at on a personal level, I have a son with special needs. So, I have, for 21 years, been part beating the drum of equality, diversity and inclusion for him. And I see how people can be lost in systems and how their voice often isn't heard. And even when you do have channels that can help, they're just not functional, basically, and at the end of the day, you have zero net results, you know, for people that are in minority groups, let's say so. So, I've kind of lived the life for 20 years, whilst always trying to, in a calm and I suppose consistent way, explain why everybody should have a voice, and everybody is important, and everybody should have access to what they need to have a fulfilled life, if that makes sense...

So, I suppose I've been working really hard, a lot of it unknown to myself, bringing equality, diversity and inclusion into every aspect of my life and through me, then into the students' life. Does that make sense?

Findings on personal identity surface the question of the likelihood of engagement by individuals who do not have direct experience of inequality.

Role Identity

The research sought multiple perspectives from three cohorts involved in EDI work, each with distinct professional roles and ways of enacting EDI. Participants possess foundational values acquired over their lifetime which they activate in practical ways in their professional roles. My analysis suggests that all participants are committed to the values of EDI such as fairness, social responsibility, equity, in their personal lives; but how they conceive of EDI and their level of commitment show up differently in their professional roles, depending on the nature and scope of their work. As a scholar-practitioner, I am also interested in how participants integrate personal beliefs with professional responsibilities and institutional contexts and begin this section with a discussion taking a cohort-wide approach to trace broad patterns. I will then discuss each cohort in some detail to identify their positionality, how they conceive of EDI, the nature of their work and constraints they may encounter in the institutional setting.

Experiential learning and values

The data indicates that those involved in EDI work in Irish HE (similar to colleagues in business contexts) *'display strong personal commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, which, while sometimes being at odds with the organisational business case for diversity, is something they nevertheless continually attempt to enact via their own praxis'* (Greene and Kirton, 2022:225). Although no preferred term emerges to

describe values, several participants connect their individual values to their social world and talk about how they realise these values outside of their role and HEI, in the wider community or activated by critical incidents, such as addressing discriminatory behaviour within the workplace through union representation or classroom. These moments often reveal gaps between espoused values and enacted institutional behaviours, prompting deeper reflection Saoirse regards social justice values as key to her disposition and used her role in a union over many years as channel to address discriminatory practices for colleagues.

I was Branch Committee Officer [in a union] in various roles. Social justice is in my DNA. I hate unfairness, disrespect in the workplace, irrespective of what gender you are, what your circumstances are, what group you come from. But I've always had this kind of thing, this is one of my key values, and so issues that women in the workplace encountered in relation to coming back from maternity leave - so I had to take a lot of cases in that area. I was trying to highlight, to management, that you have to mind your staff. It's a very vulnerable time for them [women returning from maternity leave], and then I became more active on a national basis with my Union, taking motions to congress, and I suppose that kind of raises your awareness about injustices in the system.

Similarly, Eimear asserts that working in EDI is a vocation and affirms the importance for her of doing a job that aligns with her values and integrates personal beliefs with professional responsibilities in institutional contexts:

Yeah, I think it EDI definitely feels like a like a vocation that people feel called to, and I couldn't imagine doing a job that didn't feel really tied to values, and that's one of the reasons why I've stuck with it.

Oisín realises his values in public fora and local media by contesting racist narratives directed at immigrants and others that have prevailed in recent years.

I've published and then I've been doing some local radio interviews as well just to counter the narrative that's there because the message being put out there that [urban area] is full, that [urban area] is no place for anyone else, and there was a lot of messages around racism and discrimination, you know about this idea that black men were coming over to rape our women and children.

Aoibheann describes how she wants to 'make a difference' and sees the university as a microcosm where positive social change can be affected and modelled for wider society.

Well, I was always motivated to try and get more women in public life because I could see very clearly how the absence of diversity, and particularly the absence of women from public life was not to the benefit of public life in general.

And so, I could see that there were similar things happening in higher education in the university, and it just ... all the things that one could see, all the skewed things that I could see happening externally, were happening internally as well. And I found that if I can begin to change things internally, at least, at least that's some... that's a sphere in which I actually can make a difference.

Not all participants are active politically in such public ways as Oisín, but a strong pattern emerges on the critical awareness of participants like Aoibheann, Eimear, Saoirse and others to use their social and professional roles to elevate conversations on EDI and to drive positive change within their HEI, and to ensure that EDI is not just '*stuff and it's not white noise*', as Aisling puts it. Professional experience serves as a

crucible for values development and participants find ways of realising their values in their professional role identities.

The next section explores the role identity of EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers with regard to enactment of EDI.

EDI practitioner role identity

As discussed in chapter 2, the creation of a specific unit, the Centre for Excellence for EDI in the HEA, the identification of national EDI priorities and the mandatory requirement for institutional EDI- specific roles (HEA, 2016; HEA, 2018; HEA 2022a) have driven significant progress in HEIs since 2016. To ensure clarity and transparency in the context of national policy documents, it is important to explain why I use the term EDI practitioner and how I understand and use it for the purposes of this study. As mentioned in chapter 6, I use the term ‘EDI practitioner’ to describe a range of professional EDI roles graded from mid to senior level and ranging from EDI Officer, Manager, Director to VP³⁶. The purpose of this section is to scope out the role of EDI practitioners and in doing so, it signposts to my analysis of findings in subsequent chapters on how EDI comes into view, enactment and resistance.

The findings suggest that EDI practitioners exist at the threshold of institutional belonging, where they are neither fully assimilated into traditional hierarchies nor entirely external to them. EDI practitioners get to view the HEI from the ‘outside in’ as new appointees in new roles and from the ‘inside out’ – as they get a ‘whole of university’ view through their university-wide brief, while not being firmly embedded in structures. While EDI practitioners get to see different sides of the HEI, they are also perceived as ‘different’ within the HEI. A practitioner Aoife recounts this distinct identity as *‘they’re the EDI people’*, and a *‘curiosity’*. Thus, EDI practitioners become labelled or pigeonholed as ‘EDI’ and themselves

³⁶ I made an active decision to use this term to purposely enable a smudging of identifying details for this small cohort in Irish HE TUs to ensure anonymity.

come to absorb this identity of difference in a visceral way. Practitioners articulate being held in a lack of institutional esteem, a lack of parity with other functions and feelings of isolation and ‘otherness’ by virtue of their roles. Aoife says:

It definitely changes your.... for me, in an EDI role, I've learned so much about the university, so much about the people that I work with, the good, the bad, the ugly, you know, in terms of what you learn, you definitely see a different side to your organisation, don't you?

She later expresses concern about her future career prospects and doubts that she will be able to sustain herself working in EDI for many years ahead. Ahmed theorises this difference felt by diversity workers as the creation of institutional worlds, that give residence to some but not to others (2012:123). When people fit in, they become habituated within institutions. My analysis suggests that neither EDI practitioners or EDI work are habituated within their HEIs; rather they and their work are more often siloed, on the edges and viewed as not being core to the HEI mission. This sets EDI practitioners apart within the organisation and parallels findings from research by Greene and Kirton (2025:182), which asserts that diversity work is always at risk of being sidelined or sabotaged by those who perceive it as a distraction from ‘real’ institutional concerns. This is born out by contemporary examples from the US where the Trump administration has dismantled EDI infrastructures in government agencies, research units and universities in US in 2025. This gap between the aspirational scope of EDI roles and the institutional reality of their precariousness creates a fundamental tension and suggests deeper assumptions about what constitutes legitimate institutional work – assumptions that can render EDI initiatives expandable when institutional priorities shift.

The role of EDI practitioners is envisaged in job descriptions to be an impactful one and includes developing policies, practices and targeted

initiatives that ensure all students, staff and stakeholders at HEIs are treated equitably. Despite the three separated and distinct streams of EDI policy set out by the HEA (gender, race and sexual violence and harassment), EDI practitioners strive to address organisational EDI challenges through an intersectional lens to arrive at best practice solutions. HEIs cite the values of EDI as core to the mission of a progressive university, a site to model behaviours and prosocial values for wider society. Practitioners are tasked with responsibility to promote awareness of EDI in the university and in the wider region. Research suggests that practitioners face '*a range of paradoxes, tensions and dilemmas*' in their work (Kirton & Greene, 2022:226) and these manifest in this study also.

As outlined in chapter 5, analysis of EDI policies can be conceptualised under a '*hard*' and '*soft*' dichotomy. Ahmed (2007: 247) says, diversity practitioners need to '*produce themselves*' as credible and serious in terms defined by organisations, which means avoiding been seen as '*soft*', which translates as having little value to the organisation.

These terms emerge as part of the language of EDI, with the '*hard*' referring to accountability measures, reporting obligations to the HEA and other structures, funding levers; and the '*soft*' referring to visibility and awareness events, marking of diversity days/international days of recognition, events and initiatives. Indeed, '*soft*' can also be applied to personal and EDI identity. In the interviews, EDI practitioners articulate a critical awareness of the dichotomy of perceived '*soft*' and '*hard*' elements of EDI work and indeed some, unprompted, use these exact terms to describe their accounts of EDI work. They have an understanding of both the benefits of mandatory reporting requirements in terms of embedding EDI at a systemic level, and also that these accountability frameworks can be reductive. They have an understanding of the need to have awareness-raising events that foreground the experiences of identity groups and other important

issues, while also an acute awareness of how these can be perceived in a jaundiced way as performative, or virtue-signalling events that lack substance and ultimately leave inequalities unaddressed. I conceptualise this as awareness by practitioners of the need for bottom-up and top-down EDI initiatives. These findings are analysed in detail in chapter 8 on enactment.

To reach the middle ground of the HEI, practitioners are strategic and pragmatic in their orientation to prioritise working with the people who are supportive of the EDI agenda. At times their efforts are beset with difficulties, and this will be analysed in the subsequent chapter on bringing EDI into view. Practitioners experience resistance and backlash within HEIs and this requires emotional resilience and forbearance to endure. My analysis suggests that practitioners perceive that they are expected to endure this and are largely unsupported in dealing with this resistance. The institutional audience that practitioners communicate with encompasses both staff and students and they experience resistance from across this spectrum. This theme will be explored in chapter 10 on resistance. Sineád articulates the need for practitioners to have ‘*courage*’ in the face of resistance and talks about realising at meetings that ‘*apparently [I] took a risk by saying that, I didn’t know it was a risk at the time*’.

Practitioners indicated that they experience a lack of power and limited agency in their roles regardless of the seniority of their role. A majority of practitioners regarded colleagues in other functions, occupying posts of the same grade, as having more power and influence within the HEI, which imputes a lesser institutional value attributed to EDI roles. Aoife articulates her experience of how her senior EDI practitioner role is delegitimised by colleagues. She recounts that the EDI role is not afforded the same institutional gravitas or authority as equivalent senior roles. She describes how the role is disparaged by narratives that purport that such roles were ‘thought up’ by the HEA.

Yeah, it's an interesting role because, you know, a lot of the men were sniffing, and you know, a lot of people didn't, and still don't see the value of the work that we do here, or don't want to see the value of the work that we do, you know, and it's kind of like 'oh, the HEA made them have those [EDI] roles'. You know, and it's the same in the [senior EDI] role. Like you know, you're the [senior postholder], but you're not the numero uno [senior postholder]. Do you know what I mean? Like, there's a ranking order, EDI is down the bottom of it. It's kind of like, well, 'you're here because..', nobody says this ... and it's not everybody, but there is a kind of undercurrent of well, 'these are roles because they have to be roles, you know what I mean? And we're doing this to keep the HEA happy'. Some people feel it's very important and see the value, but not all.

Part of EDI identity relates to where it is placed in the de facto institutional ranking of priorities by the senior leadership team. This ranking is revealed through reporting lines (where EDI reports to), budget allocation (whether it received recurrent or project-based funding), staffing models (are staff on permanent or fixed term contracts - my own position, like many EDI posts is a fixed term appointment) and inclusion in decision-making (are EDI staff involved in strategic planning). If as Aoife asserts, EDI is at the bottom of the hierarchy, this does not create the conditions for enactment of policy discourses. This point is substantiated with further data in chapter 10 on resistance. As described previously, the role of EDI practitioners is relatively recent in Irish HEIs. This has the benefits in that it can be interpreted as affording a level of agility to respond and of not having to follow a rigid role blueprint of a predecessor; but also, constrains EDI practitioners in that it also attaches a lack of institutional esteem. Practitioner role identity is formed by experience, and this includes experience of navigating institutional structures and processes.

To summarise this section, EDI practitioners have a distinct role identity and are seen to personally embody EDI work within their HEIs. EDI practitioners encounter the tension between stated EDI commitments and institutional realities and develop nuanced understandings of how to effect change through repeated encounters with institutional resistance, policy implementation challenges, and the slow pace of cultural transformation. EDI practitioners occupy a unique role in that they communicate EDI work in multiple directions and to the entire HEI population: to senior management, academic and professional colleagues, service staff, undergraduate, postgraduate, research and international – in effect with all staff and students. Even though the role of the EDI practitioners is credited with leading change and progress within the institution, there is a view from within the EDI practitioner cohort on the lesser value attributed to EDI and to the roles of EDI people as compared with priorities that attract funding such as teaching and research or that pertain to academic excellence such as quality assurance. Having changed roles from lecturer to EDI practitioner, I have personally experienced the lower institutional esteem that is attributed to practitioner role and the resistance that EDI work attracts; this is most acute from academics and some senior leaders, who view EDI practitioners as having a limited and compliance-focused role. EDI practitioners often experience their institutions as being resistant to their work, a matter which will be taken up later in the chapters 8 and 9.

Lecturer role identity

All lecturers in the TU sector work under standardised contracts and the same terms and conditions apply. They are typically contracted to teach 16-18 hours per week if on a full-time contract and have administrative and other duties in addition to this. Niamh talks about the overwhelm faced by new lecturers in TUs, the need for pragmatism and to balance competing demands and how this can work against the additional work of embedding inclusive practices:

if you're in TU or an IoT, you're probably doing somewhere between 16 or 18 hours and that's if you don't overtime; and you may be involved in course coordination you might be involved in course development; you have to do all of these different modules about things now; you're involved in committees, correcting never ends. So, I think when people come in and they're not used to that system, certainly I think as well, if they may be a little bit older, so they've built up preconceptions as to what this role will look like - and it doesn't match up -it's very overwhelming. So, they can revert to, 'I need to get through this, so this is going to be my way of doing things'. So, they maybe don't build in inclusive practice. They maybe don't think about the principles of universal design when they're developing things, rolling out their modules, creating their content, giving feedback to finding assessments and things like that.

Lecturers are the most proximate to students and hence are influential in modelling behaviours and practices that reflect equality, democracy and social justice in 'the most radical space of possibility' (hooks, 1994), the classroom. Lecturers are not mandated to include EDI in their pedagogy and practice but have huge autonomy in their roles in terms of the values they imbue in curricula and how they deliver their classes. No options exist for buy-out of lecturing hours (course release) or additional pay incentives to incentivise engaging in EDI work. Lecturers who elect to bring an EDI lens to their teaching and learning do so on a voluntary basis, hence, there is an uneven uptake of lecturers who bring EDI into their teaching and learning.

Lecturers who were recruited for the study, by virtue of the fact that they answered the research invitation, had a positive disposition towards EDI and see it as part of their identity and value system as detailed in the previous section. Core values traverse across personal identity to role identity and manifest in the nature of the work. Some patterns emerged

from the data to show that lecturers experience institutional EDI efforts in various ways. These include in the physical infrastructure of the classroom and campus environment, 'soft' campaigns experienced in launches, events or spectacles that highlight diversity days, or celebrate particular identity groups or raise awareness of issues, e.g. consent framework, Athena Swan etc. In all cases, lecturers view these acts as 'non-performatives' (Ahmed, 2012) in which the values being espoused are not lived up to in a consistent way 'on the ground' for students and staff. Three lecturers express concern about the lack of inclusive practices for students in teaching and learning environments, discrimination and access issues. Róisín's example of the lack of inclusive practices for students is representative. She regularly encounters students from diverse backgrounds, witnesses their different learning needs, and observes the systemic barriers that they face. The abstract institutional commitments to inclusivity jar with her pedagogical values and she concludes that the institutional response is box-ticking:

I see my colleagues as well, all the time we're dealing with students who are on the verge of breaking down, students who are thinking of dropping out, students who just can't cope with the environment and you know. And we've got a huge amount of students at the moment, we're trying to get a space up and going, a space where students can go to. And I know the Disability Office just got funding and they're giving us two chairs, two soft chairs to put, and I just think, you know, when they said that, I said nothing because the Disability Officer is great... but I'm just thinking this is not a solution, to find a stairwell and put two chairs in it, is not [a solution]. It has to be a design solution, you know, and OK, maybe it's a start, but what worries me about this in some ways - EDI or disability - is that a lot of it can seem, and this isn't the staff's fault, like box ticking ... look, we've given these two chairs - that's that

issue sorted. And the issue isn't sorted, because it's not a systemic solution.

When asked about EDI issues faced by staff, lecturers cited issues such as precarious working, discriminatory norms and behaviours, and access issues for staff with disabilities.

Typically, lecturers had low familiarity with the language and nuance of EDI policy discourse. This is evidenced in comments from lecturers and from EDI practitioners commenting on the awareness of lecturers. Lecturers such as Clodagh: *'They're [policies] not on the radar, I don't think so. Not on the general radar'*; and Aisling, *'you can have a brilliant person write an excellent policy, but if Staff aren't aware that this is the policy that applies to me and what I'm doing, then it's meaningless'*. Practitioners such as Aoibheann comment, *'I think the answer there, is that most people are not aware of them, are not aware of their content'*; while Aoife remarks, *'I'd say low level awareness, very low'*; similarly Cian asserts, *'I think if you speak to people about EDI, they'll say it's about women and it's about Athena Swan. Yeah, and that's unhelpful'*;

Role identity and pedagogical approach

Pedagogical practice that is informed by EDI values refers to teaching approaches that recognise, value, and accommodate the diverse learning needs, backgrounds, experiences, and identities of all students and creating learning environments where every student can engage meaningfully and achieve their potential. Participants enact their values-based commitment to EDI in their pedagogy in various ways and do so unconsciously as these values are part of their core belief system. Niamh is clear about this and articulates that she had an EDI lens on her teaching and learning long before it became popularised in recent years:

In terms of where my values come from, I suppose, one is that I've always been very empathetic, so I understand that people are different, so it's not a big leap to understand that if people are

different, they might need different things and they mightn't interpret the world the same way.

So that thing of empathy, faith system and belief in accountability of self and others, I think those are the reasons that I tend to build EDI practice into teaching and course development without necessarily recognising that that's something that I'm doing, you know. It's more that it's always been a natural process, been a natural part of my pedagogy to look at my students and recognise that they're all different. It's not necessarily that I'm thinking about EDI. So, I think there is a distinction between people who already maybe have an understanding of practical inclusion, and maybe have empathy towards different types of students, versus people for whom this is new, and they haven't thought about before, you know. So sometimes I think what we will probably with find this conversation is, it might be difficult for me to separate out what I do because of EDI, versus what I do because I did it anyway. You know, I don't necessarily think of the EDI thing.

Áine is similarly clear on how her academic discipline and EDI values align in her role identity and how this supports her pedagogy and practice.

the values in that are around meeting the person in front of you and meeting the whole person as much as possible.

It is evident that these lecturers believe that inclusive pedagogy represents both a philosophical commitment to EDI and a practical approach to teaching.

Role identity and commitment to initiatives

In addition to their teaching hours, lecturers elect to commit to initiatives that align to their personal values. There are many worthy initiatives that are pitched to lecturers and compete for their time and attention, in addition to EDI – these include Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Academic Integrity, Artificial Intelligence (AI), National Technological University Transformation for Resilience and Recovery (N-TUTOR) to name a few. This multitude of options can lead to confusion and overwhelm in terms of what they can prioritise. There is also overlap between some of these initiatives and this can amount to information overload as lecturers try to discern between initiatives, for example EDI is a stream of N-TUTOR and also can be accounted for in some of the SDGs and UDL. Unlike designated duties recounted earlier, some of the aforementioned attract funding and options for buy-out of lecturing hours, which make these more attractive options for lecturers than thinking about how they can bring EDI into their pedagogy. These initiatives compete with each other to align to the interests of lecturers. The multiplicity of agendas and detailed frameworks underpinning them can be overwhelming.

All lecturers in this study were involved in embedding EDI despite this lack of incentive; half (4) were also involved in one or more of the aforementioned initiatives; and half commented on the disparity with peers who do not partake in the work and how this can lead to an uneven burden. It is plausible to suggest that the lack of willingness of peers to engage in EDI work can negatively influence lecturer uptake of EDI work.

Role identity and the impact of academic disciplines

The epistemology of the academic discipline of the lecturer impacts on their view of EDI. For the purpose of this study and to maintain confidentiality, I opt for a simple dichotomy of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) and Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Business and Law (AHSSBL) when referring to academic disciplines. There was strong consensus amongst lecturers that AHSSBL disciplines were more active, committed and progressive when it comes to EDI enactment and this is supported by the literature (Milian and Wijesingha, 2023) with studies repeatedly finding that social scientists are markedly more liberal than colleagues in STEM disciplines. All lecturers, both

STEM and AHSSBL lecturers agreed, and this view is typified by Clodagh a STEM lecturer:

See if you go into the STEM areas, they don't want to know all about a lot of stuff. They want to know, well, what do I need to do, you know, to get this over the line or whatever. So, there's always going to be competing agendas. There's always going to be competing priorities, some people's personal value systems will lead them in a certain direction. But what we do need is to have information that's relevant that's timely and that kind of makes people act in, you know, get engaged with it.

My analysis suggests that disciplinary environments and peer influence shape priorities by rewarding certain approaches while constraining others. In TUs, STEM disciplines attract the lion's share of research funding which is highly valued by HEIs as a revenue stream and reputationally. Lecturers in STEM are typically less interested in incorporating an EDI lens as it is not rewarded in their disciplines or considered core to their disciplinary epistemology.

Policy maker role identity

The professional identity of national policymakers in HE represents a distinct and specialised form of policy expertise that operates at the intersection of government, HEIs, legal and regulatory frameworks and social change. Policymakers work in aegis / external independent bodies and lead the development of national EDI policies for the higher education sector across the three priority areas of gender, race and sexual violence and harassment. They occupy positions of considerable influence in shaping national EDI policy, while navigating complex political, institutional and social dynamics. Policymakers perceive EDI as core commitment of HE and as a microcosm for wider society to model prosocial behaviours and norms. Their work involves systemic thinking that accounts for the entire HE system (including traditional

universities, TUs, IoTs and colleges), rather than individual institutions. Their roles require a capacity to analyse how equity policies interact with funding mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, and competitive dynamics among HEIs. view policy and concomitant funding as levers to enact EDI and stress the importance of accountability in reporting requirements and targets in order to show progress and create an evidence base. The work of policymakers involves understanding how EDI issues intersect with social change and political agendas as evidenced in Liam's description of the shaping of national priorities and acceleration in relation to antiracism policy for HEIs:

Absolutely. That [anti-immigrant sentiment] was definitely behind where it came from, you know, it was just the reality on the ground, you know. And look, we've seen the worst side of that, you know, in the Dublin riots, for example last year [November 2023]. So yeah, there was there was a real sense of, you know, we're moving so fast. So yeah, we were, we were very cognisant of that. Yeah, of what was happening on the ground.

Like other participants, policymakers have a strong values-based commitment to EDI and articulate biographical journeys into their role and interest in EDI that are similar to other participants.

By the nature of their roles, policymakers are removed from the HEI environment and from the immediacy of the frontline of institutional EDI work and therefore encounter significantly less resistance. Their expertise extends to building collaborative stakeholder networks to solicit views on policy proposals and initiatives. Once policy is launched, the role of policymakers is to observe, monitor and evaluate from the sidelines. They seek accountability on the implementation of policies in the form of mandatory reporting requirements and achievement of metrics to establish baselines and evidence progress. Across this small cohort of three participants, one policymaker conceptualises EDI according to the legal frame of the nine protected

characteristics; with the other two participants viewing it beyond the compliance frame of identity groups and stressing equity and inclusion.

Conclusion on personal and role identity

In the previous section I have analysed the data on personal identity and role identity intersect for participants in the context of their professional work in HEIs. Personal identity is shaped by upbringing and lived experiences of inequality or privilege. . If direct experience of discrimination or inequality is a prerequisite for becoming involved in EDI work, this is a significant challenge. Role identity is constituted through professional positioning, role description and expectations, engagement with peers and in the institutional environment. All of these experiences interact and impact on meaning perspectives of participants and how they make sense of the complex relationship between personal values and experiences and espoused institutional values and the often slow and uneven ways that policy is enacted in HEIs. Ball et al. agree that individuals make sense of policy through the lens of their own experiences, and this also affects the divergent ways in which policy is enacted, ‘thus enactments will be inflected by these different readings and are likely to diverge’ (Ball et al., 2012:15).

Participants demonstrate insight into their own biographical learning journey and how this has effected their values. My analysis indicates that participants are largely self-aware, resolute in their commitment to the values of EDI and thoughtful in their actions. Participants predominantly reflect a commitment to the moral argument for EDI and seek to enact change through their professional role, regardless of what role that is. This pattern is consistent and there is no difference across the three cohorts: all participants come to EDI work with similar values of equality and social justice and in a ‘sideways’ way. The expression of how participants enact EDI is different depending on their roles and they encounter resistance in different ways, and this will be explored in subsequent sections. Indeed, part of the work of this thesis is to explore

the positionality of participants from each of the three cohorts to better understand the ‘brick walls’ (Ahmed 2012) or systemic and structural barriers, that their values may slam into as they seek to enact EDI in their roles.

The 'linguaging' of an EDI identity

This section explores how participants understand and use the language of equality, diversity and inclusion and the assumptions that underpin this terminology of the relatively recent institutional fixture of EDI. My analysis suggests that EDI, as a fixture, has become an identity in active formation in HEIs, through the ‘language in use’ (Fairclough, 1992). Language is not neutral and how we use language in organisations can reproduce the status quo of academic hierarchies and governance structures, marginalise or oppress and also establish the identity of the organisational fixture and the people within it. The emergence of an EDI identity within Irish HE cannot be divorced from broader socio-political transformations that have fundamentally changed Irish society since the 1990s. The economic expansion of the Celtic Tiger and subsequent economic crash and austerity period, increasing immigration, the homelessness crisis and generational shifts in social attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and cultural difference have created historical moments when established institutional logics were destabilised and new organisational forms and social norms made possible. The formation of EDI identity thus occurs through ongoing negotiation between transformative social pressures and the default institutional inertia that is typical in HEIs. Language is key to creating an EDI identity and shaping discourse to create conditions for transformation.

My analysis indicates that there are formal and informal languages of EDI and participants routinely use terms to indicate this. Formal EDI language includes the language of accountability, reporting, metrics, policy targets, typically described as ‘*hard*’ and with masculine connotations. The informal language in use, typically ‘*soft*’ examples

from the fieldwork include adjectives such as *'fluffy'*, *'touchy-feely'*, and reductive descriptions such as *'tokenistic'*, *'virtue-signalling'*. Participants cite 'soft' terms when they describe how colleagues perceive EDI work, which is often repeated performative acts rather than existing as an essential institutional characteristic. Participants use 'hard' language to describe the multiple reporting requirements, preparing detailed applications for accreditation (such as Athena Swan) and many practitioners raise how these tasks are time-consuming and detract from doing the actual work of EDI such as policy document creation, committee establishment, training programme delivery, data collection exercises, and public communications about institutional commitment to EDI. This suggests that the real work of EDI is in the softer work, but this is viewed pejoratively by colleagues as performative and tokenistic. The 'hard' work is the data-driven and reporting requirements that HEIs must fulfil, but this is viewed as overly time-consuming and self-justifying for HEIs and invisible to the wider HEI population. These findings will be explored in the next chapter on how EDI comes into view, the focus here is on understanding how EDI is an identity in formation.

The naming of the work as Equality, Diversity and Inclusion or EDI gives it a status of official description, a definite identity as a nascent institutional fixture and situate it in official discourse to become part of routine institutional description. EDI is the current descriptor for equality work and has taken the place of earlier terms such as equal opportunities (Ahmed, 2012), social inclusion and access. EDI work requires shifting the focus from basic equality where everyone is treated the same, to a more equitable and inclusive interpretation where people get the supports that they need. The term EDI suggests a value-based project of transformation. When participants were asked what they thought of the choice of words used to name the work, there were divergent responses irrespective of cohort. A consistent pattern that

emerged was their critical interrogation of the acronym and 'language' of EDI, how it is perceived, used and constructed as identity. Participants deconstruct the acronym into its component parts and critique the appropriateness of each element. Caoimhe distinguishes between the different elements of EDI:

So, they're very different terms [equality, diversity and inclusion] and I think I know that they become compacted, but I think it's important that they're not, and that it doesn't become just an acronym.

For Saoirse, equity is a more important concept than equality when it comes to denoting EDI work:

The problem I have is, equality is grand but without equity it's no good. And I've been in conversations where I feel that there is a bit of a resistance by certain cohorts, to spending money or adding resources, that would actually give people who need it that jump up, you know?

Ciara also draws the distinction between equality and equity:

Umm, I guess I do have a bit of an issue with the term equality, and people's understanding of equality, that often when I'm talking about EDI work, I'm often clarifying that actually, when we're talking about equality, we're really talking about equity and this is what it means. So yeah, it is interesting, that as you say, EDI has become a thing, and the term equality is there, rather than equity. So, if I was to change anything, that would be one I would be looking at. I do think that because we use the word equality rather than equity, in a way, you know, if you took a critical lens to it, you could argue, well, what actual real meaningful change are we are we trying to achieve by talking about equality over equity? And so, yeah, I think I'd find that bit of it problematic and... So, to me it's around working, working on an equitable basis, so really

understanding the barriers, that different groups of people have, either in their studies or in their work.

Responses from these participants typify other responses that distinguish being equality and equity and suggest a preferred conceptualisation of EDI that prioritises equality of condition (Baker and Lynch, 2009) over equality of opportunity and foreground the primacy of related concepts like equity, social justice, belonging and integration.

Participants across the three cohorts, (Liam, Niamh, Saoirse, Róisín, Aisling, Sinead, Aoife) all specifically relate the ‘equality’ element of EDI to ‘hardlines’ of legislation, protected characteristics, HR and a formal enforcement procedure if basic rights and duties are not being met. While Saoirse and Ciara prefer the use of ‘equity’ to ‘equality’, Aoife thinks that ‘equality’ is the most important concept and that it should not be divested or watered down; she believes it is needed in the acronym, as it is heavy-hitting and less ‘woolly’ than the ‘D’ (diversity) and ‘I’ (inclusion) or ‘B’ (belonging). My analysis indicates that equality is this considered a ‘hard’ term, as it denotes rights, duties and legislative protections. The ‘hard’ is needed to temper the ‘soft’. Aoife asserts that the term equality keeps the focus on tackling inequalities and EDI enactment and that if the language is softened too much it will occlude the realities of the inequalities that exist: both hard and soft elements to EDI are required for it to be effective.

Belonging is easier than equality, you know, because equality is actually a much more difficult concept, whereas belonging is kind of nice and something ‘woolly’. You know, like people feel, like the university can be a lovely place where we are diverse and people feel like they belong, and I think that it's good, the way it should be, but it's kind of very soft language so it allows people, I think, to get away from actually their realities that are around equality or inequalities. So, I think to me the word equality is a really important part of it, because of inequality, you know that we have

to actually acknowledge that the rest of it is lovely. But you can kind of skirt around the issues a little bit. Yeah, I mean for me, it is all about equality. You know or tackling inequalities. So, I think if you do that, you know you'll get the other stuff, but that's the key, that's the key to it.

Aoife's contribution connects with Ahmed (2012) theorisation of the paradox between the routine uses of the language of diversity by HEIs and the experience of routinisation of institutional resistance to EDI. She asserts that the term diversity also relates to business case arguments, to diversity as a management term, something that needs to be managed and valued as a human resource and as a way of rebranding universities. Ahmed surmises that, 'the managerial focus on diversity works to individuate differences and conceal the continuation of systematic inequalities within universities' (Ahmed 2012:53). Aoife's points suggests that if, as Ahmed contends, language is softened too much by the substitution of hard-hitting terms like equality for softer terms like diversity, inclusion and belonging, this can function as a public relations containment strategy and be used to conceal the operation of systematic inequalities. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

Sinéad articulates the tensions between the hard and soft aspects of EDI and concludes that the purpose and impact of the work is the most important thing, and more important than the choice of words employed:

It's [EDI] a little bit soft and fluffy, but it's trying to have hard conversations!

And so I almost feel like the debate about which words you use is almost more of a distraction. It's like, does it really matter? It doesn't matter what words we use. What matters is what we're trying to achieve, and again you touched on it with some of the accreditation and some of the people that we've brought in. Like that, there's this double-edged sword that we have a dedicated resource now ... So there is the

language, I feel like it is less relevant, than the purpose, and I feel like the accreditations, although they can be a great focus like getting the organisation to realise that something needs to be achieved by a certain date, they can really become busy work for the people who came in to do good work.

Some participants proffered other acronyms, such as Sinéad who suggests Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI); the use of 'Integration' instead of 'Inclusion' is suggested by Áine; and Cian proposes the addition of Respect to the acronym.

Three participants think that the choice of language used doesn't matter, rather it is the work itself that matters, and if the grouping of ED and I make the work more palatable to institutions and thereby increase the possibility of making progress, then that is a positive result. These participants link what the naming of EDI in this way, does for the 'doing' of EDI work, and thus brings the focus back to enactment, the meaning of the work itself and the need for language to be active not just symbolic. Aoibheann echoes aspects of earlier comments by Sinéad imputing the importance of the 'doing' of EDI work and posits:

I think the acronym Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is widely recognised in the system now. It's also widely recognised outside of the university. Shortening it to D and I, diversity and inclusion, I think, leaves out the important element of equality or equity, which is the one I prefer to use, but. I reconcile myself to the fact that equality is the word that's been used. And ultimately, I think that it's up to us as leaders to put content into the acronym, and that content, I think, needs to be based around a social justice framing, which you can build in to the language of EDI - equality, diversity and inclusion.

Liam echoes this sentiment that the language is less important than the actual work, while also highlighting the autonomy of the senior leader to choose the language to describe the work of the unit.

I'll be honest with you, Mary, I don't think anywhere I've ever been, I don't think anyone has really given the language a huge amount of thought. You know, it's feels about right, people have been happy with it like most places I've ever been, they kind of go, ...well, you're the head of the unit, you call it what you need to call it. So, it ends up as D and I or EDI, or the gender piece comes in where that needs to be a focus. So, I've never known any really strong opinions about it, and I've seen it called all the variations that you've just mentioned. So, and I'm not sure I have a better answer than anyone else out there. The EDI fits quite nicely.

The views of Sinéad and Liam suggest a pragmatic approach to change, while possibly underestimating the semantics and the impact of language.

Áine wonders about the efficacy of making EDI a specific area of expertise, and whether this will de-expert others and promote handing over queries to the EDI office.

But so, both the naming of them [EDI] under that acronym and that umbrella is fairly recent, like it's only in the last couple of years really that it's coming to the fore and having institutional visibility and shape. And I feel like sometimes, like the language of EDI, can make people feel unexpert and can become a way in which, 'What? I don't know anything about that, you know, so over to you!'

Niamh believes that the additive nature of the acronym is confusing, given the different meaning that each element evokes, and that the acronym doesn't accurately reflect the work and can actually backfire when things are handled poorly by the HEI.

I think some of the confusion around the language is because they've been lumped together. Inclusion, diversity and equality - they're not the same thing. I mean, those activities are important, but the two things don't fit together because one, the diversity side becomes very, you know, initiative-oriented, in a way that, regardless of intent, can be divisive. Inclusion is a much more holistic practice. And I don't know that they marry in roles....people throw around the term [EDI] and, something will happen there, be it lack of communication around something or something would be forced in, or they'll be lack of framing and people will go, 'Talk about inclusion', in a 'this isn't very inclusive' way. So now it's becoming language that's being used to indicate when things are not being done well, you know.

The end of Niamh's contribution alludes to how the language of EDI can be repurposed to evidence when things are not being done. But the language of EDI is not solely about the 'doing of EDI', it is also about EDI as a constitutive identity that is coming into being in HEIs.

The majority of participants largely believe that the fact that there is an 'EDI' language that delimits the work is to be welcomed. Indeed, Cian, Óisín and Clodagh all comment that the fact that there is a language to engage people in equality at all is a good thing: it is a mark of progress to have a lexicon in itself. Cian's response typifies this view:

Well, I think that there is language and that it is in the vocabulary as a positive, because it's progression from where we would have been... I think that overall, we have a language, yeah, that talks about and inequalities, disparities, is a positive thing overall.

Focusing on EDI as a generic term can also obscure and create an illusion that all aspects of equality and diversity are being dealt with, when 'in reality higher education institutions are able to pick and choose

those which matter most to them' (Bhopal, 2023:336), or those which are identified as priorities at a sectoral level. Cian's abridged comment cited earlier, is extended to show his frustration with this approach and suggests a holistic structure to the framing of inequalities:

I think if you speak to people about EDI, they'll say it's about women and it's about Athena Swan. Yeah, and that's unhelpful. Obviously, it's better than not having a discussion about any form of inequality which would have been the case prior to that... I think what's been frustrating is that it's come piece meal – it started with gender and actually it shouldn't be with gender, it should be around equality as a number of themes. The focus was on the gender, OK, and now it's moved on to the sexual violence and race it, but it's sort of piece meal as opposed to structural. And from my experience previously we should have learned about that and should have had them more integrated, comprehensive as opposed to piece meal basically. But you know that's the way.

Cian's contribution illustrates the dilemma of dealing with multiple coexisting priorities, in an integrated way, representative of the tangled and complex nature of identity work.

Oisín moves beyond the terms of the acronym to how it is operationalised in everyday institutional practices and can become part of institutional identity formation that become evident in values, policy and action.

Yeah. So that on that kind of surface level, the language is probably, you know, it does what it says on the tin from a policy or a theoretical point of view. Like, definitely having the language there and having a policy and a framework has a positive impact that it's on people's radar around, you know, issues around social justice or equality or belonging, and they can kind of relate that under the banner of EDI. And maybe it does give a message out

to kind of more marginalised groups that, you know, this is an organisation that does look for, you know, different identities and recognises and values people with different identities. I suppose I'm wondering about the substance of it in the everyday practises and to me like I think from a strategy point of view, it's probably an effective...the language is effective because you know it's a similar template or language that we can all speak from an educator point of view and from a policy and an organisation point of view. But you know, I think culture eats strategy for breakfast every single time, you know. So, I think the cultural indoctrination of it is probably more critically important, so it's fine having the language, it's how the language is adopted into the organisation and I think that's into the everyday practices and into the strategy.

Here, Oisín acknowledges that EDI policy language has symbolic value, signalling institutional commitment and providing a shared framework, but questions whether this rhetoric translates into substantive cultural change within everyday institutional practices. The cultural indoctrination of EDI is achieved through repeated performative acts, construed as the 'soft' elements of EDI work. Regardless of divergent views on choice and semantics of the language, what is a consistent pattern in the data is the critical engagement of all participants in deconstructing the language. Kirton and Greene (2022: 150) note the recent linguistic shift of 'tacking on 'inclusion'' and how this responds to one aspect of the critique of the business case. They assert that 'conceptually, adding 'inclusion' softens the potentially negative connotations of the business case and discursively accords renewed legitimacy for diversity initiatives within a broader social purpose'. They note that they have seen 'equality' reappearing within practitioner discourses in the five years prior to 2022 (2022: 150) and that the acronym of EDI may signal a more integrated approach to the work.

In conclusion, the contradiction of hard and soft elements is pervasive in participant accounts of what EDI is and how it can become embedded in HEIs. There is a plurality of views on the importance of language in bringing EDI in to view in the HEI, none of which is mutually exclusive. This is across all cohorts and patterns could not be attributed to a specific cohort. These views range from the fact that there is now a language to name, create awareness and discuss equality is positive; to viewing language as secondary and even immaterial to the work of policy enactment; to the acronym facilitating the 'experting' and as a result the siloing of EDI as a fixture in institutional life; to how language can be used to occlude the realities of inequalities experienced in HEIs (Bhopal & Henderson, 2020) ; to how the language can be turned against itself if efforts at enactment fail. This analysis leads to the conclusion that the institutional fixture of EDI in HEIs is itself an identity in formation. EDI is characterised by ongoing negotiations between institutional actors regarding what EDI means, how it should be operationalised, and where and how it fits within established institutional hierarchies and governance structures. As it approaches 5-7 years of existence in TUs, this ambiguity is not merely a transitional phase to be resolved, but rather a constitutive feature of EDI's institutional emergence within the particular historical and cultural context of Irish HEIs. This raises the question of when will EDI be fully formed and integrated into established hierarchies and governance structures of HEIs. The languaging of EDI supports its identity as an institutional fixture and brings it into view in the HEI. The dichotomy of hard and soft language represents the inherent dilemmas of EDI work. Such understanding is crucial not only for the purposes of this research but for EDI practitioners seeking to navigate the complexities of institutional change in TUs in pursuit of more equitable and inclusive educational environments. But the language of EDI is not solely about the 'doing of EDI', it is also about EDI as a constitutive identity that is coming into being in HEIs. Institutions in the emergent TU sector have a window of opportunity to create new

institutional identities and sidestep traditional conceptualisations of HEIs as having stable predetermined identities.

Conclusion

The story of this research inquiry begins with the participant and what led them to EDI in their professional practice. In all cases, the interest of participants in EDI in their professional practice was linked to their personal biographies. Personal identity is key for participants. All referred to lived experience as fundamental to their commitment to EDI and as formative in their core beliefs and values. The professional role identity of participants is also significant in how they enact EDI in their practice. Given the different foci and parameters of each role, EDI shows up in different ways in the roles of EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers. Practitioners develop and enact policies, initiatives, benchmarks to embed EDI and try to track its effects. Lecturers can bring an EDI frame into their pedagogy and model these values in the classroom as part of their passion and drive to address issues of equality, diversity and inclusion. Lecturers subscribe to various disciplinary epistemologies and choose between competing priorities which can serve to support or diminish the legitimacy of EDI. In sum, there is no compulsion on lecturers to embed EDI or to undertake training. Policymakers come into EDI in the same way as others, through their different lived experiences. They occupy positions of significant influence while navigating complex political, institutional, and social dynamics that shape EDI policy across the HE sector.

My analysis suggests that all participants interpret inequalities in HE against the backdrop of their own experiences of inequality or difference and this is independent of the establishment of EDI as a fixture on the HE landscape. This suggests that EDI values of participants are ‘baked in’ over the life course from our early experiences onwards and internalised. According to Milian and Wijesingha (2023:451), ‘individuals’ worldviews served as a lens through which to develop

responses to external demands... and that worldviews are themselves products of individuals' lived experiences within local ecologies'. Individuals with lived experience of inequality, have acuity, relationality and a sharp radar to perceive other and similar inequalities which people face within their environment. Having an EDI lens is also related to being open to living, working and understanding people who have different lived experience; this in itself can be enriching. My data shows that personal identity is a determinant of who 'sees' EDI. Yet if EDI remains invisible to the broader institutional population on whom institutional transformation depends, then the transformative enactment of EDI work is severely limited.

Finally, the EDI fixture in HEIs is itself is an identity in formation, a dynamic process of becoming that challenges traditional conceptualisations of HEI identity as stable or predetermined. This identity is formed through the 'linguaging' of EDI. Just as individual identity is formed over time and is influenced by lived experiences, so too is EDI an identity in formation within the HEI and language is a way it comes into view. It emerges in the use of hard and soft language, denoting different aspects and contradictions of EDI work. Drawing on Ahmed's (2012) theory of performativity, EDI can be understood as an institutional identity that comes into being through its repeated articulation rather than existing as a pre-given entity. The continuous 'linguaging' of EDI - through policy documents, mission statements, strategic plans, and institutional communications and events - works to perform the identity that EDI claims to describe. This performative dimension challenges traditional assumptions of institutional identity as fixed or naturally occurring, revealing instead how EDI identity can emerge through discursive practices and performances which repeat acknowledgement of egalitarian ideals. This reveals the contingent and constructed nature of all forms of institutional identity.

In this chapter, I have sets out the emergence of identity as a key driver for participant involvement in EDI enactment in HE. In the HE context of EDI, identity for me has three components – personal identity, role identity and EDI identity through language. All are co-constituents and generative to EDI enactment. EDI is identity in formation for the individual and as an institutional fixture is marked by fundamental contradictions, such as the homogenous staff demographic profile set in contrast to the diverse student profile; and the coexistence of a rhetoric of transformation within bureaucratic structures designed to maintain stability and predictability. I will analyse other ways that EDI comes into view in the next chapter. I link this to excavating the EDI world overall and the enactment of EDI in HE.

Critical Summary

In positioning identity as personal (lived experience), role-based (professional enactment) and discursively performed by EDI functions (institutional ‘linguaging’), I must also turn the analytic gaze to my subject position as an EDI practitioner. My reading of participants acuity and radar for inequality, and my claim that personal identity determines who ‘sees’ EDI, is itself a claim made from inside that same interpretative frame: I am also someone whose worldview was ‘baked in’ through lived experience and who now sees EDI accordingly and must name this positionality. My scholar-practitioner standing likely sharpened my ability to recognise patterns participants described, while also risking a confirmatory pull to read the data in ways that validate a professional identity I hold a stake in.

Chapter 8 Findings on EDI in View

Introduction

This chapter explores how EDI comes into view in the university, building on the previous chapter's exploration of personal and role identity. As EDI values become embedded in professional identity, individuals develop greater attentiveness to EDI matters and increasingly bring an EDI lens to their work. I consider how EDI emerges and what puts it on the institutional map. It typically comes into view through several institutional mechanisms. These include establishing structures and actors; policy circulation, resourcing, levers, leadership, policy diffusion. For EDI practitioners, bringing EDI into view for HEI staff and students is a significant part of their job which is beset with challenges.

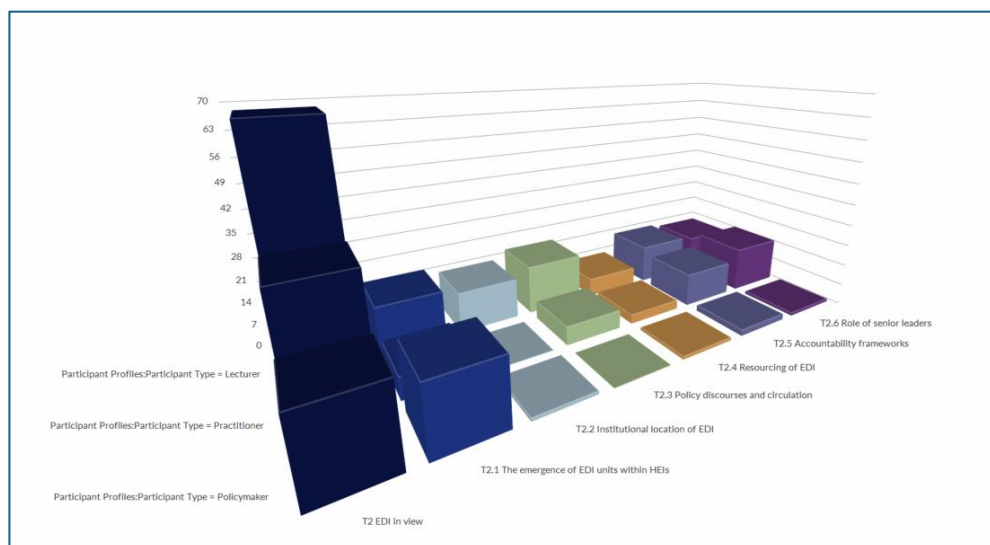
National EDI policy directives from the HEA circulate locally and bring EDI into view in the university by embedding policy narratives into institutional talk and structures; this supports and embeds policy circulation and mainstreaming. Key actors within HEIs circulate policies and these are interpreted, translated and reconstructed locally (Ball, 2012). Ideally, national policy commitments and values are taken up by institutional actors in documents such as strategic plans, local policies and procedures, performance agreements etc., and these articulate values and commitments made in national policies. However, authentic enactment of local policies cannot be assumed and what actually occurs is not well understood and rarely researched. This chapter will seek to address this gap in knowledge.

Policy implementation requires human, structural and material resourcing in order to be implemented. The human and structural resourcing involves the creation of actors and structures to drive, oversee and account for the implementation of policy; material resources are funding. The significance afforded to EDI policy discourses by senior leaders has a legitimising effect and impact on buy-in from staff and students: if leaders are seen to be inauthentic in their commitment to EDI, this can lead to resistance and cynicism from staff.

Notwithstanding this, in my data, at best lecturers communicated an understanding of an EDI policy headline, with a very tenuous grasp of detail. Unsurprisingly, the practitioners and policymakers I spoke with have an in-depth understanding of policies as this is essential to their roles. Finally, EDI also comes into view when specific milestones or requirements are mandated by policy such as achievement of an Athena Swan award.

Figure 9 illustrates the differential ways in which EDI comes into view across participant groups, mapping engagement with six key institutional dimensions. The visualisation reveals striking patterns in how lecturers, practitioners, and policymakers perceive and articulate EDI's institutional presence. Notably, lecturers are most animated about the overall visibility of EDI within the institution, suggesting that practitioners' efforts to publicise and promote EDI work are achieving their intended effect. Practitioners themselves demonstrate particularly pronounced engagement with the role of senior leaders, underscoring their strategic recognition that institutional change requires visible leadership commitment and advocacy from the top. While discussions across all participant types converge around institutional location, policy circulation, resourcing, and accountability frameworks, these variations in emphasis suggest that EDI's visibility is not uniform but rather emerges through multiple, role-specific vantage points.

Figure 9: Levels of animation by participant type, theme (EDI in view) and subthemes



Context

The emergence of the institutional fixture of ‘EDI’ began when EDI posts, concomitant EDI offices and other supporting institutional structures were created. A fixture is an entity with a specific identity that is understood by others. The acronym EDI is relatively new in higher education and even more so in technological universities. Following recommendations from the HEA (2016) for all HEIs to have a senior post at VP level or equivalent, over the period 2019-2021 EDI posts were created in the five TUs or predecessor IoTs. The VP is the key EDI actor in HEIs as the most senior EDI postholder. It is common for the VP post to include other extensive briefs such as human resources. EDI postholders who report to the VP bear titles such as Director of EDI, EDI Manager, EDI Officer. as described earlier, and for ease and anonymity all are referred to as ‘practitioners’ in this inquiry. Prior to the creation of EDI as a fixture, HE policy focused on issues like access and participation for students; this was addressed through Access Offices and Officers. Appointees to these roles were largely women. Once the HEI creates and fills an EDI post, postholders begin to get EDI into the

institutional discourse and drive awareness and progress through their efforts.

The emergence of EDI units within the HEI

The contours of the three participant cohorts were explained in the previous chapter. There are some differences in how cohorts describe the impact of the creation of EDI roles. For lecturers, the data shows a general pattern of observation of significant changes within the HEI since EDI practitioners started in their roles. The fixture of EDI within the institution is largely defined by the role of the EDI practitioner. EDI offices in IoTs were typically populated by one individual when initially established, whose main responsibility was writing the institutional application for an Athena Swan Bronze award. This has increased to 2-5 people in EDI offices since mergers to TUs as evidenced in an analysis by Watts and Fink (2024) which compared staffing levels between 2019 and 2024. Lecturers describe the appointment of the EDI practitioners as a *'landmark moment'*, secondly as, *'it feels something is different because the role is there'*, and thirdly as *'a huge change, a good change, just like a step change'*. Saoirse, a lecturer, saw the occupation of EDI roles as bringing definition and structure to EDI work.

And because now you had somebody, before that the structure really was very ad hoc. I suppose number #1 the hiring of the EDI manager was a positive step.

Another lecturer Caoimhe comments on the need for and impact of having a specific EDI person, with expertise, to drive the work and refers to the progress that can be made when there is an EDI *'expert'*. She articulates that it *'feels'* something is different when someone is driving EDI work and the work warrants someone with expertise in a specific role to drive the agenda, otherwise it will dissipate and become *'nobody's job'*.

I mean, I don't know when our EDI person came in, but for me it feels two years, maybe two or three and because maybe COVID took a bit of, you know, probably distracted a bit. But it's really become very amplified, certainly sort of post COVID, but I'm sure it was there maybe prior to that... I think that we do need an expert to drive it, and to get us all to see that we are all part of it. And so, I think, yeah, I know it could be a danger to say that 'Oh, that's EDI and it's done elsewhere', but I don't have the sense of that personally.

... But for me it feels something is different because that role [EDI] is there. So, I would think, yes, it's all our responsibility, but there's something significant about creating an office at a manager position saying, you know, this is something, because like, I know that it's everybody's job, but sometimes if it's everybody's job, it's nobody's job.

The practitioner cohort regard EDI as being embedded as an institutional fixture and also refer to how they perceive the wider staff body regard their role and work. Aoibheann discerns that staff are 'happy' and get a sense of 'comfort' from the articulation of EDI as part of the institution and also knowing that it is somebody's specific job to work on EDI matters.

So, EDI is a fixture. I think EDI has actually institutionalised itself, I think it is accepted as a fixture, and I think you know when you talk to staff around it, I think they're very happy that there's an articulation of the EDI agenda - for sure. And it's certainly given confidence to different sectors and different groups of people to actually express how they are in the world. So, for example, our LGBTQ Plus Community I think are now a lot more comfortable in being identified as a group in that way. Even though they still have issues around how visible they want to be, which I think is an indictment on the culture. But as I said, that

takes time to change, but at least now, among them, I don't get the same agonised calls from people, who can be 'out' if they want to be. So, I think that knowing that there is an EDI [function] there in the institution, an EDI office, or people whose job it is to both symbolically represent, and also substantively work on EDI, has been a great comfort to a lot of people. Yeah, and to neuro diverse people as well.

Another practitioner Aoife echoes this sentiment and believes that there is strong awareness of EDI in the sector as a whole and that it is largely welcomed by colleagues who see the work as making a difference, especially compared to how things were before the EDI unit was created.

But, people are aware of EDI, I think there's a good awareness in the sector of it, of what it is, and I think of what we do. So, I think, and probably because we have a lot of visibility, a lot of events, you know, a lot of stuff like that; there is good coverage and good communication. So, people are generally, I would say they're aware of what we do, but they might not like what we do sometimes, or they mightn't value what we do. But by and large, the feedback we get is positive, people do see what we do. And people do value and appreciate, I think, what we do. You know, they might not always [be able to go to events], they might say, 'I'm really sorry I never get to go to anything and it's great, and keep up the good work and what you're doing does make a difference', you know, or once every so often you get a couple of emails from people about something and they'll say, you know, 'Actually, thank you for doing XY or Z', and like you go, 'Oh, thank God!, it's great! Hallelujah!'

But I do think the work is seen and is appreciated, and people would always say there is a difference in our university now, than
six or seven years ago.

And there is, you know, and I see that there are things that would have happened then that you'd never do now.

Aoife's response suggests that there is a tension between visibility and legitimacy: while EDI has high institutional awareness through events and communications, recognition of its *value* remains conditional and uncertain. Her evident relief at receiving positive feedback could be as a result of operating in a context where the value of EDI work must be constantly demonstrated and validated, despite claims of progress and appreciation.

Understandably, as they are removed from the institutional settings, views from the policymaker cohort refer to the importance of having a structure and channel for communication through the senior EDI postholder and EDI office, as a means to disseminating EDI policy messages to the HEI populations. Orla, a policymaker comments on the importance of these senior roles for EDI:

So, I think it's really important that policymakers are talking to the leadership of institutions, but that prior to disseminating the policy to the leadership of institutions, there has been a conversation with the people who are going to be implementing this or who are going to be affected by it.

So, I think that's what we try to do in my neck of the woods anyway, where the policy aims to be reflective of the needs of the sector. But then we communicate initially to the heads of the institution or maybe perhaps to the Vice Presidents for EDI. But you know, at that senior level, because that's where our relationship [is], or that's how our relationship has been defined by the reviews of gender equality and different things. I think that that's really important.

And then what that creates then is a channel for a leadership to then communicate this wider in their institution whether they're

endorsing it or, you know, explaining it, whatever their role is going to be in that, but I think that's really important that we as policymakers create that channel. But we're conscious that sometimes that it might slow things down, or there might be an assumption that, 'oh, everybody knows about this already'. But I think that that's really valuable where leadership can kind of say, this has come in from the national level: here's what we as an institution are going to do. Or here's who's taking this on. Or here's the office that's going to be responsible for this.

Orla's contribution outlines the importance of clear designation of official channels within HEIs that policymakers communicate with, and that are respectful of hierarchy and chain of command; while also that following these challenges can slow things down and possibly lead to inertia.

An obvious way that brings EDI into view for staff and students in HEIs is by the establishment of senior EDI roles as key actors and an EDI office. There is strong affirmation from lecturers on the positive difference that the role and contribution of EDI practitioners to making EDI visible and perceived as an institutional fixture. Practitioners agree that EDI has come into view by virtue of these roles and offices and largely staff are appreciative of the work and see that value of it. Policymakers regard the EDI roles and structures as the conduit for policies within the HEI, and see the importance of adhering to approved channels of communication. The findings suggest that EDI practitioners have a distinct professional identity in the institution, characterised by a pedagogical dimension as institutional educators on inequalities and also shaped by their perpetual justification of EDI work which exists under conditions of ongoing scrutiny where value must be continuously proven, unlike other established functions, whose legitimacy is taken for granted.

Institutional location of EDI and processes

Bringing EDI into view is enhanced by the creation of actors and structures to support and drive EDI work. I understand actors as including both individuals and collective actors who navigate structures, operate within constraints and have the power to exert influence on discourses. Sectoral actors in HE are the Minister of DFHERIS, Secretary General. HEI actors are senior postholders for EDI discussed previously, Presidents and other senior academic and professional managers and decision-makers, administrators, individuals of influence, lecturers, professional staff and students. The HEA (2016) report recommends that an awareness and track record of EDI should be a criterion for getting senior management positions. When writing about policy in second level education in the UK, Ball et al. assert that not all actors in the policy process are equal (2012:49); they are positioned differently and take up different positions in relation to policy, including positions of indifference or avoidance. This is evident in how practitioners talk about their power and agency in their roles and will be discussed in later chapters. This is key to the research as how can EDI not reproduce inequality if inequality is inherent in the power structures that the EDI practitioner has to navigate.

I understand structures as enduring, systemic arrangements of power, norms and institutions that shape discourses. Sectoral structures are bodies like DFHERIS, HEA, Advance HE, Research Ireland, Horizon Europe, National EDI committees and practitioner networks. Influential HEI structures are governing bodies, academic councils, executive and management groups. These structures are key to embedding EDI considerations into HEI governance architecture. Other HEI structures include those with a specific EDI remit such as Athena Swan Self-Assessment Teams, Race Equality Working Groups, EDI Steering Groups and others. These structures require sufficient authority to influence institutional policies across all operational areas, from academic

programming, research to campus management, rather than being confined to peripheral advisory functions. These structures are key to putting oxygen into EDI policies and making them real and lived with the institution, particularly if there is positive social energy amongst the actors.

A lecturer, Clodagh, picks up on this need for EDI values to be oxygenated by courageous and committed actors in management roles to drive implementation of EDI policies. She identifies ‘*leading by example*’ and modelling behaviours, as a way to bring other staff along; otherwise there is a gap between policy and practice, and policies have limited value (Coffield et al, 2014).

It's a will to stick your neck out, and you can have all the different laws and regulations and policies and everything, but if the people on the ground are ignoring it....so often you need people in management positions, that individuals know that if I have a problem, I can go to them and they actually will take this seriously, you know? ... you have to have the right people in the positions too. And there has to be consequences as well if things aren't done. And I think that's a cultural thing. And I think that's going to take time in Ireland anyway. We can't change everything overnight. But what we can do is lead by example... does that makes sense? That's the way I see it anyway.

How EDI structures are set up, resourced and where they report to within the HEI all have an impact. A practitioner Sinéad speaks at length about the lack of clarity in terms of institutional and reporting structures that has followed from the reconfiguration from IoTs into TUs and the uncertainty and stress that this has caused for staff in her institution.

So we're easily another year [away] by the time that you're recruiting roles of that level [VP], I'm sure they're going to be taking quite a time. So that's why I think there's a disconnect between

expectation and reality of ...And I suppose EDI, I think EDI reveals the hypocrisy of it, because it's so celebrated and so showcased, and at the same time, if you don't have the basics, if you don't have job security or structural security or certainty of who you reporting to and what you're doing, then how are you supposed to do all the other stuff?

Another practitioner Cian calibrates institutional interest and value attributed to EDI by dissecting the amount of time afforded to discussion of EDI matters at an important institutional structure, the senior management meeting.

And I don't think it's overly well discussed at a senior level in the organisation. Our [senior EDI postholder] isn't an EDI VP, they have a dual role. They get a chance to speak at senior management team meeting. It happens only every two weeks. They can only speak on EDI at every other one of those. So that's once a month. That's eight or nine times a year. That's for 5 minutes. It's not enough. Now, I know they have a busy agenda...

If senior decision-makers do not legitimise EDI by giving it frequency, presence and sufficient airtime on agendas, then the only thing that is being embedded is that EDI considerations are not regarded as important in institutional life.

Policymakers are largely detached from HEI structures but interact with sectoral structures such as national committees, practitioner networks etc. that also serve to bring EDI into view within HEIs. Policymakers understand policy cycles, recognise how initiatives develop over time, and are required to maintain continuity across political transitions. Professional competence includes the ability to preserve policy momentum while adapting to changing political contexts and social

change. Liam cites the Programme for Government³⁷ as of crucial importance, an output of the governmental structures that policymakers have to navigate. Liam characterises what will be given priority by whether it is included in policy commitments for the term of new governments.

You know, if you're looking for the brass tacks when you think of the taxonomy of how these things actually happen, going back to the Programme for Government, that's the baseline. I mean that's the one that we have to deliver on and anything after that is always an extra and a bonus, you know so.

The commitments made in the Programme for Government direct the priorities of government departments and aegis bodies which then filter down to national committees, practitioner networks and to HEIs. Illustrating this, and of relevance to this study, the Programme for Government 2020 included the development of an action plan against racism (Government of Ireland, 2020:76) and tackling sexual violence and harassment in higher education (ibid, 2020: 99) as stated priorities and progress was made in both of these areas. The perception exists that challenges facing HEIs stand a better chance of being addressed and funded if they are publicly committed to in the Programme for Government. The same policymaker follows this by alluding to the importance of adjacent structures to create the social energy for progress and to bring EDI into view:

So those network and practitioner networks I think are hugely valuable and really important, because, they're the people that are going back, you know, influencing the language and the adoption of the policies, and driving whatever the next iteration is

³⁷ This is a negotiated agreement in advance of forming a government based on potential coalition parties' election manifestos. The document serves as a roadmap for government and civil servants are reluctant to deviate from it. (O'Cuilleánáin, 14/1/25)

and what where the focus is. So yeah, hugely important, I would say.

The emergence of EDI in HEIs creates new categories of institutional knowledge (diversity statistics, climate surveys, bias incident reports) and new positions (EDI practitioners) that reshape power relations within institutions. However, the insertion of EDI into established academic hierarchies also reveals the limits of its transformative potential. As Ahmed (2012) demonstrates in her analysis of diversity work in universities, institutional commitments to equality can become mechanisms for managing and containing challenges to existing power structures rather than fundamentally transforming them. Structures are relational arrangements constituted by actors who are enabled and constrained by various local factors and the existence of social energy to address EDI challenges. The Irish context reveals similar dynamics, where EDI structures may serve to legitimise existing institutional arrangements while creating an appearance of progressive change. This is of interest to me in terms of how decisions are made and how they can enable or hinder EDI policy development in HE. Another policymaker Orla, alludes to this social energy created from discussions and interactions and how this can shape policy.

I think there's other really good conversations, like, say, the National Committee for EDI is a really good space for live issues and things that are being developed. But it's really beneficial for us to hear from everyone on the ground and working in the institution, and that would be the same for the other groups and committees that we have. I think there's really robust discussion and that helps, inform our work. But as a kind of a more outward facing piece, the conference or even going to other events that we have and that we attend as well, it's really useful because, I think it's very easy, you could just be behind your desk and, you know, working away on a document the whole time. But when you get

out there and talk to people and hear presentations and ask questions, that's really helpful.

This comment is indicative of a pattern of similar responses from other policymakers and illustrates their view on the engaging collaboratively with broader networks, and to actively contribute to the meaningful dialogue and social energy which informs policy development. In effect, they are making a significant contribution to the 'worlding' of EDI (Ahmed, 2012).

Policy discourses and circulation

The policy discourses *du jour* and how they circulate impact on perceptions of what is important in HE and what staff should give their time and attention to. All accept that EDI is now part of the discourse of Irish HE and that there are a range of national policy initiatives which have gained prominence. Lecturers and practitioners were equally animated on how EDI policy gets talked about and circulates and a consistent pattern emerges on the challenges associated with embedding EDI policies.

In terms of EDI policy discourses, a consistent view emerges across the EDI practitioner and lecturer cohorts that the wider staff body have low-level awareness. All participants agree that there is low or surface-level awareness of the EDI policy landscape. Staff might be aware that a policy on gender or race exists but that is the extent of the awareness; an in-depth understanding or insight behind this is markedly absent. As noted briefly earlier, policies are largely not on the radar of lecturers; they have more immediate work priorities. A lecturer, Oisín describes the reality of quotidian conversations with colleagues:

Like, if I go for lunch, I went for lunch with colleagues today, like race doesn't come up, equality issues don't come up, it's timetable it's you know it's the everyday.

Aoibheann, a practitioner, ascribes this to the busyness of colleagues and believes it is the responsibility of EDI practitioners to meaningfully translate these policies and get them into circulation for staff and students and this must be done in the knowledge that it will take time and to temper expectations accordingly.

And you can't blame them because they [policies] are pretty heavy, pretty weighty documents and we have to find ways of translating them into language and into processes that are meaningful to the person at the front desk, or the lecturer at the classroom, or the person doing finance or something like that. And I think that's a process. I think that takes time. And I just wonder are we expecting ourselves to be a little... Are we being too hard on ourselves, saying well, this isn't yet embedded? 'Oh my God, we've done a bad job'. I think it takes time, because it takes time to shift the culture, because that's what we're really on about, we're talking about culture shifts.

Overall, a pattern emerges from participants on the importance of getting the message about EDI policies into the 'institutional flow' (Ahmed, 2012) but that this is a significant challenge. Aisling, a lecturer, describes this as:

So, like you said, you can have a brilliant person write an excellent policy, but if staff aren't aware that this is the policy that applies to me and what I'm doing, then it's meaningless.

Cian, a practitioner regards the existence of policy and getting it into the 'institutional flow of things' (Ahmed, 2012) as the means to permeate and change the culture of HEIs. Policy is the starting point of bringing EDI into view in the institution.

I think having fair, usable policies is a really important first step. They need to work and they need to be implementable, and they need to be promoted by individuals and barriers need to be

removed. That's easy to sit and say, but I don't think you can get into the culture without having those clear statements.

Oisín comments on what he believes is higher level of awareness of EDI policies in humanities disciplines where the values espoused in policies align to the disciplinary values of social justice, equality and democracy.

They [staff] probably are [aware of the Antiracism Principles for HE], yeah. In fairness to them, they probably are because it's probably like, particularly in humanities, it might be something on their radar as a pedagogical point of reference anyway and probably is involved in teaching, but again, you know, do we practise what we preach a lot of the time?

Circulating EDI policy discourses is further complicated when there are so many competing discourses. Niamh speaks animatedly and at some length about the proliferation of policy initiatives and the absence of meaningful framing of these initiatives, that ultimately results in poor understanding of the rationale, purpose and intended impact and works to silo and reduce buy-in from staff.

I mean, you see things come out sometimes and you know, for workshops and White Papers and things like that, and people are talking about doing certain things, like it's this radical new concept. And there's a cohort I think of lecturers who almost have a 'duh' type of response to it, which I know is not a very academic way of putting that, you know, there's kind of a 'oh wait other people aren't doing this'. Take the SDG's (Sustainable Development Goals). That's fine for people who have come across the concept of SDGs, for other people, they're going 'What are SDGs? Why do I have to change my module for it and what does it mean for me?' And that comes from a lack of framing, and with that lack of framing, there's a resistance. It's, you know, 'this is another thing I have to do', rather than, this is what these things

mean, practically speaking. This is what it might look like for you. Can you embed this? This is what embedding might look like. This is why we would do that. This is how it would benefit our students. This is how it would benefit their relationships. This is how it will benefit them as future employees when they go into the world and it's how it will benefit our classroom interactions. That piece is missing. The application is missing, you know, and that's what I mean when I talk about practical inclusion. You know, inclusion very often in higher education is based on the 9 grounds and that's fine. And there's a legal impetus for that. And those grounds exist for a reason. I'm not saying that we shouldn't focus on them, but that's where an awful lot of the whataboutery comes in I think, from other people, if they don't have lived experiences that are similar to those of people who are being protected under the nine grounds, or if you're in one of the categorisations under the nine grounds, you don't have shared experiences with other people in that cohort, you can feel like there's nothing there for you.

And again, that's framing, like it's a lack of framing. So, lecturers don't understand. Administrators don't understand. Students don't understand. You've got a whole group of people who know they're being told that they have to do something, but they don't understand why they have to do it. So, I think framing, giving them the scope to have to contribute to conversations in a way that is relevant to them, and then engaging in expectation management, that's how I would deal with that.

Niamh's critique gives a topography of policy circulation in HE. It starts with the 'massive push' to get EDI into the HE ether, to birth the policy discourse to the institution. But the lack of framing creates resistance as people do not see how it is relevant to them or their students or who it will benefit. We see from Niamh's example that the policy comes into view in a way that makes assumptions about people's knowledge of

issues and this often creates a disconnect from their meaning schemes (Mezirow, 1991) which works against its enactment. The policy is presented in isolation and this lack of framing ultimately does a disservice to its enactment.

Framing discussions of EDI policy with colleagues is a tricky endeavour as recounted by Cian, a practitioner. His description of how he ‘works a vocabulary’ to frame discussions with white males colleagues on the equalisation of privilege to be impactful and thought-provoking shows his skilful method. He begins by acknowledging that his ability to engage in these conversations is bolstered by the fact that he is a member of this ingroup.

I mentioned the cohort of White middle-aged men and you know, in some respects I'm one of those so I can tap into that group...I think we also need to frame some language around saying, ‘your period of privilege has come to an end’. Doesn't mean you're hard done by, or put upon, but your period of privilege, and now that's been equalised out a bit, but that's not a threat to you. What's in it for you? Well, you're still white, male, permanent, 6 figures, pension, your world has not changed. You're still privileged. And it's this notion that ceasing to be privileged means you're underprivileged or disadvantaged - it's nonsense.

So, we need to, I think we need to work a vocabulary around engaging people in that sort of a discussion. And I sit and have some of those discussions with colleagues and you know when you get someone to push back at you, and we can jest about it... and at the end of it, I can still say, well, then you know you've got your six weeks holidays, you've got your six figures out, you've got your pension coming in and you're worried about what it's going to be. This or that? You know, are you really hard done by? Yeah, you know, we need to engage that constructively, sensitively. But in a way, often they'll say, ‘you know, you're right’. So we're

in quite a closeted world. And we need to not back away from some of those discussions but do it in a way that doesn't get people's backs up.

Cian's conversation typifies the difficult labour of EDI. His response reveals how EDI work requires emotional labour and rhetorical strategy to manage defensive reactions from dominant groups, effectively making inequality palatable enough to be heard. The acknowledgment that *'we need to not back away from some of those discussions but do it in a way that doesn't get people's backs up'* exposes a central tension in EDI practice: the need to speak uncomfortable truths while simultaneously protecting privileged sensibilities to maintain dialogue and influence. Cian strategically deploys his own privilege to surface such discussions. A similar conversation on white male privilege initiated by a female colleague is less inclined to land as well.

Conversations such as the ones recounted are troublesome to engage in and require skill and nous to navigate. They are hard work, and the risk of alienating colleagues and sidelining oneself from the social milieu is real. Both examples from Niamh and Cian emphasise the importance of not just policy circulation, but framing of the policy discourse, as an enabler for enactment. For lecturers and EDI practitioners, the nature of the HE policy landscape is changeable and cluttered and it is difficult to carve out space for framing EDI policy discourses when there are many other higher status discourses to compete with. Policymakers are largely absent from this discussion on how policies circulate as articulated by Liam, *'Once we launch stuff out there, policy-wise, you know, we kind of stand back a little bit.'*

Resourcing of EDI

How and the extent to which EDI work is resourced impacts on what can be achieved. The allocation of resources to EDI initiatives represents how EDI identity moves from abstract discourse to concrete institutional

reality. Just like the creation of EDI units and staffing allocations actively construct EDI as a legitimate institutional priority, so too funding shows how institutional ‘linguaging’ gains credibility through resource commitments that make EDI tangible. The extent to which EDI units are resourced with EDI practitioners and officer posts has financial implications for HEI, as does the level of funding for EDI initiatives. The EDI budget is the interpretative frame through which policy is viewed as policy translation activities and initiatives need to be staffed and funded (Ball et al, 2012). Participants discern that value is placed on something when it is funded, and whether and how EDI is resourced has an impact on it coming into view with HEIs.

The lack of resourcing or under-resourcing is raised consistently by participants across the three cohorts although it is experienced differently. The HEI can demonstrate valuing of EDI through how it is resourced, e.g. creating EDI posts and structures and committees to drive and support EDI work. Before exploring responses from each cohort specific, I present the response from one lecturer, Oisín which typifies the general view of participants:

Yeah, like my initial instinct to that question is, you know, follow the money and you'll get the answer to that question. And you can see where money's being spent in the university and I think EDI is way down the pecking order, when it comes to that. And like, I think it's not just good enough to have it as an agenda item on a senior management meeting. I think it has to permeate throughout university life. I kind of have a couple of examples of that, but you know from a strategic point of view it's there, and you know, at various levels of decision-making, it's there. But I think it has to go into daily operations you know, and that that's from the top level down, you know, at the at the leadership and governance level.

EDI practitioners' experience of resourcing

Practitioners experience the vagaries and inconsistencies of resourcing directly in the expanding work brief of EDI initiatives they are expected to implement and the limited funding that is allocated. The resourcing issue is described by a practitioner Aoife as a state of being 'stuck':

You know, we're stuck in a certain - we certainly are - with the resources we have. We're stuck at certain points. We can kind of manage what we're doing, barely. We cannot do anymore.

There is reliance on the goodwill of staff in TUs to continue with an ever-expanding body of work such as gender pay gap and public sector duty reporting, race, gender based violence, gender identity and expression. This expanded work brief comes in the context of newly created and merged institutions with interim organisational structures, without an allocation of additional resources, or security in relation to basic conditions of employment or reporting structures, as articulated by a practitioner Sinéad.

In EDI, it seems that nobody is paying attention to how much we're asking people to do, and how many people are actually committed full-time to doing it. So there's this huge disconnect, and yet an expectation that we will always be involved with everything...

This view suggests that there is a lack of understanding and valuing of the workload of EDI practitioners, who are most often structurally located in the middle ground of institutional hierarchies, and mediating top-down messages from senior leaders and bottom-up messages from staff and students. Sinéad continues to articulate the forbearance expected of practitioners working in uncertain and chaotic conditions:

And I think the disconnect between what EDI is and how people do it, is kind of in alignment with the disconnect of how an

organisation is supposed to function - and yet the lack of structure to get us there. Like I noticed it when I first joined, there seems to be a real reliance on goodwill and patience, and an assumption that well people aren't gonna go anywhere, like that the staff will just stick it out, and we'll do it for the students. We'll do it for our reputations. We'll do it for the organisation, whatever it is, that there is, like, an assumption that everyone would just hold their breath and keep waiting...

Lecturers' experience of resourcing

Lecturers experience resourcing of EDI differently. Lecturer contracts in the TU sector designate 16 teaching hours per week, with administrative/service responsibilities, quality assurance, and appropriate activities as designated by their Department. This mitigates against additional EDI work which can be a slow and time-consuming endeavour. For lecturers, EDI work can take the form of reviewing modules to generate an inclusive curriculum, antiracism/transgender/UDL training, contributing to institutional working groups on race, gender etc., involvement in student-facing EDI initiatives such as celebrating diversity days, organising reading groups etc. A response from Caoimhe typifies the view of that cohort and describes the counterpoint between wanting to be involved in EDI work and the reality of the teaching contract:

I mean, I think one of the big things I was about to say, about any of this [EDI] work, is like, 16 hours of lectures a week, you know, with lots of diversity, and you know the emotional labour of teaching diverse students, I just think it mitigates against this kind of work. You know where people need time, you know they need time. But like at the end of the day, if you've got like, I mean when I was teaching, I would have 5 modules. So, like you know, 5 by 3 [hours per module] equals 15 hours and then I'd have an hour of probably five or six students on FYPs (final year projects). So, like,

there was really very little time to do the kind of work, you know, redesigning or anything like that, you know.

In lecturer contracts, EDI work does not feature. This undermines the institutional commitment to embed EDI in all aspects of institutional life.

Like Caoimhe, Saoirse accounts for reasons for lack of engagement by lecturers but asserts that inclusive practices need to be modelled and communicated to a wider audience and that will have the effect of nudging other lecturers to follow their example.

I think the trick they're missing is that you know so many of us are doing these things, and I think actually they should let the rest of the world know that we are doing these so that they can say, well, look, [Saoirse] is a busy woman and she's done that. And you know, and she's delighted to do it. And this is her tuppence ha'penny about it, but let people know that we're all doing this because, it kind nudges another person along [in terms of] Why am I not doing this? You know?

Róisín who is heavily involved in various streams of EDI work takes a less sympathetic view of her peers than Caoimhe or Saoirse and contests the view that lecturers do not engage with EDI considerations because of high teaching loads or lack of role models. She attributes the gap between bottom-up and top-down implementation of EDI initiatives to the indifference of academic staff to get engaged in the work of supporting activities that are equality related and the fact that it is not referenced in the academic contract.

And I've seen attempts, but yeah, there is a gap. There's a massive gap somewhere, but I do think a lot of that gap we can see, is the individuals as well, is that desire, the individual desire of the individual staff. And because if I can do it, and I don't have that many resources, I'm precarious, as I keep saying, but I can still be part of the Allies group. I can still advocate for students when and

where I can. I have dealings with, and I know the EDI office by name. I know that I've actually chosen to do that, and I just wonder, you know, how others, it's so difficult to get other people to choose to do anything outside their immediate contract.

Róisín raises the question of what will move the needle in terms of lecturer involvement in EDI work given the rigidity of the contract and lack of incentivisation. Both Róisín and Saoirse trouble the notion of how, as busy lecturers, they can account in their practice for EDI considerations, but colleagues choose not to. This echoes Milian & Wijesingha's finding discussed earlier in chapter 4, that lecturers 'appear to be generally missing in action' (2023:458).

Policymakers' experience of resourcing

Policymakers are mindful that funding for EDI initiatives is key to their success. There is an awareness from all participants that EDI work has grown but resourcing for it has not. This resonates with practitioners, and Sinéad describes this as

I think just kind of the summary point around, I think EDI work has really grown, and the stakes get higher, and it continues to evolve, and I'm not sure that's reflected in how we resource EDI in institutions. There's still a big piece of work to do around [that].

A policymaker Eimear agrees that funding conveys value but cautions against backlash against funding EDI initiatives.

I think it absolutely is helpful in terms of raising the stakes of EDI work. It also opens us up to backlash, I think, in a way that is, that we have to be very careful around how we manage it.

Overall, the prevalent view from participants is that the EDI brief has expanded greatly in recent years and this has not been accounted for in institutional structures, funding and human resources or workload. Practitioners and lecturers experience this differently. Practitioners face

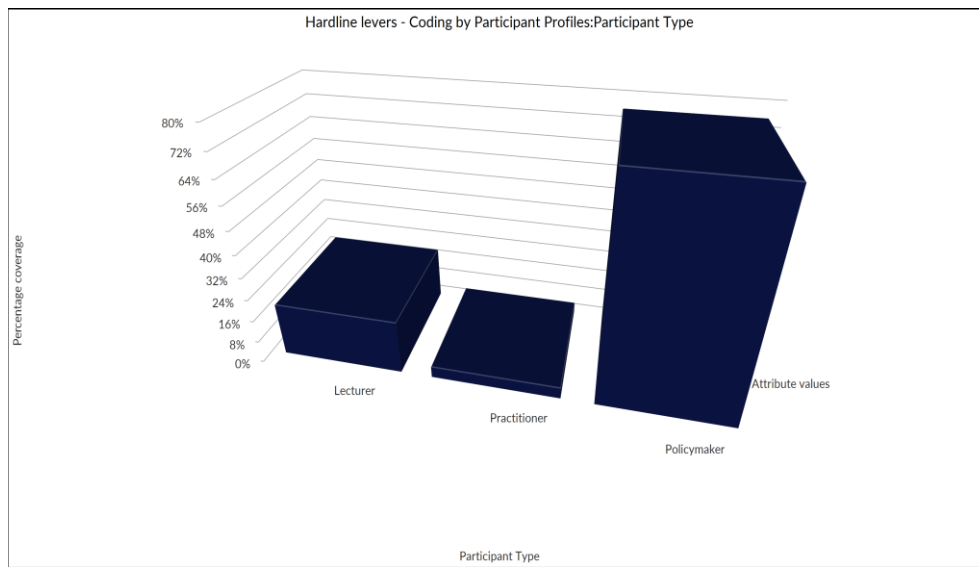
a miasma of initiatives across a widening number of identity groups; lecturers are at full capacity with teaching administrative duties and are challenged to find the time and headspace to invest into an additional workstream. To do this in a sustainable way that will enable a consistent approach, EDI must be resourced at a structural level both by staffing EDI offices adequately and through reforms to the teaching contract.

Accountability frameworks

When initiatives are resourced, within the neoliberal HE framework, they must then be reported on by what I term ‘hardline’ levers, that pertain to accountability metrics. The amount and sources of funding allocated to areas within HEIs has an impact on where the university’s values are, and the assumptive worlds there are rooted in, such as globalisation, individualism and marketisation. When language is framed and targets are set for EDI workstreams, they are accompanied by measures that demand an audit trail, arguably to show accountability to drive progress. This section will explore how the ‘linguaging’ of EDI in this way affords it legitimacy and enables institutional recognition, while potentially limiting its transformative potential.

Participants have an awareness of the prevalence of the neo-liberal ethos of marketisation and performativity in Irish HE with lecturers and practitioners largely taking a critical view of this and policymakers viewing it as *realpolitik*, a pragmatic way to track and order initiatives and ensure their effectiveness. Examples of these include how participants talk about funding streams. Cohorts are differentiated here with the highest levels of animation from policymakers (Figure 10) on the value of funding levers and incentives for HEIs to perform well on equality metrics, and the importance of measuring these to show progress. They are fluent in neoliberal language of accountability in their comments and fully committed to the value of these measures in improving EDI outcomes.

Figure 10: Participant levels of animation on funding levers



Core funding ‘coups’

Liam, a policymaker comments that the two levers at their disposal to drive progress are policy and budget and cited the most notable achievements were in areas which received funding. He justifies the need for accountability to determine how effective the intervention has been and in order to track progress and inform future policy decisions.

He gives the following example:

So, the Sexual Violence and Harassment Managers is a good example there. Because we got it into core funding, that is something that's absolutely embedded into the agenda. I think the move to get a Vice President, as in, EDI reporting into a vice president in each institution.... that was a real coup because it put it on the management, the highest management level in each institution. That was a real coup. That made a big difference because we could kind of talk to that level, you know, so you're putting the policy in at that level. That was a good one.

I think any of the any of the actual initiatives, any of the initiatives, where we backed them up with the funding, they landed well. So

for example the SALI³⁸, you know it's quite a big cost to SALI for example. So, when you back it up with the funding like that, and the funding is a clear funding stream. So what the HEIs don't want is for us to issue something else that they have to do, and they have to do it from their core funding pot as exists, because of all the other pressures.

But I suppose, it was just that the importance ... to be able to say, well, look, there is a shift and here's how we've measured it. Especially probably because it was new, you know to be able to measure it, otherwise, it would have been money following money for, you know, for what? For what cause, you know.

Liam's contribution surfaces the impact of funding policy objectives separately, outside of the core funding pot allocated to HEIs. In the case of the creation of Sexual Violence and Harassment Managers posts, he describes this as a 'coup'. The implication is that when HEIs are expected to fund activities from their core funding pot, what are viewed as extraneous and non-core initiatives are unlikely to happen. One such example of a policy recommendation which is expected to come from core funding is the establishment of systems for diversity data-collections both within institutions and a sector wide level. This has featured in a range of policy documents (HEA, 2016, HEA, 2018, HEA, 2022b) but has yet to be implemented consistently by HEIs and at a sectoral level³⁹. The fact that there has been no progress on this recommendation to date, despite it consistently featuring in policy documents, suggests that funding may be required to drive progress.

³⁸ Senior Academic Leadership Initiative was a competitive scheme launched by the HEA in 2019. It is envisaged that 45 senior academic leadership posts will be awarded to HEIs over three years to assist in accelerating gender balance at senior levels.

³⁹ While 85% of HEIs use Access/People XD/CoreHR as their HR Information System to capture diversity data and this should make the introduction of a sector-wide approach more straightforward, HEIs are operating various different versions of this software, and the use of the systems functionality varied greatly from one HEI to the next (Nestor, Reilly and Costelloe, 2025).

Competitive initiatives

Similarly, the SALI scheme, although a competitive process (not every HEI received a post but rather had to submit applications which were peer-reviewed and compete for a limited number of posts), is another initiative that has effected change in terms of the number of women in senior academic posts. Although the impact in the TU sector was marginal with only 2 of the 26 posts being allocated to TUs at the time of writing⁴⁰. My analysis suggests that deploying separate funding streams outside of the core funding pot allocated to HEIs is the most powerful way to expedite target-driven policy obligations. Policymaker Orla alludes to how including a competitive aspect, such as in the SALI scheme, can be effective, whereby HEIs can be benchmarked against each other in terms of progress made.

Yeah, levers and targets can be used as a positive thing where institutions don't want to be in last place when it comes to these things. So yeah, I think they're powerful. And in terms of what's worked well, I think the data has a really big role to play there because people can now benchmark and they can see, oh, you know, oh, this institution has whatever percentage of women professors, and we only have this. And the data is quite granular as well.

External levers that bring EDI into view and track funding are mentioned also and regarded as bolstering the Irish frameworks, e.g. Horizon Europe. Internally, institutional action plans required by policy frameworks such as Athena Swan for gender equality, the Consent framework for sexual violence and harassment, and the Antiracism principles, are regarded by Orla as ‘*living documents*’ that can be

⁴⁰ A review of SALI cycles 1 and 2 shows the allocation of appointments [Senior Academic Leadership Initiative \(SALI\) | Irish Universities Association](#).

adapted to ensure the work is meaningful locally and the risk of the ‘tick box’ is avoided.

The System Performance Framework 2023-2028 and HEI reporting obligations

Since 2024, there is a new iteration of the performance framework which ‘sets out parameters under which designated institutions of higher education identify their contribution to the achievement of institutional and national strategy, as appropriate to their mission, scale, location, and strategic plan’⁴¹. In the new framework EDI is embedded as a transversal area that reflects national system level priorities for the higher education and research system. It will be interesting to see how this is addressed by HEIs and responded to by the HEA. Orla views the inclusion of EDI as a transversal as potentially giving more scope for meaningfully embedding EDI across HEIs and also contributing to an evidence-base:

[there is] a new performance framework, I think it's really positive in that EDI is a transversal across all the different pillars of the performance framework, so while it's optional to institutions to include EDI, there's incentives in the performance framework, there's performance funding. So, I think it's really positive in that good work in EDI can be rewarded, but also in having it as a transversal, it's not siloing EDI into any particular part of the institution. It's saying that EDI matters across all areas, and it's up to your institution to fit that in where it most makes sense for you, because that's what I think we want to see is institutions responding to need, you know, rather than just picking from a menu of good practice that they think will go down well. So, it's speaking to that, data-driven evidence base, that people are

⁴¹ [System Performance Framework | Funding, Governance and Performance | Higher Education Authority](#)

acting based on need, and yet by having it in that in that performance agreement I think that's really important.

Overall and unsurprisingly, policymakers have a strong rationale on the need for reporting mechanisms to establish a baseline and demonstrate progress. How this cohort view reporting requirements as they pertain to enactment will also be discussed in the next chapter.

Lecturers had a particularly low level of engagement on accountability and funding levers. A lecturer, Saoirse, has a more jaundiced view on the purpose and accountability of reporting requirements. She questions the lack of institutional accountability and penalties issued to HEIs when targets from hardline measures like the performance compacts and Athena Swan are missed. She highlights the perceived lack of institutional imperative and transparency and repercussions when objectives are unmet.

I've been very much aware of compacts down through the years, but never aware of someone rapping them on the knuckles if you don't achieve these things! Uh, you know there are no reports, you know, no kind of scorecards on this, so I don't know, is it kind of meaningless at the end of the day?... You can read the compacts, but there's no one coming down saying, well, you didn't achieve that, hence, you know, less funding or hence this, or hence that. So, I'd love to think that, you know, do you know that Athena Swan with its own list of goals in it, that we will be held accountable the next time we go looking for the next award. But the compacts, I mean, again, the accountability, I just don't think it's there at the end of the day...I just can't see accountability. So I see loads of lovely documents, and they'll produce a lot of other lovely reports.

In summary, according to policymakers and practitioners funding levers and accountability mechanisms are important ways to build the base for EDI work by legitimising it and bringing it into view in HE. The

predominant view from participants is that what is valued is funded and that EDI is low down in this pecking order in HE. What is funded is also linked back to the values of an institution. In Irish HE, EDI funding is allocated to three policy streams mandated by the HEA. Specific schemes within these three streams typically work within the neoliberal frame and use competitive and target-driven mechanisms to achieve EDI results, which are monitored and evaluated through reporting frameworks such as the compact agreements. Other local initiatives may be funded from EDI offices, but amounts are significantly lower. Accountability measures are regarded as a mechanism to analyse if policy streams deliver on what they are intended to address, as opposed to having '*loads of lovely documents*'.

The role of senior leaders in legitimising EDI discourses

Presidents and senior leaders in HEIs are powerful actors and play a key role in bringing EDI in to view through what they give prominence to when they speak and how they behave. Leaders can help foreground policy discourses and aid circulation. When I use the term senior leadership, I understand this as encompassing the President of the HEI and their team of senior leaders and the wider management team which includes heads of academic departments, and managers of functional areas such as HR, IT, Admissions, Student Services and so on. My analysis suggests that participants identify the role of the President as head of the institution as very important, but more important is the role of other senior leaders within HEIs to furthering EDI work. Other senior leaders work closely across institutional structures and have a wide span of control and therefore have an important role to play in widening their local agendas to foreground and embed EDI.

An analysis of cohorts shows that EDI practitioners have the strongest views on the importance of senior leaders to embedding EDI, likely related to the fact that roles of most practitioners are graded at middle-management levels and they work with middle and senior managers on

various committees. A pattern in the views of EDI practitioners emerges showing that some senior leaders help to bring EDI into view, some are indifferent, and others constrain it. Practitioners have an insightful view as they most often occupy the middle-ground in the institutional hierarchy, mediate national EDI policy in local contexts by working collaboratively with institutional leaders and depend on them to talk about and show commitment to EDI efforts in their own contexts. EDI practitioners feature most strongly in this section on the impact of senior leadership on EDI discourses. Conversely, the data shows that lecturers do not see their work to bring EDI into their teaching and learning activities in the classroom as contingent on senior leadership behaviours. This may be due to the autonomy of their role in the classroom. Policymakers view the relationship with senior leaders as important, but in a different way to that of EDI practitioners, given that they are removed from the immediate politics of HEI settings. For policymakers, the limited data shows that it is about working through established authority structures such as the President or VP for EDI. Recent policy consultation phases such as those on race and gender equality have created space for divergent voices and democratic participation, yet adherence to top-down communication through hierarchical structures returns power to traditional institutional gatekeepers. When senior leaders act as institutional filters, applying managerialist frames to EDI policies (Ball, 2012), they can selectively strain out transformative or challenging elements while permitting less disruptive initiatives to proceed, resulting in delay, institutional inertia (Ahmed, 2012), and diluted change (Brookfield, 2011). Orla describes the relationship between national policymakers and senior leaders in HEIs as follows:

But you know at that senior level because that's where our relationship or that's how our relationship has been defined by the, you know, reviews of gender equality and different things. I

think that that's really important. And then what that creates then is a channel for a leadership to then communicate this wider in their institution whether they're endorsing it or, you know, explaining it, whatever their role is going to be in that, but I think that's really important that we as policymakers' create that channel. But we're conscious that sometimes that it might slow things down, or there might be an assumption that, oh, everybody knows about this already. But I think that that's really valuable where leadership can kind of say this has come in from the national level: here's what we as an institution are going to do. Or here's who's taking this on. Or here's the office that's going to be responsible for this. And you can follow up with questions.

When significance is afforded to EDI policy discourses by senior leaders, this has a legitimising effect and increases buy-in from staff and students: if leaders are seen to be inauthentic in their commitment to EDI, this can lead to cynicism and resistance from staff. A practitioner, Aoife describes the disjoint between ‘talking the talk and walking the walk’ in an example of presenteeism by some male leaders in her HEI as follows:

What becomes problematic obviously, if you have the people who, and there are these, and they're mainly men in my university, who come along to the event, who do absolutely zero to support you or anything to do with you or the work you're doing, and then they come along to the event for the photo shoot, stand in the middle, hold the sign up, smile and like, go off again or give a quote to the press office, even though they haven't actually done anything to do with the event, you know, and everybody knows like there are people just kind of doing that.

Such behaviours are problematic at broader level as they signal to the HEI population a reductive and symbolic level of engagement. By its nature, much of EDI work relates to culture change and is therefore

collaborative and dependent on social energy of the actors. If personal commitment is lacking or at best reduced to superficial presenteeism this serves to undermine the ethos of EDI and the import of particular initiatives.

I will begin this section by analysing how participants view the importance of senior leadership values.

The role of the President

Several aspects emerge, principally the importance of the leader modelling behaviours and actions in the HEI, leading by example and showing that their values align to equality. Aoife understands the spirit of policies as resting on the behaviours of senior leaders and later links the success of the work of EDI practitioners as being subject to the behaviours and values that the senior leader is modelling. She references not only the President but the interpersonal dynamics that are observable between senior leaders by others at meetings and committees and that are indicative of the values that leaders hold.

Like essentially, the values in the university are very much framed by what the President does, by how they behave, by how Executive behave, and how people treat each other. You know how we respect each other, how we behave with each other, how we manage to, you know, integrate with each other. Yeah, I think it's hugely subjective I suppose. Like you can see some, I see some present leaders in Ireland, you know, Presidents of universities and they are invested in the EDI space. You know, by letting them speak, they talk about their values. They talk about equality, diversity, inclusion in a meaningful way. It's not a 'turn up and take a photo', or an off again, they actually embody it. They live it through their behaviour. They talk about it at every opportunity. In every speech they get, you know, they bring it into everything they lead with that kind of integrity. And you know, it's part of their

fabric, and that people are expected to behave like that, you know. And then you've others who are just much more performative really. And people can see that, I think that, you know, you can draw a box and put people into each box and you'll probably get us pretty much you know so.

So, I think it's, it's difficult and when you're an EDI practitioner because you are very much subject to the values of the behaviour of those around you, you know because that is, 'the walking the walk', and how do you get people to do that? We can have all the policies we want. But are we going to use them? And when are we going to use them? How are we going to [use them]? That's gonna be ... Are our leaders collectively willing to live by the values we say we have as an organisation and I'm not so sure, I'm not so sure - there might be a few that will - but I don't know, and push comes to shove you know, it seems easier to be the kind of people causing the ructions and challenging, and you know, you seem to get more in that leeway in that way.

Participants articulate that the success of EDI work is down to individuals and a will to change the culture. Having senior roles for EDI, that are themselves powerful, is key to putting and keeping EDI on the agenda of other powerful actors. A lecturer Clodagh emphasises the importance of having the right person in the senior EDI practitioner role and in other management roles and of ensuring accountability for actions, as key to leading transformative action.

I think very much, we've had a phase change in the last two years since we had our new President, and since [person in EDI role] came on board, [they've] been a huge help on the whole, a real role model. You know, [they're] amazing and I think, what I've seen is that the calibre of work that's been engaged with is so high that people can't ignore it.... So, I think people are leading in the EDI

space by example. And it's just a matter of time before people catch on.

There is a gender difference in terms of findings here, in that a ratio of 10:1, women placed a greater emphasis on the importance of senior leaders to enable and support EDI work. This difference is regardless of participant type; the female to male ratio is 4:1 across the data set showing that men are underrepresented proportionately (regardless of the study population being predominantly female at population level) in terms of how often the support of senior leaders came up and how much they talked about it. There was also a difference between cohorts, with the mostly female practitioners, (4 out of 5 are female), emphasising the importance of the role of senior leaders as a means to making EDI progress; in effect, practitioners regard their work of successfully embedding EDI as contingent on the tone set at the senior leadership level through their words and behaviours. For others to talk about EDI, the President must talk about it and get into institutional conversations.

Senior leaders 'talking the talk and walking the [EDI] walk'

All participants are in agreement about the importance of senior leadership support and their commitment to egalitarian values as a means to progress. This manifests in leaders' willingness to 'talk the talk' about EDI, and to 'walk the walk', by using their situated and relational power to embed EDI and signal institutional priorities (Ball, 2012). Senior leaders must also create openings to get EDI into important institutional conversations and keep it there.

Participants assert that in addition to the President, heads of academic departments and managers of functional areas are key to enabling EDI progress. In day-to-day activities, most staff will contact their line manager that they report to with queries and not the President. This identifies the need for the layer of people who work closely with groups to staff to demonstrate commitment to EDI values. Whereas all

participants agreed on the importance of the role of the President, EDI practitioners were particularly animated about the importance of support from other senior leaders, as EDI practitioners are dependent on them to raise awareness with their staff.

Cian speaks of the need for EDI messaging to permeate the HEI, with the senior leadership team playing a key role and including EDI as a core part of their agendas as this will ensure that it cascades through all the core functions of the HEI, rather than be bolted on or sidelined.

I think that's a really important role and our messages need to come top down and bottom up. But the organisation needs to be steered by its senior leadership team, and I think that EDI needs to be at that top table, inputting into those discussions so that EDI elements are woven into teaching and into the research and into the international bit, as opposed to been seen to be, you know, we'll talk about that once every couple of weeks. No, they don't Mary [include it as a regular agenda item], because I think they see it as a 'bolt on' at the side that you know, it isn't one they're adverse to, but it's at the side, yeah, it's not at the centre. It's not informing what we do.

This challenge of reaching the people who can directly affect change is echoed in comments by Aoibheann who claims that her view is rarely sought out by her peers when they are developing strategic plans for their units, an example of talking the talk, but not walking the walk:

Yeah. I mean, there's certainly, there's an acknowledgement that it has to be part of the way the senior leadership think and the way they develop their strategic plans. But interestingly, they don't come looking to me for advice on how their strategic plans should be framed to include this issue. So that.... I think that's a weakness. But what we have tried to do is work with senior leaders in other roles, such as in the registrar's office, so the

quality assurance people, the academic affairs people and all of that. So, we work closely with them to embed EDI in the quality assurance processes, the evaluation processes and things like that. And that's been quite successful in fact. So sometimes it's, while the senior leaders will speak the right thing, actually you need to get to the people who do it, to affect change.

This suggests that despite acknowledging EDI as a strategic imperative, leaders develop plans without seeking EDI expertise, effectively sidelining the practitioner from decision-making spaces. In response Aoibheann pragmatically redirects her efforts to operational gatekeepers who control implementation processes such as quality assurance where policy becomes practice. Kirton and Greene (2022) found that line managers in business and organisational contexts are reluctant to prioritise EDI amongst the myriad of other demands, perhaps compounded by the fact that the benefits appear likely to take a long time to develop and are reluctant to see beyond their own short-term interests for longer term collective good (2022:230). Aoibheann recounts her regular disappointment, when events are poorly supported by her management colleagues.

I've always felt a little bit let down in some of our events. So, for example, when we won our Athena Swan, one or two [senior academic roles] turned up, but not all of them. Which was a bit of a pity because it was a whole senior leadership effort to try and get it, and the whole of the senior leadership agreed the plan, so it would have been nice if they had been part of the celebration of it afterwards, yeah.

Aoibheann continues at length to speak about the challenges of gaining support amongst management colleagues for an EDI-related project. Aoibheann perceives her role to be devalued when she has to get the imprimatur of the President in order to legitimise her 'ask' of a senior colleague. This suggests how a lack of power and seniority show up in

the daily lives of practitioners and how this is diminishing of both the person and the work and contributes to institutional inertia and slow progress. Aoibheann continues on this thread and attributes how she was treated to her gender:

And what really, really frustrated me about it was, that if I had been a guy leading EDI, it wouldn't have been an issue. They would have done it. But they would only accept it from the President, who's a man. And that's really pisses me off and still does. It still does annoy me because my authority in this area is not recognised, and so I find resistance of that kind, that requires me to kind of use.... use the President and I don't like to do it all that often because then you lose all credibility.

Aoibheann's experience suggests that patriarchal presumptions prevail with some senior management colleagues and reproduce existing power imbalances, however other practitioners take a different view of the impact of gender on an individuals' commitment to EDI and this will be analysed in more detail in the next section.

Gender and commitment to EDI

Several practitioners observe that men and women on senior leadership teams are equally disinterested in EDI and caution that an assumption that women are going to be more engaged than men in EDI should be avoided. This links back to findings on the significance of identity and lived experience on commitment to EDI in the previous chapter. Practitioners divide senior management teams into those who are supportive, those who are too absorbed in their immediate priorities and are indifferent (relating back to 'initiative fatigue'), and those who are active detractors. Three practitioners (Aoife, Sinéad and Cian) agree that not all leaders live the values and '*there are [senior leaders] who would be actively resistant to us*' (Ciara). Aoife disaggregates these groupings clearly:

So, you can have women in leadership positions, and it doesn't mean they're interested in equality, diversity or inclusion. So, I would say there would be an equal number of men and women disinterested, on our... [senior decision-making body], as interested, you know. So, for me, it's not gendered. So having more women there doesn't mean like, oh, they're all going to be interested in EDI, I think that they're not, you know. And the way you have some who are really ...who will really support you, right? And it's brilliant. And you know you can count on them, and you know, go to them in advance of the meeting and ask them to back you up or do whatever. And then you have the ones who kind are like – whatever - they don't really care, they are too worried about their own stuff, and then you have the active, I would kind of call them active detractors, the ones who, just like for whatever reason.... everyone has their reasons, but for whatever reason, just really, actively try to make life difficult for EDI practitioners ...that's how I'd say it. You know, challenge, the allocation of resources and challenge, you know why we should be doing, you know, all this kind of doesn't make life difficult in general, you know? But look, that's and again, that's not gendered in my experience.

So, it's the women as much as the men kind of creating problems, you know, and people just don't see the value of it sometimes, but they have to report to the HEA so.

A second practitioner, Sinéad echoes this and states:

Gender is not a metric of how inclusive a leader will be, and we can't rely on just having X number of women in senior positions, meaning, or X number of minorities in any whatever position, meaning that we've achieved greater inclusion across the board... that just I think yeah, I just wanted to touch on that, yeah.

A third practitioner Cian remarks that senior women can and sometimes do behave as men have behaved for years.

Now you'd hope that senior women might be more open to that debate [women returning to work, career development supports etc], and I'd say most are, but not all are. Others have you know, they've climbed the ladder, and they've pulled the ladder up behind them, which is what men did for centuries. So why should they be any different?

A key finding of this research is that practitioners report that while they can generate surface-level changes in terms of visibility, policy language and awareness, through their own efforts, deeper institutional changes such as embedding EDI in decision-making structures, redistributing power and resources, depends entirely on senior leadership willingness. This will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

To summarise, buy-in from senior leaders and powerful actors is crucial to the embedding of EDI in HE. Behaviours, values and norms needs to be modelled from the top to demonstrate what the HEI stands for and how it will interact with staff and students. Some leaders can be disinterested, albeit due to being over-stretched or for self-serving reasons. There are differences at gender and participant type in how people view the importance of senior leadership to support and enable EDI work, with women and EDI practitioners exhibiting the strongest levels of animation in conversations about senior leadership support. A greater emphasis is put on the importance of the role of senior leaders as a means to making EDI progress by practitioners than by lecturers. All practitioners felt it is their role to make changes, but in reality, these changes are hard to achieve if it is not underpinned by the support of senior leadership teams. This support is not to be assumed: resistance is not exterior to power and can come from within as well as outside (Ball 2012).

Conclusion

Both lecturers and practitioners agree that there is a low level of awareness of EDI policies amongst the wider HE population. At best, there is surface-level awareness of policy discourses amongst lecturers as a 'headline', bearing in mind that lecturer participants in this study are positively disposed to EDI work, and possibly distinct from the general population of lecturers. Lecturer participants themselves surmise that awareness and understanding of EDI policy discourses amongst their lecturer colleagues is low. This means that getting EDI policy discourses to circulate widely and be understood more deeply in HEIs is a challenge for practitioners. Both lecturer and practitioner participants assert that only a vague awareness of EDI policy discourses can be expected from the wider staff body. This is understood in the context of staff having multiple competing agendas to contend with and opting to cover essential aspects of their job firstly. People with lived experience or who are members of an identity group have a heightened awareness of policies relevant to them. An obstacle to disseminating policy identified by participants (lecturers) is a lack of framing of policy discourses to aid meaning-making.

Translating complex, intersectional equality concepts for broad institutional audiences requires influential figures who can frame and champion EDI messages with authority - power that EDI practitioners typically lack within their institutions. Without senior leaders who critically engage with EDI issues and articulate their institutional relevance, policies struggle to resonate with staff who may perceive EDI as irrelevant to their interests or roles. This reliance on advocacy of senior leaders to broker difficult conversations reflects what Ahmed terms the 'worlding' of EDI: the messy, contested work of building institutional environments where equality becomes foundational rather than supplementary.

To conclude, EDI discourses come into view by getting into the normal everyday discourse of HE, institutional locations and processes where it is spoken about and circulated, absorbed into resourcing models, and a part of Presidents and senior leader critical conversations. For a discourse to merit visibility for wider institutional audiences, it must be valued and enabled by institutional actors and structures. EDI is important for HEIs to safeguard equality and promote diversity for staff and students and model prosocial values for society. Participants believe that HEIs are enhanced by having an EDI function, but HEIs have existed for hundreds of years without an EDI function and as we can see in the US how quickly the precarious institutional position of EDI is removed from view, institutionally dislocated and funding withdrawn. Findings on how EDI comes into view within the HEI show that careful attention from senior leaders, credible and consistent policy discourses and resourcing is needed to locate EDI within institutional discourses and processes. EDI has carved out a position within HEIs, but like the identity groups and egalitarian values it represents is as yet still a precarious institutional function.

Critical Summary

This chapter argues that EDI comes into view in the HEI through deliberate institutional work. It claims that visibility is contingent and can be withdrawn as easily as it is granted. I feel this tension directly, since senior management endorsement can enable my work while also speaking over the people it claims to represent. Writing from my locus as a scholar-practitioner, this matches my own experience of what moves institutions to action: senior leader framing, circulation of discourse into everyday practice and embedding EDI within resourcing structures. This top-down account sits uneasily beside findings from the previous chapter that those with lived experience hold a heightened awareness of EDI policy and are more likely to be invested in EDI work. This creates a paradox where institutional visibility depends on elite

sponsorship, but commitment appears strongest among those affected by inequality. I encounter this gap constantly in my practice, between the engaged few and the much larger group for whom EDI discourse remains second-hand.

Ahmed's point on 'worlding' is not merely that EDI is contested, but that building an equitable institution exposes how existing HEIs are built to exclude. In my own role, resourcing for EDI work visibly expands when it aligns with institutional interests and contracts if these interests change, suggesting that credible and consistent discourse, while necessary, cannot alone counter institutional incentives that make inconsistency likely. The following chapters explore amongst other things, what institutional function this precarity serves.

Chapter 9 Findings on Enactment of EDI

Introduction

This chapter presents findings from the research which explore the experiences of academics and practitioners in terms of how EDI is enacted in HEIs. It builds on the previous chapters on identity and how EDI comes into view in the HEI and seeks to understand how power and positionality impact on the ways in which EDI is taken up by people in their roles and within HE structures, the assumptions and tensions surrounding the enactment of EDI and the effects these have on the EDI message and embedding of EDI principles.

Enactment is the process by which policy intentions are transformed into operational reality. As a critical scholar-practitioner, this research draws on the work of Ball et al. (2012) on the conceptualisation of enactment. Enactment is how policies are taken up and work in institutions and conceptualises policy as a socially constructed phenomenon that is continuously negotiated and reshaped through multiple institutional and individual interactions (Fairclough, 1992; Ball et al., 2012). This conceptualisation transcends a traditional linear model of policy development and transactional implementation and instead represents a critical lens through which policy implementation in higher education can be understood as a dynamic, iterative process of translation and transformation. It is a sensemaking process by policy actors as they read, interpret, translate and reconstruct texts. As policies move from texts into practice and are made real and operational for people who need to invoke them (Ball, 2012; Fairclough, 1992), this can expose gaps revealing where espoused institutional values contained in policy commitments fall short and are contested through enactment.

This process of interpretation, translation and practical realisation of policy texts and their underlying intentions within specific institutional contexts is complex. As noted earlier for Ball et al. (2012), looking at secondary education in the UK, enactment involves understanding and documenting the ways in which schools deal with multiple and

sometimes opaque and contradictory policy demands, and the diverse ways that they creatively work to forge practices out of policy texts and policy ideas in light of their situated realities. They describe this as a process of recontextualisation that produces some degree of heterogeneity in practice. It is useful to draw on Ball's definition of (2003) performativity as, 'a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions' (2003:2016). This definition foregrounds key discussion points in this chapter on how EDI is experienced in HE. This discussion includes the practice of conceptualising EDI as an indicator of institutional virtue to be promoted and celebrated; the drive to measure enactment of EDI policy; and the gap between material realities experienced by staff and students and declared EDI values in institutional documents. Ahmed's (2012) work has also been instructive. It conceptualises performativity as a critical apparatus of institutional power that operates through seemingly neutral administrative practices. Ahmed critiques institutional diversity practices as mechanisms of power rather than genuine transformation. She surmises that the very act of naming inequality becomes a mechanism through which institutions claim to have addressed the problem, creating what she terms 'non-performative' declarative statements that 'do not do what they say' (Ahmed, 2012:116). These statements take the form of documents such as EDI policies, statements and measurable metrics, and practices such as public relations activities based on performative speech acts and events. These work to convert systemic inequalities into documents and metrics that can be taken as evidence of the institution addressing inequalities (Bhopal and Henderson 2020, Bhopal, 2023). Returning to the language of Ball's (2003) definition, these institutional outputs are then inspected and judged by external actors and receive awards or sanctions depending on their worth.

This presentation of findings opens with participants' accounts of EDI enactment as performative in nature. Participants have a dual perspective on the performative enactment of EDI in HE in that they view performative practices as both necessary and indeed inevitable, but also troubling in HEIs. This is due to an inherent tension: while created to address inequality, the success of these practices and mechanisms must be rendered visible and quantifiable to satisfy governance and accountability demands. This pressure to demonstrate impact through metrics, box-ticking, publicity and reportable outcomes can inadvertently channel resources toward initiatives that produce measurable change in representation or awareness while leaving intact the deeper power structures that generate inequality.

Performative practices are evident in the day-to-day activities of EDI practitioners⁴². There is a view (Ciara, Clodagh, Saoirse and Oisín) that these communications are necessary for awareness raising and visibility as this is how young people communicate and get information about what is going on in society. These bring high levels of awareness of events, but a tension exists when acts are not mirrored with meaningful change for staff and students and when institutional power remains unchallenged and narratives of '*nothing to see here*' are reinforced. The lecturer voice comes through especially strongly on the gap between policy and implementation as they see this gap through their own experience with students on the ground.

⁴² For instance, performative publicity efforts use publicity props such as speech bubbles, slogan tee-shirts, diversity-themed cakes to increase novelty and present interesting photos for social and mainstream media release. These events are organised by EDI practitioners and occur throughout the academic year to mark various calendar days that celebrate or raise awareness of identity groups and inequalities such as Black History Month, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, International Men's/Women's Day, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls, World Day of Social Justice, LGBTQIA+ History Month, Traveller Ethnicity Day, Transgender Day of Visibility, Pride Month; and also days the mark SDGs and climate action.

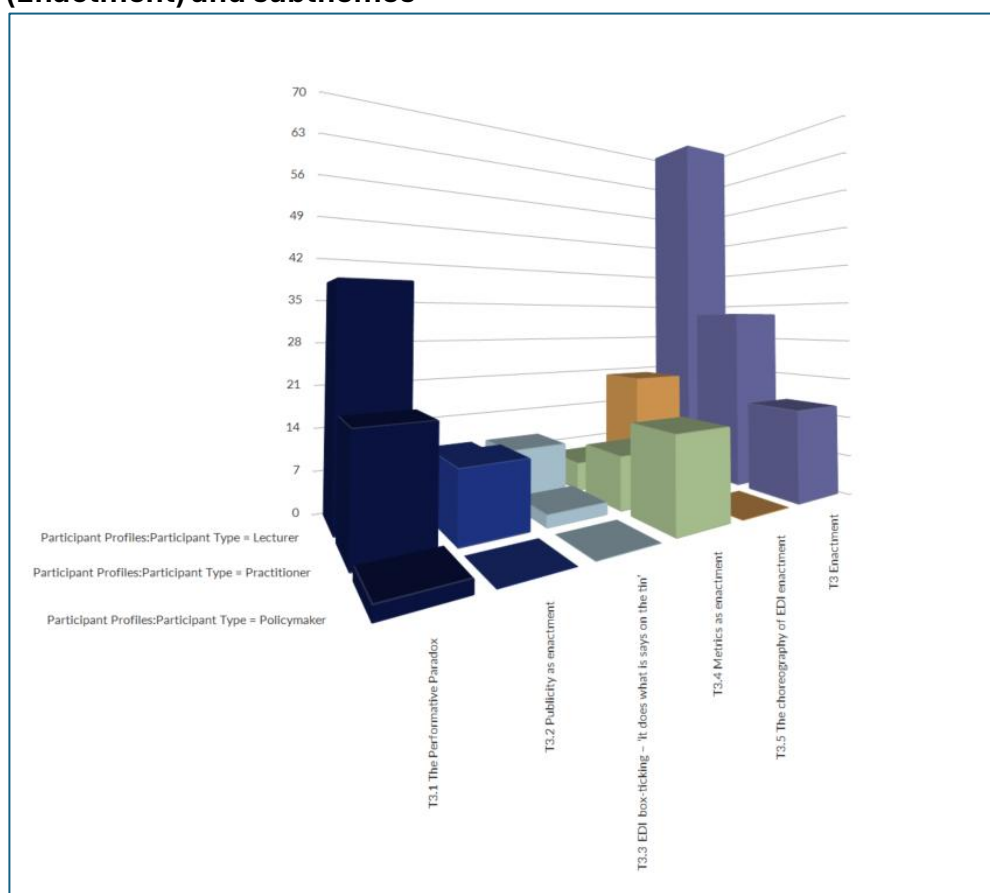
On one hand, participants adopt pragmatic language that positions performative practices as legitimate tools for raising awareness and securing funding. On the other hand, they simultaneously deploy cynical terminology, characterising the same activities as ‘virtue-signalling’, ‘box-ticking’, and relying on metrics as superficial proof of progress. A consensus emerges around what might be called EDI realpolitik of having to engage in the performativity circus and tricks, because that is the way the system is set up, while continuously proving the value of EDI and coaxing managers to get on board. This reveals the dynamic and often contradictory nature of institutional practices, whereby HEIs can speak and act in ways that purport their commitments to EDI without truly embodying it or delivering systemic change (Brookfield, 2011). Practitioners recognise the inherent complexity of institutional transformation and use what critical agency they have to subvert and drive progress from within the institutional ‘circus’. Participants identify progress across three dimensions: structural mechanisms (robust policy infrastructure, functioning EDI committees, adequate resourcing); cultural transformation (senior leaders demonstrating fluency in EDI concepts, modelling inclusive behaviours, and championing EDI purpose); and strategic embeddedness (EDI targets integrated into institutional strategic plans and accountability frameworks such as compact agreements).

Practitioners are often hamstrung in their work, as the task of embedding EDI values in systemic structures is complex, immense and requires commitment from multiple actors across the HEI. Without support from other actors, it is beyond the scope of the small numbers of people in EDI roles and offices in HEIs. This Sisyphean nature of this challenge is evident in the low levels of optimism of practitioners that is evident in the data.

This chapter focuses on themes that emerged from the data that relate to the various ways that EDI is enacted in HEIs. Figure 11 maps the

contours of EDI enactment across participant groups, revealing how professional positioning fundamentally shapes understandings of what it means to ‘do’ EDI work within HEIs. The visualisation exposes distinctive preoccupations: practitioners are most exercised about the performativity paradox and publicity as enactment, reflecting their front-line negotiations with the tensions between symbolic gestures and substantive change, and their responsibility for making EDI work visible across the institution. Lecturers, by contrast, are most animated about EDI enactment: the coordination, sequencing, and practical orchestration of EDI initiatives within their immediate academic contexts. Policymakers demonstrate strongest engagement with auditing as enactment, emphasising the role of accountability frameworks and metrics in enabling and legitimising EDI work.

Figure 11: Levels of animation by participant type, theme (Enactment) and subthemes



The Performative Paradox

The term performativity often holds pejorative meaning among critical scholars (Ahmed, 2012; Ball, 2012; Bhopal, 2020; Baker and Lynch, 2007; Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2015) who view it as functioning primarily as institutional self-legitimation rather than genuine transformation. Ball et al.'s (2012) seminal work articulates performativity as a governance mechanism that fundamentally reshapes institutional cultures and professional identities, creating what they term 'fabrications' or representations of institutional practice designed for external consumption that may bear little relation to institutional reality. In the EDI context, this manifests through what Ahmed (2012:118) calls 'non-performatives', policy statements that declare commitment but generate no material change, existing purely as documentation of institutional virtue. Policy documents, diversity statements, and institutional events become ends in themselves rather than mechanisms for change. Ahmed's (2012) concept of diversity work as 'busy work' captures how performative practices consume practitioner time and institutional resources while leaving power structures intact. When EDI is enacted only in ways that can be easily publicised, measured, or 'ticked', HEIs signal commitment through visibility rather than demonstrate it through redistribution of resources or dismantling of exclusionary practices.

This creates a paradoxical position for EDI practitioners, who become what Goffman (1959) terms 'performers', professionals who must engage in institutional theatre to maintain EDI's visibility and legitimacy. As a critical scholar-practitioner, the question for me is not whether EDI work involves performativity - it inevitably does within contemporary HE - but whether performative practices operate as gateways to structural change or as substitutes for it. The evidence from this research suggests performative work can be a precursor to more meaningful work in that

preliminary messaging through public-facing events and statements function as initial engagement with EDI principles.

Publicity as enactment

People working and studying in HEIs experience institutional life and assimilate what they believe to be the values of the HEI through repeated institutional events or happenings on campus spaces, be that the classroom, library, meeting rooms, staffroom or canteen. These can be described as ‘performative acts’ and can include ‘soft’ events, speeches, promotions, Students’ Union elections and celebrations and more formal, accountable or ‘hard’ engagements such as meetings and classroom environments, and the less perceptible although potentially most powerful structural space of the curriculum. In terms of enactment of EDI, these acts intend to raise institutional awareness of an issue and by doing so, go some way to bringing into effect what they name, e.g. antiracism, gender equality etc. Often these acts are performed publicly to align to or embody policy commitments, or to be understood as the institutional realisation of policy. The work of Ahmed (2012) and Ball et al. (2012) have helped me to distinguish between how I understand performatives and non-performatives and a reminder of the discussion in the literature review may be a prescient and useful signpost ahead of the presentation of findings. Performatives in EDI work are HEI actions or utterances that successfully ‘do things with words’ (Ahmed, 2012: 54) but often in ways that serve the interests of the HEI rather than transformative goals. They represent the HEI performance of the utterance (in speech or written) of the commitment to EDI. Ahmed demonstrates how EDI statements, policies, and initiatives can become performative when are understood as performing institutional commitment to EDI without necessarily producing substantive change or worse, possibly reinforcing existing hierarchies. Non-performatives represent EDI actions or utterances that fail to achieve even their intended performative effects of generating institutional legitimacy

through EDI discourse and actions. Drawing on Ball et al.'s (2012) policy analysis, these are interventions that neither transform culture nor successfully perform institutional commitment. Non-performatives can take the form of unfunded or poorly framed or executed EDI initiatives, EDI committees without decision-making power, policies that contradict other HEI practices, or actions which are repeatedly promised but never delivered. Unsurprisingly, these often generate cynicism about EDI work itself.

There are some differences across cohorts in terms of views on performativity and this is to be expected given their different professional roles and perspectives. Participants use the language of performativity in words and phrases such as *'box-ticking'*, *'establishing an evidence-base'*, *'need for data'*, *'performance indicators'*, *'reporting'*. Both lecturers and practitioners are pragmatic in their orientation and see the need for performative acts as they create visibility and put EDI on the institutional radar for colleagues, while at the same time describing discomfort at the breadth and depth of engagement required and the time sink required by this performative work which detracts from meaningful EDI work.

Ahmed writes about 'diversity as public relations' (2012:143). Public relations is the means by which organisations establish and maintain goodwill. The aim of EDI practitioners is to name and acknowledge systemic inequalities, and to lead institutional culture change and help tackle inequalities through the work of staff and their wider contribution in higher education. The commitment to ongoing critical interrogation of institutional practices is part of this research. Firstly, the practitioner view of EDI publicity will be explored, followed by the lecturer view.

EDI practitioners' views of EDI publicity

Practitioners articulate a sophisticated approach to institutional communication and are skilled in generating publicity for EDI initiatives.

While they agree with lecturers on the need for and benefits of publicity for EDI initiatives in order to gain traction, they view publicity and communication efforts pragmatically, as serving to normalise equality discourses as a staple of institutional life, and a means of representational power in the hierarchy of HE discourses. All practitioners also see how EDI publicity can work as a mechanism for institutional self-legitimation, even when this is not the intention of practitioners. They have an awareness that by skilfully communicating EDI narratives in press releases, images and on social media, political demands are transformed into shiny marketing materials; yet they feel they must coalesce with this publicity train to raise awareness and communicate EDI values. EDI practitioners show critical awareness of how EDI publicity can court resistance from actors within and outside of the HEI; this will be explored in the next chapter.

As institutional actors, EDI practitioners believe they have less power compared to colleagues at the same level in the HEI. However, an area where practitioners can and do exercise power is through their mandate to deliver institution-wide communications on EDI. EDI is one of the few institutional functions that can access and communicate with both staff and student populations. Practitioners use this wide mandate to disseminate EDI messages and to normalise and incrementally build EDI discourses and leverage this wider awareness in their interactions. A pattern emerges in practitioner responses on what they see as the need for EDI events to raise awareness and also of the accompanying dangers of this – as otherwise policy is largely neutered for institutional audiences.

Aoife sees a high level of awareness amongst colleagues and students for EDI work in her HEI. She emphasises the need for ‘*surface-level*’ publicity to be underpinned by strategy and meaningful EDI work in the background. Aoife normalises the need to publicise EDI activity and sees this as essential to creating a discourse of EDI and reaching a wider

audience. She takes the view that public messaging is key; in effect, not only do HEIs need to have impactful EDI policies, in the first instance, the institutional commitment needs to be performed, although this does not mean that its impact is limited to being performative. This is performativity for the right reasons, if the existence of EDI policies is not announced or performed, the policies are rendered invisible and emasculated. I call this a form of necessary performativity.

They [staff and students] see, they are aware of the events, they see things on campus, so I think you have to have it, because that is how we communicate our message, how we communicate our values. So, I think it does become, if you keep doing everything, without a purpose, or a strategy behind it, then it does become just performative. But saying that, I think you have to do it, you have to communicate across the university, and our feedback is that people appreciate that you do it. Do you know what I mean? We would get people saying, look, 'it's great to see the events on campus. I might not get to go to them, whatever, but it's lovely to see that it is [happening]'. It's become part of our university ethos or values. I think that's important. So, you're doing the communications and you're doing the visibility and you're doing the events, or people will come and engage; but then you're also doing the real work in the background. Our challenge is that we're not resourced to do both and it's very difficult. So, I think, look, I don't mind, I'm comfortable with a little bit of performativity, if it's for the right reason you have to. It's the game we're in, like, it's because you can be sitting in the background, right, and you could write all the policies you want and you can do all of the stuff you want in the background, if you don't communicate it, if nobody knows about it, it doesn't matter. But like I prefer to be damned for doing than not doing at this stage, like you know what I mean.

Ciara speaks of the pressure to evidence work linked to policy and funding through promotion of events on social media. Backlash can come when such performative events are sometimes confused for constituting the 'actual work' of an initiative, for example, events to celebrate International Women's Day being viewed reductively. When this happens, the equality framing can be lost and supplanted by what staff perceive to be the 'marketing opportunity', as described by Ciara.

So, if you can show progress against certain actions and highlight the need for other actions, you know they are more likely to get funding for it. So, in that sense, the performance piece, I think, is important to show that you're doing stuff on it. I guess where I'm personally challenged with it, it's that whole idea of like 'OK well we're only doing this because it looks good in marketing' and I'm like, 'no, that's actually not why we're doing it', and I guess I'd be much happier to just get on with stuff in a quiet, behind-the-scenes way, and for things to change.

Ciara's approach is one of strategic performativity, whereby she uses her presentation of institutional progress as a mechanism to achieve increased funding and as an entry point for deeper change. Other examples of this manifest.

But you know we live in an era that if you're not highlighting it on social media it's not maybe near being recognised. And I guess that also then brings up a lot of challenges for me around the role of social media and what is being put, what social media is being used for, and how it can obviously be used to highlight platforms for hate, rather than rather platforms around support and respect and everything else.

Ciara shows concern about use of social media and is conscious of the potential for the messaging to be contested and subverted for hate, an issue wider than EDI in HE and that prevails in discourses in wider

society, both nationally and internationally. Examples can be found in discussion threads on social media platforms on anti-immigration sentiment, anti-Traveller, anti-transgender.

When a substantive amount of time is spent by EDI practitioners organising events and publicity, this impacts on their capacity to do meaningful EDI work, such as policy development. In the next excerpt Aoife identifies the difficulty posed by EDI not being resourced sufficiently to do the necessary elements of EDI work: the meaningful or what she views as the ‘real’ work of EDI which happens in the background (invisible), and the publicity element (visible). If practitioners are forced to choose, which do they prioritise? Earlier, Aoife likened the performativity of EDI to a ‘game’ that must be played by practitioners. The rules of engagement specify publicity is key (despite the heavy workload this generates), as this is how people come to know about EDI.

You know, literally you could just be doing something every week, you know. But also, I think communication is so important, communicating our values and visibility is so important. And yes, there are performative elements to that, and there are competitive elements to that probably. But also, ... It's what people see if you ask them, like what do we do? What do EDI do? They'll probably tell you, I don't know what they tell you, but they definitely would know that you have a presence. They see, they, they are aware of the events, they see things on campus, so I think you have to have it like, because that is how we communicate our message, how we communicate our values.

Ciara responds similarly about the resource implication of doing performative EDI work and problematises the expansion of events and publicity when this is overrepresented in EDI work or comes at the expense of more meaningful policy and structural work. She articulates

how the time required for front-facing event organisation mitigates against the 'real' work of EDI.

I think another challenge around it as well is, the amount of time it takes to organise and run these various events....Um, so if you take into account the energy that goes into the events versus the energy that really should be going into those behind the scenes, influencing and advocacy around specific measures on policies and procedures to make fundamental changes.... And I think there's a little bit of an imbalance there, that there's often maybe more of a focus on that front-facing, immediate, event awareness-raising campaign stuff, rather, than you know, let's have a detailed discussion around quotas and get a policy over the line to get a quota in place.

Of relevance to this analysis from earlier in chapter 8, is the phenomenon of how some institutional actors co-opt EDI publicity for the purposes of self-promotion and strategic alignment to initiatives to enhance their reputation as evidenced in Aoife's comment about senior colleagues who attend EDI events but 'do absolutely zero to support you'. Despite the presence of such interlopers, a strong pattern emerges in the views of EDI practitioners on publicity: they take the view that if they do not publicise EDI work, then its impact is limited. Although publicity may be reductive and in danger of being misconstrued as tokenistic, it disseminates the message.

Lecturers' views of EDI publicity

Lecturers see the need for publicity and awareness raising for EDI events and believe that openness and honesty are required and that EDI efforts should not be kept a secret. A strongly held view from lecturers is that the job of mainstreaming EDI values needs to start with publicity. The work of EDI needs to be outwardly visible as this is the first form of engagement with EDI principles for most people. Clodagh offers her

view on publicity which corresponds with what I identify as necessary performativity:

I think it goes hand in hand, I think particularly for young people. I go back to this idea of these open, young people. That's how they communicate. They communicate through Twitter, through X, through Facebook, through LinkedIn a lot as well. And if we're open and honest in how we communicate, I think they will pick up on that and I think the wider community [as well]. You know, when we're going out looking for students, I talk about EDI, talk about, you know, how we're welcoming, I talk about, the projects that we do, I talk about the real-life stuff, but if we don't signal that to the outside ...of what we know, we're the best kept secret... So, the data is there, you know the information is there, the want and the need. So why keep that a secret you know? Like, why not? You know, I think it's really, really important to get all that information to be open and honest and frank with all of our stakeholders, be it parents of the students that are in secondary school, the professional bodies, be it the employers, be it the lecturers, be it our own internal community, you know. Why keep it a secret? You know, we have to be open and honest at all levels of communication.

Saoirse agrees on the need for awareness-raising efforts to engender curiosity and buy-in amongst the wider HEI population and regards publicity as imperative to getting the message out there, despite running the risk that this may be viewed by some as institutional virtue-signalling:

Look, I think we have to document them and there is a certain level of, you know, virtue signalling for sure. Yeah, we're bending the knee to it. But look, I think we have to document, and we've gotta show what's going on the ground to encourage people to say, oh, no, they did that - maybe we can do that - because I think that's the way it has [to be]. It has to work that way. But no, it might

be tokenistic, but look, it's publicity. It's shows something's happening, and even if people hate the rainbow, the rainbow footpaths and crossings, you know, at least it's prompting discussion, you know, getting people talking. So and like the road shows, you know, people pass by and look, maybe they they're just curious. And if that's all you can do, raise curiosity on the day, I think it's a positive step, you know? Yeah.

Saoirse raises the political reality of change: HEIs must engage in performative acts to demonstrate work is underway in particular areas; even if divisive, such actions spark conversations.

Niamh agrees on the need for publicity around EDI events but disputes whether they achieve their intended objectives. Her concern centres on inadequate attention to the discursive construction of these events, specifically, how inequalities are framed and communicated. She contends that poorly framed discussions of inequality produce material consequences, causing harm both to the broader EDI agenda and to the specific identity groups concerned (again illustrating the connection between identity and EDI enactment). Such failures undermine the learning potential of events, leaving audiences and observers either uninformed or, more damagingly, confused, alienated, and resistant to future EDI messaging. She articulates another example of how performative EDI efforts can transpire to be non-performative and counterproductive.

I think there is a place for them [EDI events], but I don't think they serve the purpose that they intend to serve. I think they can help to start to create awareness. In my experience, there's almost no development post event, and so it's just a thing that's been done and people may not understand why I think the performative aspects of D and I practice tend to capture either the people who had already bought into this anyway, or they capture the people who needed it.

Everyone else doesn't understand the purpose and I think that comes down to framing again, that they don't understand why it's being done. People don't understand the rationale behind why things are happening. So if you can say that to them, look, this is the data. That's the evidence to show that it happened. And this is how it can make these people feel. This is what it might mean for them in practice. This is how their experience has been different to yours, and it's how it negatively may impact them. I think then you can create those initial stages of empathy where they start to learn that just because it didn't happen to them, doesn't mean it doesn't happen. But I think that's missing from events.

So I think yeah, they capture people who needed them. They capture people for whom it's reflective of their needs or wants and desires. I don't think they capture the wider population; and it's not to say that they're not important, but I think the framing and the development of the event post event is missing.

Áine similarly picks up on the lack of framing of EDI initiatives and what she sees as a lack of an intersectional approach. She talks about the paradox of the HEI trying to action particular initiatives for identity groups but doing this in trenchant way where often the intended purpose and outcome can be lost or watered down in what is disseminated in the publicity content, ultimately serving to devalue its content.

And I suppose one of the problems with it is the kind of shifting identity or, yeah, the kind of PR around it all, do you know, like that shift into what EDI is... I think it's trying to be catch-all and some of the specificity of identity groups or politics that have been doing certain work for a long time ...I suppose they could be absorbed or they could be evaporated depending on how they're seen or understood, you know, and I suppose, that's one of the yeah... it's like, OK, great, the institution is picking these things up and trying

to action them, but in a very institutionally blunt way. So, a lot of the nuance and particularity that you'd be trying to actually develop on the ground or in a project or with students or in research, you know, gets reduced down to something that's kind of too readily dismissed, or sidelined, devalued.

The assumption is that publicity is part of institutional life, and EDI, no more than any other domain, must posture and compete for attention.

While both lecturers and practitioners recognise the need for what I term necessary performativity, that EDI initiatives to be acknowledged in institutional communications as a means of normalising EDI and making progress in tackling inequalities, they emphasise different dimensions of this challenge. Lecturers, positioned as receivers of institutional messaging, have mixed views on this. Some express acute concern and doubt whether communications do justice to the nuanced, intersectional realities of inequality or sanitise them into digestible headlines. They prioritise thoughtful, substantive communication that avoids reductive framings, recognising that poorly constructed messaging can alienate audiences and undermine the legitimacy of EDI work itself. Practitioners have critical awareness that publicity should signal that EDI is an institutional priority and secure legitimacy, while striving to ensure its circulation does not reduce transformative work to empty spectacle. They are cognisant of the importance and representational responsibility of such publicity to embedding EDI, but if EDI is not circulated through official channels, it risks being dismissed as peripheral regardless of its substantive merit.

Policymakers did not comment specifically on publicity, possibly because they are removed from the immediacy of the institutional environment and, as Liam commented, once policies are launched, *'we kind of stand back a little bit'*.

Metrification as enactment

Metrics are quantifiable measures to assess performance, progress or outcomes. They are designed to provide data driven insights into how an initiative or policy is working and are often tied to strategic goals. In Irish HE, the HEA requires HEIs to report on outcomes for accountability and transparency purposes through the negotiated compact or performance agreement. I view metrics as mechanisms of necessary performativity. Data collection and monitoring are widely regarded as essential in informing policy on EDI, establishing a baseline and in measuring progress over time (HEA, 2016; HEA 2018; Royal Irish Academy, 2021: 8; LERU 2019). It is established practice throughout Europe for HEIs to collect equality data for various reasons: transparency, accountability, external reporting, identifying disadvantaged groups, understanding diverse needs, raising awareness about specific activities, and measuring the performance and impact of EDI initiatives (European University Association, 2019). It is widely maintained that the availability of systemic data collection allows senior leaders and EDI practitioners to understand the diverse composition of educational institutions, monitor trends, detect and follow up on inequalities, and identify bottlenecks where targeted policies are needed. The primary goal of collecting EDI data is to translate findings on patterns of inequality into actions that reduce inequalities. However, data collection is not unproblematic or neutral and much has been written about how data collection on minoritised communities for research purposes can itself be an act of violence and oppression that may need resisting if it does not lead to targeted actions to address inequalities (Ryan, 2019; Benjamin, 2021). Data collection has the potential to define, reduce and restrict personhood, deny certain groups the agency to exist as a person with lived experience embedded within relational contexts and in the face of discourses and power structures in which such regulation has been created. Data collection is part of

neoliberal architecture and can trigger or reduce box-ticking behaviour. If well-designed, reporting mechanisms can capture meaningful data.

Although discussed in the previous chapter as a way to bring EDI into view, reporting requirements were also discussed by practitioners as having the potential effect of bringing about enactment; they have a role in making HEIs accountability and driving substantive change. Paradoxically, they are also perceived as a way of taking away from enactment in terms of the time taken to complete multiple reporting frameworks, and also in terms of chipping away at the commitment of practitioners or wearing them down through repeated reporting demands.

Practitioners take a similar view as Ball et al. (2012) and Ahmed (2012) in that they view reporting requirements as onerous and adjacent to the moral purpose of EDI. In the drive for evidence, they often serve to detract from EDI work, while also being discursively useful to the EDI case. Lecturers view the data as being useful for framing inequalities and as an indicator of institutional compliance, while policymakers see reporting requirements as essential to progress. I will begin with findings from the practitioner cohort.

EDI practitioners' views of metrics

Practitioners are acutely aware of the benefits and perils of audit-laden frameworks for EDI and how they become what Ball et al. call policy transactors (2012:56) – that policies must reported as done and accounted for, or to be seen to be done. Amongst practitioners, the prevalent view is if an area is funded, this will be accompanied by reporting requirements to evidence how the funds were spent and whether this was an effective use of funds. Fundings streams create a cycle of activity for practitioners in terms of application, strategy, spend, report. Ciara comments on the belief of many participants that

measurement increases the possibility of funding, and the assumption of its necessity:

I guess I've a few different views on it; I mean one view is that whole idea of what gets measured gets funded.

Practitioners struggle with reporting requirements when they perceive the act of measurement comes to overtake the imperative for structural change and substantive transformation. This reveals the paradox of generating and reporting on data that may be used to render the inequality it seeks to reveal invisible.

Reporting becomes problematic and unsustainable when practitioners have to comply with a proliferation of sometimes overlapping and overly bureaucratic reporting requirements. Sinéad calls this the 'busy work' of EDI and says,

these charters can be used to distract us from the very work we're trying to make change in - so it's like, OK, go collect a lot of data to prove that racism is happening. Go get the data to prove that there's a gender pay gap - and then you spend a lot of time and a lot of effort and a lot of funds trying to prove something, then to be told, 'Oh well, look, there's no money to solve that now', and yeah.

Aoibheann, while extolling the merit of sectoral policy guidelines to focus the sector on equality issues like racism and sexual consent, expresses 'concern' about onerous and competing sectoral reporting requirements and believes that the over-regulation and requirements are unsustainable, and will have the net effect of wearing down practitioners' commitment to the work.

I think on the one hand, I think that while we have very good, let's say policy guidelines such as, the Anti-racism Principles for Higher Education, for example. It's only an example, we've the ConsentFramework...

And I think they were very necessary to stimulate and to catalyse the sector and to address these issues, and address them in a kind of reasonably coordinated way. But I'm a bit concerned now that there is significant over-regulation of EDI, and continual reporting on various things in a way that, in my view, is unsustainable in the longer term, not just unsustainable in terms of the work, but in terms of people's commitment to the work and people's willingness to be a critical actor and to have a critical engagement with these issues. I could see it very quickly becoming.... losing the spirit that is intended, that it has within it, which is the very important spirit of equity and justice, which are the values that underpin our work, at least in my view, they're the values that underpin our work. Other people might disagree with me, but I could say that the over-regulation is a problem and will increasingly be a problem I think, because we're reporting in too many different directions all at once, all competing. And there's almost... it's almost now pushing out, pushing the creativity out of the sector and at the same time, on the performativity other aspect of it - we have our own internal challenges, our own internal environments that throw up all the complexities of these issues as they manifest in whatever our own environments are. And prioritising those is quite a demanding task, because to do anything effectively, you have to give it concentrated attention.

For Aoibheann, EDI enactment is neither simple nor linear and is experienced differently in each HEI. She understands the rationale for measurement but sees over-regulation as stifling creativity and energy of practitioners, the very passion that brought them into the practitioner role in the first place. She sees the hollowing-out of EDI by onerous sectoral reporting requirements that can have the unintended effect of sucking the creativity and commitment, (parts of the role identity of

practitioners) from their work. This is when measurement of EDI progress reaches the point where it becomes a non-performative. There is a level of exhaustion evident in Aoibheann's language of 'pushing' and Cian's language of 'killing' in the below excerpt. Also apparent is the lack of optimism about how the EDI fixture is evolving evident in Aoibheann's and Cian's comments.

Cian echoes this sentiment on over-reporting, specifically, the time that it takes to satisfy reporting requirements and what this takes away from practitioner's ability to do the actual work of EDI. He surmises that some of the benefits of EDI work are going to be lost due to these onerous reporting requirements and repeatedly expresses 'worry' about the evolving sectoral parameters that are being set out by the HEA. The language of 'box-ticking' creeps in here again. The overarching tone again is one of pessimism.

I suppose I've a number of different thoughts, like one is to start at a policy level, a central level, I think the HEA and the HEA Centre of Excellence has become really performative. And I'm really worried about that. You know, the amount of reporting we need to do to tick boxes so they can count how many boxes are ticked and then the boxes have been ticked, then that's great. And that's really worrying. And there's quite a lot of discussion around how to progress the report on the Second Review of Gender Equality, with the sector saying 'Stop, stop, look, you're killing us with reporting, we don't have time to do any work because we're reporting', and I think it was effectively ignored. And that's a worry and that's part of the mainstreaming of building it into our work. I think, on the other hand, at a local level, being performative is a worry. I think being visible is important as well, and undertaking activities that demonstrate what we do, you know, what we can do and want to be able to do, I think is important.

Others such as Aoife comment on how metrics have driven positive change and says,

So, there is an improvement, you know what I mean? Like, it's hard to assess that you know, it's hard. And like we can look at all the metrics, and like you know there the gender balance now on things like Academic Council, [senior decision-making body], governing body, all those things and that's all built into it as well. So, I think people do I think see it, they're still, they also see all the other things that are left to do. You know, and there's huge things like, you know, it's like the tip of the iceberg is always seen - there's so much more that has to happen.

Aoibheann returns to the 'hard' and 'soft' dichotomy and attests to the might of hard measures to drive systemic change. Although she does not explicitly mention reporting requirements, it is suggested in her description:

And that's something that I always am attentive to [distinction between hard and soft measures]. While I know the confidence building measures, as I call them, the softer measures, are important, and absolutely are important, and they do work up to a certain point - unless there's structural systemic change, which is always hard - then you could be doing the soft measures for five decades before you see a change.

My analysis is that practitioners understand the need for hard measures, reporting requirements and metrics to track progress. However, there is serious concern amongst practitioners that requirements have increased substantially both in breadth (across more protected characteristics) and depth (increase in units of analysis) and this is creating an unsustainable level of work for practitioners that detracts from more meaningful and impactful EDI work - when measurement is described in these ways, it becomes a non-performative.

Lecturers' views of metrics

The lecturers I spoke with are not particularly interested in reporting requirements and showed a low level of engagement with this topic. This is unsurprising as they are removed from the task of reporting on EDI and therefore are not exercised by its purpose or bureaucratic demands. They are however attuned to how reporting requirements can create the appearance of transformation and identify the need for critical discourse on the purpose of metrics as enablers to EDI. Áine describes good EDI work becoming reduced to metrics when it intersects with EDI frameworks. This metrification is blunt and reductive and doesn't allow for nuance or criticality. She links this to current social and political discourses which have become reductive, polarised and eschew critical interpretation - Áine identifies this as a contribution or causal to sidelining of EDI.

I think that what I'm trying to get at is, with the kind of disappearing of feminists, critical, critical disability, and like there's such interesting work being done critically in those areas and while they've had, they have an influence, I feel like it's hard for people, even who work in those, to then intersect with EDI frameworks because they become about metrics, because they become about measuring. But, you know, like, I don't know. I think there's more scope for that critical discourse, especially in the arts and humanities. That's what we do, you know. But that in and of itself is devalued, and this cultural moment, you know, you have [to] slow down to think before you blow some shit up, you know.

And I really feel, you know, and this is I think also the thing that happens with EDI - it gets, it can get sidelined so easily.

Niamh's earlier perspective on publicity positions data as central to framing the rationale for events, arguing that presentation of data to support the narrative of the event is essential to ensure that people

understand and make the connection to the purpose even if they don't have lived experience of the issue, *'look, this is the data. That's the evidence to show that it happened'*. Her view is that the data is useful for framing inequalities and building the rationale with the wider HEI audience. Clodagh also stresses persistence and use of hard and soft measures: documents and people. She says,

We need to be persistent... So, we need to have the documents, we need to have the laws, and after that it's often persistence and role models, and people following through so that, in time will bring culture change but the last thing we can do is give up... And change takes a conscious effort and time...

Overall, lecturers regards themselves as having distance from metrics and remain largely untouched by them. Those who spoke of them view the measurement of equality as an enabler of understanding while also being reductive of inequalities it represents. Several lecturers mentioned that the sort of changes envisaged will take time. In both cases any discussions of inequalities which draw on data and metrics should be scaffolded by critical conversations which situate these in their social and institutional context.

Policymakers' view of metrics

Policymakers express a very strong rationale on the need for reporting mechanisms to establish a baseline and demonstrate progress. They view data and metrics as legitimising the case for EDI and contributing to the buy-in that is needed for the work. There is an awareness on the part of policymakers that reporting could be less onerous and may become so once it become more established. Liam articulates the reporting rationale:

So, I suppose that the reporting was because there was nothing in existence. It'll be interesting to see in 10 years' time you know, is the reporting as important, or is it is it an even bigger beast. And

we used to get that feedback, we were cognisant of the fact that the reporting was quite a big requirement. I suppose because it was relatively new and you're starting from scratch, it was to be able to monitor it, so that you knew it was making a difference because, look, as you know in a busy HEI, you know the latest craze can take over, you know.

But I suppose, it was just that the importance ... to be able to say, well, look, there is a shift and here's how we've measured it. Especially probably because it was new, you know to be able to measure it, otherwise, it would have been money following money for, you know, for what? For what cause, you know.

Orla refers to all forms of data, both qualitative and quantitative, that contribute to knowledge in the field as important. They help engender buy-in and legitimise the need for EDI work:

But then our role is also to help build that evidence base for equality work, which I think is really, really important. The fact that now there's data available over a number of years, we don't want everyone in HEIs to spend their time just working on data and not actually tackling the issues at hand. But I think we have to acknowledge how important it is to have the evidence base because that's what builds the continued buy-in that is needed for the work. So not just the numbers, the statistics that we have, but even you know qualitative reports, and surveys, all the things that we've kind of collected at a national level I think are really, really useful. But I think with the idea of the buy-in that that everybody is trying to create for this work and then having our having our evidence base and our rationale, is what can help to prevent any kind of backsliding.

She later gives an example of how data can advance conversations about inequalities:

One of the words I've heard used recently is 'gender fatigue', you know? 'Oh, sure, haven't we talked about that for years. Is that not fixed?' Using that evidence-based approach is a way to combat that, and say, 'no, it's not fixed yet', for this kind of other narrative that we're hearing, where you know the idea of EDI as almost being exclusionary to certain, mainstream views or identities. This is really challenging to address, but in pointing back to the evidence base and the legal framework like the Equality Acts and Public Sector Duty, you know, gives a grounding for our work in, in law and in evidence. So, I find that that would be really helpful for us. But yeah, it's probably quite different to how you respond directly to a staff member in your institution, you know, for it's a little bit more distant, I guess for ourselves.

The three cohorts understand and experience reporting frameworks differently. Practitioners, while acknowledging the benefits of having data to evidence inequalities and fund workstreams, are critically aware that the conversion of inequalities into metrics can render them invisible while signalling institutional compliance. Practitioners also express fatigue at the bureaucratic overwhelm of often competing reporting requirements and of spending disproportionate amounts of time preparing reports and data which detract from meaningful EDI work. Lecturers are detached from reporting requirements although are aware of how data can frame institutional narratives of equality issues. Policymakers have a definitive and clear rationale for the positive value of data and reporting as a means to progress equality.

Practitioners express concern that writing reports to fulfil onerous reporting requirements can start to hollow out the actual work when the focus is on measurement as opposed to impact. EDI work, by its nature, is about people; their individual experience, institutional culture and social change. When a sizeable amount of practitioners' time is spent preparing and presenting data in reporting frameworks, this separates

practitioners from people and EDI work from institutional work. Ahmed describes this: 'Documents are paper: if diversity work becomes paperwork, the practitioners can end up feeling as it is 'all a paper exercise' (Ahmed, 2012: 87). Examples of such reports in Irish HE include Gender Pay Gap and Institutional Staff Profiles by Gender. Critical scholars such as Bhopal and Henderson (2020), Ahmed (2012, 2017) argue that reports can present the HEI as being action-oriented and taking a proactive and progressive approach to address inequalities, when in fact, all the institution is doing is presenting a report. Whereas the view of policymakers in this study is that such data is necessary to establish a baseline and legitimacy for initiatives. Policy and report writing is also considered to be the 'hard' work of EDI. 'Hard' applies to the incontrovertible nature of the data and also to the superior status of the written word as intellectual capital in academic institutions; 'hard' artefacts also have permanency and reports have a lifespan beyond their production and can be produced at will as evidence of commitment to diversity and progress or lack thereof over time. Conversely, the subordinate 'soft', and 'fluffy' experiential elements of EDI work that involve supporting and working with people, such as events mentioned earlier, are embodied, less credible due to their transience and therefore limited in terms of delivering systemic change (notwithstanding that they can be documented in pictures to attest that they happened). At 'soft' enactments, people show up; at 'hard' enactments, documents show up. This returns us to the primacy of the document in institutional life. The findings point out that the objectives of EDI reporting work do not guarantee a greater level of EDI, and if done in a blunt way, can give an impression that HEIs are more committed to EDI than they actually are, leading to regressive enactment. They do however exist as an artefact and are a starting point for systemic change. Indeed Ahmed (2012:111) conceded that 'Critiquing how equity and diversity become embedded within performance culture is not to suggest that we should not go through these motions'.

EDI box-ticking – necessary, strategic and non-performative enactment

Box-ticking refers to a procedural approach to meeting requirements and is often driven by external regulatory pressures. When a box is ticked, it indicates that an administrative or procedural task is complete and that required procedures have been followed regardless of their effectiveness or appropriateness. The term has bureaucratic connotations and denotes compliance rather than an achievement of substantive goals. Box-ticking is a key part of performativity culture and can signal both legitimacy and virtue, in Ahmed's words, '*a document that documents the inequality of the university becomes usable as a measure of good performance*' (2012:84). Her analysis reveals how EDI work can become 'stuck' in institutional processes. Box-ticking can be at the sectoral level when HEIs report to the HEA, or at the institutional level. For the former, the ticked box can portray the institution's bona fides as intact, as it has done what it was obliged to do at a surface level. For the latter, it can signal institutional imprimatur and give mobility to initiatives to progress further; this could be in terms of funding, human resourcing, announcing commitments. In the EDI world, the sectoral boxes that need to be ticked could include annual returns of institutional diversity data to the HEA; returns on progress of implementation of Gender / EDI equality recommendations; applications for relevant schemes such as the EDI Enhancement Fund, Athena Swan or the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative; celebration of diversity days on campuses. Box-ticking can also indicate the policy-practice gap, whereby the performance of box-ticking becomes more important than the harder to measure inequalities that the box-ticking denotes. Ball's conceptualisation of performativity (2012) describes how institutions become focused on producing evidence of their effectiveness rather than achieving genuine improvement; the symbolic ticking of boxes is one such way of doing this.

EDI practitioners and EDI box-ticking

Practitioners are animated about the need a deeper analysis of the implementation of EDI initiatives within the HEI. In the absence of this, EDI work remains at the level of ticking the box. Deeper analytical work is required as a means to identifying the policy/gap. Sinéad comments:

And we should have these, you know, review points, these discussion points, like almost scheduled in to say, OK, six months, or a year or two years later, let's go back and review best practice, or look at how it's actually being implemented, and because otherwise, it's defeating the purpose of us doing it, it just becomes literally performative, literally tick box because it's just done, and then put on a shelf and left to get ignored and dusty and umm.

Cian regards institutional self-knowledge as fundamental to a critical assessment of EDI activity. He makes the case that this responsibility should be embraced by the HEI. This involves an evaluation of the implementation of EDI policies to see if they have worked for those who have used them and if their experience of policy enactment connects with performance outcomes and stated HEI values.

Yeah, well that for me is the difference between what the HEA want and what we should be doing as an organisation. Yeah, because so there is performance stuff, we should be doing that to an extent. And it's a worry. But that's the way it is, but actually within our organisation, what's important? What are we? How do we know that this is making a difference? Is it making a difference? And you know, maybe our surveys will start to tell us some of that stuff as well. But like, that's not reporting, that's, if we're serious about becoming an inclusive organisation, then we need to be doing that ourselves.

Cian asserts that HEIs that are genuinely interested in equality should have an appetite to analyse the implementation of policies within the HEI

and to know the impact of actions, rather than relying on directives from the HEA to do so.

Lecturers and EDI box-ticking

Lecturers articulate views on how they regard EDI and sometimes on how they believe EDI is regarded more widely by academic colleagues. A pattern emerges of conceptualising it as tick-boxing or trivialising it as ‘*EDI stuff*’. Róisín ponders on its substance:

So, the EDI offices are great for that [raising awareness of equality issues], you know? And but I do worry that it's been brought in as an institutional tool to say, oh, look what we are doing, we're ticking these boxes.

Survey-filling is the example given by Aisling of literal box-ticking. The tension between valuing the work but making sure it is not tokenised is surfaced. Aisling comments on how colleagues perceive EDI:

I just think people are seeing EDI as the ‘EDI stuff’, and I don't mean that disrespectfully, but that that is how it's viewed. Here's the EDI stuff. Here she comes again, looking for us to fill out a survey and I think they're missing the point.

‘*EDI stuff*’ implies survey box-ticking. Aisling captures how EDI becomes reduced to ‘*stuff*’ that exists as an ‘add-on’ to the ‘real’ work of an academic. The phrase, ‘*here she comes again*’, reveals EDI practitioners positioned as external irritants making box-ticking demands upon busy colleagues, rather than as peers in shared institutional transformation.

Lecturers view EDI policy commitments as being expressed in performative acts, such as ribbon-cutting ceremonies to unveil Pride walkways on campus, invited guest speakers on diversity themes, use of signs and props for photo opportunities on selected diversity days. In contrast to the ‘happy talk’ (Ahmed, 2012) at these events, there are many examples from lecturers of situations where students experience

a lack of inclusive practices, and the organisational response is inadequate. These include lack of accommodations for students with additional needs, lack of mental help supports, poor/inappropriate physical infrastructure, stereotypical representation on gender in academic disciplines. Oisín notes with frustration the disconnect between EDI headlines of strategy, committees and events and substantive actions. He highlights the lack of supports for staff and students who face the realities that may be showboated in performative EDI events.

Yeah, it comes back to the kind of the point I was raising earlier about, I worry about the substance of these types of initiatives. And I wonder about the agenda behind them, of are they being seen to get like, you know, an Athena Swan award of some kind? But I think a lot of the other initiatives we might be just social media-washing ourselves into kind of EDI, rather than actually looking at impact and you know... So, I think EDI runs the risk of doing what it says on the tin on a surface level. It can be, you know, can be seen as a tick box in that we've, you know, we have our EDI committee, and we have a strategy and we're doing all these wonderful, fantastic things ... we have all these committees. But actually, you know, it needs to be followed up with substance of what it actually is.

Caoimhe maintains that ticking the box may be a starting point to establish identity for EDI, as discussed earlier in chapter 7. She suggests that some initiatives can start off appearing like they are 'tick box', but can end up gradually transforming the institution. This returns me to necessary performativity on the spectrum of EDI enactment: the cumulative effect of seemingly small performative acts can have the desired effect of changing culture, suggesting that surface-level EDI events can work harder than they appear to.

I can see why you need to tick box, but I think you need to move into that, [it] needs to just be a starting point to the more, you know, like deeply embedded, you know, and I think that's part of the EDI office then. I mean, I suppose all of the different you know - like the they did International Women's Day and they got a senior leader to wear the T shirt, you know, 'this is what a feminist looks like', or, 'I am a feminist', and it was just really effective, you know what I mean? Like our marking those kinds of things and [EDI practitioner] has done a lot of those kind of [things] you know, like, I think, it's opening people's minds to the diversity stuff. It's really kind of putting it on the agenda, they seem probably maybe small things, but I think it's just like, oh, like the senior leader is going to wear a T shirt saying 'I'm a feminist'. Do you know like, or in the picture of them with the Pride flag and a few people? These are important and I guess you could say they may have started as tick the box, but I think they do more than that.

Róisín takes an opposing view in the below excerpt and discounts the symbolism and potential for transformation that a performative spectacle, the unveiling of an LGBTQ + walkway on pavements on campus grounds, can engender. The naming of the inequality and funding and painting of the walkway is promoted in institutional narratives as addressing the problem; that box can be ticked. Róisín takes issue with the sizeable institutional allocation of funds to such a performative act and believes it could be better spent on supports for students. She rejects such acts as virtue-signalling. Her account describes a non-performative on the spectrum of EDI enactment.

I see a few individual staff trying really hard to be honest, and I see, you know, I see - and it's not the EDI office's fault - again, they're all amazing. You know it's the same people that I see, I see some really dated and horrendous, well what I feel are horrendous ideas, for instance, in the LGBTQ+ allies group, that myself and my

colleague who is a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and you know, the only member within the group that is actually LGBTQ+, which is the hysterical! And they were going on about, you know, getting all this council funding to do a rainbow on the road outside. And I'm like ... do you know? And I'm just thinking, fucks sake! Like they're students here who are suicidal or could be suicidal students. There's these issues with housing, and they're all intersectional. They're all you know and that you want to paint the fucking Pride flag colours and spend thousands to get planning permission to do that. It doesn't make sense to me on the ground to be honest. So it's kind of that virtue signalling. I do see a lot of virtue signalling, and it's not even intentional virtue signalling. The people that are doing it all come from a really good place, you know, and they come individually into it for their own reasons. And who am I to say that that getting Council planning permission to paint a flag crossing outside the college... Who am I to say that's a bad idea? ...I think that we actually have to stop the virtue signalling and get to the actual doing, get to what is it that the students actually need? The student - that's not gonna help the student cross the road. Do you know what I mean? That's those kind of things really, sort of - everything irritates me as you can probably hear, cause I'm like, you know, once again, it's not from a bad place and then of course the President of the university comes out and stands next to the flag, with the flag on the ground, waving flags and then off they go again and you're just like, 'oh lads, you're just all waving flags'. Like, can we just stop with this?

So I think from that perspective, that it functions for the university in that sense.

But I suppose for me, just as a critical thinker, until it's really on the ground when it comes to all these issues, then it can't be top

priority, because if it was top priority, you know this, some of these issues would be addressed, you know.

Róisín wants to see the ‘real’ or bigger issues addressed first, the substantive before the performative.

Both examples of the Pride and International Women’s Day events illustrate how bringing EDI into view is often constructed through performative acts to serve as a hook or a story to hang the issue on. Once the event is complete, that box can be ticked. Caoimhe’s view taken of the first example is that such events can over time positively impact the culture; and Róisín’s view is that the performative event is purely virtue signalling and detached from the lived experience of the people it is trying to serve. The predominant view amongst lecturers aligns to Caoimhe’s and is that EDI needs to be made visible in order to create awareness of inequalities and to garner support and goodwill. The lack of authenticity attributed to EDI events induces scepticism amongst staff. Authenticity is defined as ‘some measure of self-consistency across time and situations’ (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010:140) whereby an actor lives up to the ‘moral standard that he or she endorses’ (Roberts et al. 2009:151). When an action is inconsistent with espoused values it can be deemed inauthentic, virtue-signalling and opportunistic (Milian and Wijesingha, 2022:456).

Polymakers and EDI box-ticking

Orla, a policymaker thinks the danger of the tick box will always be there but this is mitigated by having robust policy frameworks.

So, while the danger of the tick box is always there, I think the framework we have is quite strong for ensuring this work is really meaningful. And I think that's our aim as well with the work in other policy areas such as ending sexual violence, harassment and race equality. You know, we really don't want this to be or

become some kind of tick box or oh, we have we have X now, so we can, take a break. That's not it.

Another policymaker, Eimear is frustrated by the performativity debate and can see it being used to devalue the work being done and identifies a gendered element to this criticism. Women predominantly occupy EDI roles; roles which are not held in the equivalent esteem of other roles at the same level in the HEI; EDI work needs to be publicised and this results in assumptions that EDI is simply ‘*EDI stuff*’, ‘*soft*’ and ‘*fluffy*’ and not the serious work of an academic institution. She makes the case that this feminised conceptualisation of EDI work bleeds into the gendered identity of EDI practitioners who themselves are perceived as ‘*soft*’ and ‘*fluffy*’, thus, returning to us identity again.

Yeah, I think there's is still loads we could do, I think. And it depends on the issue. I think the kind of performative piece one will always be that debate always will be there and I get a little bit frustrated by that. Oh, it's just window dressing kind of argument 'cause. I think it's actually, it's really unfair, in particular to all the women in particular who do this work. I think it devalues them, undervalues them.

Ahmed (2012) asserts that EDI workers need to be perceived as non-threatening to counter that the EDI message is threatening.

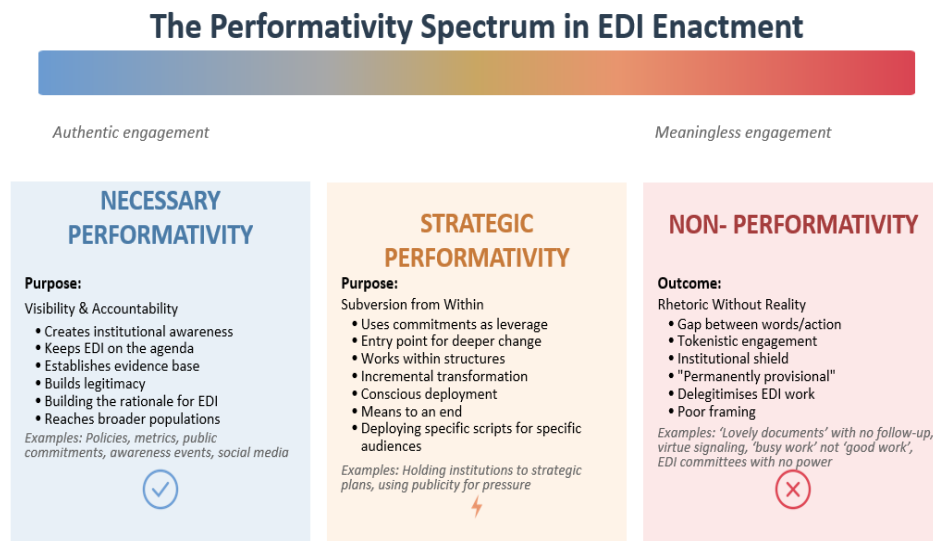
Overall, lecturers distinguish between what they see as ‘*EDI stuff*’, the tangible manifestations of EDI box-ticking on campuses through events, survey engagement, committee meetings etc., and what they regard as authentic commitment to EDI as part of their personal and professional identity (explored in chapter 7), which comes through in their teaching. They perceive that they are largely detached from box-ticking EDI of the former. There is a view that even if acts or events are viewed as box-ticking or tokenistic, they are still doing something by generating dialogue and engagement on issues. For some lecturers, box-ticking acts can

achieve more than they set out to, and act as gradual, ongoing, symbolic acts of institutional change. Others see them as empty self-aggrandising institutional rituals that are detached from the lived experience of staff and students. Policymakers are aware of the box-ticking elements of EDI and the omnipresence of this debate, but believe this as being mitigated by robust frameworks and reporting mechanisms.

From my analysis, I propose that performativity exists on a spectrum. Performatives are understood in various ways and can be problematic as they lead to accusations of inauthenticity and are often viewed in a 'box-ticking' or tokenistic way. It is acknowledged by all participants that performative acts of some sort or other are required as this puts and keeps EDI on the agenda and gives it visibility; this is what I term necessary performativity. These necessary performative acts and statements serve as the most outwardly visible and often preliminary form of engagement with EDI principles. However, these necessary acts can also be interpreted as evidence that the HEI does not take EDI seriously and only address it in a tokenistic way. Second on the spectrum is strategic performativity. This relates to practitioners descriptions of working from within to try subvert statements and structures for equality purposes. They do this by strategically deploying performative activities as entry points for deeper engagement, recognising that public-facing events and statements can function as preliminary consciousness-raising even while acknowledging their limitations. Ahmed (2012, 2017), Tzanakou and Pearce (2019), Bhopal (2020) and Brookfield (2024) talk about this approach of using performative commitments made in strategic plans against the HEI as a means to making them do something. Third on the spectrum is non-performativity, this is EDI rhetoric without the achievement of equality gains in reality. Ahmed (2012) argues that non-performatives reveal the institutional ambivalence toward EDI work, where the gap between

rhetoric and reality becomes so pronounced that even the performative dimension collapses.

Figure 12: The Performativity Spectrum in EDI Enactment



Based on Ahmed (2012). Performatives can create what they name; non-performatives fail to bring about what they declare.

The choreography of EDI in practice

Building on the Performativity Spectrum in EDI Enactment, the last section of this chapter will offer examples from participants of how EDI has been enacted in their HEI. EDI values that HEIs espouse (and claim) in policy documents are aspirational. How these values are enacted can differ greatly depending on a combination of factors such as institutional actors and their level of knowledge of issue, academic department / function, issue at stake, location and perceived threat to HEI reputation. I suggest all of these factors combine to create a site of enactment. These are knowledge-producing sites with the potential to raise awareness and foster critical engagement with people through discussion of equality issues. Participants were not specifically asked about sites where EDI is enacted although the following emerged in the course of the interviews: classrooms, theatres or learning environments; other campus spaces that host events such as concourses, Students'

Union areas, canteen; and critical conversation spaces, both formal and informal, that host meetings, trainings, communities of practice, conferences, graduations and other performative speech acts.

Choreography is a productive concept to apply to policy enactment. It is usually applied to a theatrical performance and is about deliberate coordination and sequencing of actors working together to achieve specific goals. I use it not as an explicit theoretical construct, but as a term I arrived at to hold a tentative synthesis of my ideas on how institutional change can be achieved through adaptive and incremental acts. For me, it captures the tension and fluidity between scripted and improvised elements in institutional life. While EDI policies may provide the script, their enactment depends on countless micro-performances by individuals who bring their own interpretive frameworks, resistance strategies, and creative adaptations. Through the choreography of policy enactment, institutional values can be endorsed, contested or undermined and the knowledge produced through enactment may differ from what was intended. It involves an ongoing process of repetition, citation, and normalisation (Ball et al., 2012) in the quotidian life of HE. The repetitive and cyclical nature of this is collaborative and can be exhausting, particularly if the material consequences of policy discourses for people's careers, wellbeing, and life chances serve to maintain existing hierarchies and do not initiate substantive change. Ahmed's work (2012), and particularly, *'Living a Feminist Life'* (2017), directly addresses how EDI work involves navigating institutional spaces and the bodily experience of challenging institutional norms. Her concept of *'feminist killjoys'* reveals how resistance is often choreographed through seemingly minor disruptions of institutional rhythms. Can repeated soft measures that occupy so much of practitioners' time do more and result in systemic change?

For this inquiry, choreography suggests transformation occurs through the gradual alteration of institutional rhythms and movements over time

rather than dramatic ruptures. This may offer insights into how sustainable change might emerge over time through accumulated ritualistic micro-practices and embodied habits. Áine references the repetition of the 'performing' of EDI and the exhaustion this can bring, and the need to find resources to counter this exhaustion. She takes some comfort from changes that have been achieved in HE while understanding the lack of completeness and the work ahead:

So, we go on, you know and while we can hopefully enact some changes over time and I think it's so interesting - how change does happen in our lifetimes? How much things have changed?...It's like yeah, it's not done, you know? And so, there's an exhaustion around that, but I think because progress has been made in this country, at least towards change, people can be more activated in it. But they can also be like, 'aren't we done with that?' you know But I suppose the framework of the performance is like, no, we do it again (laughter) like you know, and that you have to find some kind of resource in yourself, or in the world, or you try to understand something as a resource to do that work.

And I do take a lot of solace in what has changed in our lifetimes. It ain't perfect, it's still messed up, it's still very costly on people's individual lives, we have a long way to go to get it right. But at the same time, like, huge progress has been made you know, and there is a much more diverse intake at the university level, in all sorts of ways, and those are the institutions that we that we live and work in...so that's where we are, that's what we can address, it's not everything, it's not politics and policy to a certain extent, but that we can but try I suppose.

Just as it can be argued that choreography of EDI can achieve progress, it can also be contended that the concept of choreography might discourage more confrontational approaches that challenge institutional power structures and leave enactment of EDI work to those

already committed to its values, mitigating against wider mobilisation of social energy and making the assumption that all change will take time.

The two examples from lecturers of enactment in HEIs that follow illuminate the choreographed responses to EDI issues from institutional structures. These examples encompass the management, planning, sequencing, repetition and performance of policy through how it is enacted in institutional realities. These examples are typical of the issues that ultimately land on the desks of EDI practitioners, when other institutional structures have been exhausted, with an expectation that the EDI office can resolve them. Each example involves multiple actors and use of a strategy of bureaucratic containment to contain what are perceived to be radical demands (Ahmed, 2012; Milian & Wijesingha, 2023). These examples are followed by two additional examples of how EDI can be enacted in the classroom, a site of potential transformation, where the lecturer has power and agency to effect change.

Ambiguous support structures and erratic institutional responses

Oisín recounts a story about a visually impaired student whose classes were scheduled on the 4th floor of a campus building which has no lift.

And like, one of the things, like, I had a student a number of years ago who was visually impaired and had a dog with her, and they put all her classes on the 4th floor in a building with no lift.

You know, in quite an old building, on stairs that even I would struggle to miss every second step, like I'd have to watch where I'm going. She nearly broke her neck. And like every lecture she came out of, like, she was coming down the stairs with a guide dog, and [when] she had to go to a toilet.... there was a toilet that accommodated her. It was a toilet for her, a disability toilet, where she could bring her dog in and have some kind of dignity and respect. But it was on the ground floor and most of her lecturers are up on 3rd or 4th floor.

And I brought this to the Head of Campus at the time. Umm, you know, the response was, you know, 'well, we can't actually put a lift in this building because it's a protected building, a listed building'.

But you can change the bloody classroom! Like it's, you know, Mohammed, meet the mountain kinda thing. And so like, then that lady, not surprisingly, dropped out of the course, you know? And she just wasn't getting the supports, you know, it was down to lecturers, individual lecturers to convert files to audio files and MP3 files. You know, there was no learner support piece, in the classroom [it] was very much down to individual lecturers to accommodate in the classroom.

So, I found that response wholly inadequate and actually, no matter what policy we have, like that was just.... like she had grounds ... but the argument being made to me was that we have made reasonable grounds for accommodation under the legislation. And they had, but they hadn't, really. Do you know, like they had met a certain criteria under the legislation, that they had met reasonable grounds. But they hadn't. You know, this is...and she ended up dropping out in her first year. And even then, there was a discussion, I found this kind of really personally, and professionally, I found this quite antagonising, like a discussion among colleagues, where [they said] she would just not be able for professional practice because no place of work is really going to make accommodation to her needs. And I found that just ... I couldn't believe what I was hearing ... and these were social care colleagues, you know, saying this... and they were reluctant to sign off on her placement, you know, she had to go in to a placement to complete her training.

So, you know these kinds of practices exist and this is the problem. You know, EDI is great on the kind of surface level, but

when you get back into individual issues for students, you're left on your own, and students are left on their own, and individual lecturers are left on their own, and it's very difficult to challenge that when you bring that forward.

This example illustrates a choreography that is poorly planned and uncoordinated. It involves an array of actors including lecturers, the Head of Campus, Buildings and Estates, the Disability Office and lecturers at a minimum. There is no consistency in the level of support lecturers offer the student, it is up to individual lecturers to make accommodations in the classroom and to make materials accessible and this does not lead to a consistently equitable experience for the student. Oisín perceives that the HEI hides behind legislative compliance as a shield for meaningful action to accommodate the needs of the student. Oisín is equally disappointed in the responses of colleagues when it comes to accommodating the student on a placement site. Staff and students are ultimately left on their own to navigate equality challenges. This story illustrates that when lecturers and students are left isolated and without support, the ‘non-performative’ that Ahmed (2012) writes of is evident – the institution does not bring into effect what it has named and claimed it will bring into effect. Additionally, the lecturer conflates the wholly inadequate institutional response to this student’s needs, to surface-level EDI, even though the EDI office or personnel are not mentioned in the narrative and likely were unaware of this.

No forum exists to record the lack of collective accountability for issues like this. Rather, there is a disjointed institutional response that darts from one actor or function to another, with nobody taking full responsibility. EDI offices can bring EDI into view, but institutional structures that are supposed to respond, do not do so or do so inadequately. All of this takes place against the backdrop of declarations of commitment to equality in institutional documents and discourses.

Milian & Wijesingha (2023:458) similarly found this ‘jurisdictional ambiguity’, when seeking supports to promote EDI in the classroom, whereby each office perceived the other to be playing a more central role, but a clear sense of responsibility for this function was entirely absent. This pinballing of responsibility disables policy enactment and leads to catastrophic outcomes for students and frustration and dismay for lecturers.

Another example from Saoirse raises similar blockages about the ongoing issue of female representation in promotional materials for the School of Engineering. Again, the situation requires multi-actor coordination including the Head of Department/School, lecturers, professional support staff, Marketing Office. The example shows the tendency for institutions to reproduce themselves. Saoirse has given long service and is nearing retirement and has raised this issue previously but to no avail. Institutional muscle memory is weak and it manifests again years later as if it had never occurred before. The despondency of the lecturer is evident in the flow of her response, her observance of the use of professional female ‘models’ (not authentic engineering students) in the latest iteration (the use of symbolic representations that bear little relation to classroom realities). This culminates in her wish to subvert the next batch of posters into female images when they next appear. This example surfaces the interconnection between identity (women as engineers), visibility (represented in promotional video) and enactment (how policy is taken up within the institution).

Three years ago, I was looking at this video online for [specific discipline of] engineering, - there was one woman who was in the video was blurred out. She just happened to be a woman sitting in a computer lab, and all of a sudden the focus is on the men, and the woman is blurred. Maybe she wasn’t a student in the class, but I said, what message are you giving females? And every

person in the video, the lecturer teaching the students, the technology, looking like [discipline specific] engineers doing their stuff... all men. And I kind of raised this issue, and I said women work here and they study here, you know, now they're very few. But there were women at the time, so that video was pulled. Fair enough.

And I see a new project and the same thing again. So I get on my bike, I say women work and study here. Now there were a few more women more than usual [in the department]. Not one of them in the video. Not one female lecturer. There were female lecturers and students at this point in time. They're not there. They're invisible, so I got a reply to my complaint: 'the lads will sort this out'. I said, am I reading this? That someone, actually, a male manager, and I know I'm yabbering on here, and you probably can't use this...but a male writes back to a female and says 'the lads will sort it out'. So again, a new video this year, so it's the beautiful models, you know, the black female, brown female, whatever, they're sitting in the lecture theatre. I know they don't exist in the classrooms, but at least there's women in the group. No female lecturers at all. Then the posters for Open Day, beautiful posters everywhere, you know they're on the roads, guiding people in. There's technology everywhere. There are men everywhere. There's female careers advisors coming in from the secondary schools.

The posters are men, men, men. I complained before it. I complained after it. I was told, 'ah well we had the posters from last year...that cost us a lot of money'. I thought well, I have been complaining about this for years. We have a strong female [discipline specific] engineer. Why wasn't she in the poster? Now look, you can't force women to be in posters. I mean, you know, I'm, I'm not angling to be in

posters, but you know what I'm saying is that... I'm trying... I'm fighting hard for EDI, you know. Let's open everything up, and the marketing people are saying, 'Oh well we can't. You know, we let your department know about this, we don't encourage this, but you know, this is what they did with their money'.

So I'm gonna be brought up [to be disciplined], because I'll go along one day and I'll just put little curly hair and boobs on them [the posters] or something, you know.

The choreography in both examples illustrate that when a complex structural response involving multiple actors is required to address a problem, this can prove too much for rigid institutional structures that remain untouched. It is evident from these and other examples in the data that mainstreaming EDI into institutional processes is not happening. The default response evidently is to distribute or ghettoise equality concerns away from institutional processes, where they can be retrospectively addressed with piecemeal responses. In examples from these and other participants, functions such as procurement, marketing, communications, buildings and estates, head of function/department, chaplaincy, lecturers are all mentioned. Often, when the person who raises the query or needs an accommodation is unsuccessful with these actors, as a last resort, they contact EDI offices to see if they can progress their query. The practitioner assumes the 'sweeper' role and then has the labour of tracing the treatment of the student and equality discourses across different institutional sites and functions to familiarise themselves with the issue. Aoibheann summarises succinctly what others from that cohort have expressed in their interviews about how these and similar issues are addressed.

And there's an expectation, I think at local level... certainly I feel the expectation is that we take up all the battles, all the cudgels, and respond to every single issue. And that's exhausting for a team.... That's really challenging for people to manage. So, I think

we have to start being a lot more strategic about what we do. I think we have to begin to do, to really push, and this is where I think our intervention needs to be going, to really push a mainstreaming approach, which means that EDI is not the responsibility of the EDI office. It's the responsibility of the EDI office to lead it, to shape it, and to provide capacity building or support or whatever. But it's not the day-to-day responsibility of the EDI [office] to deliver on it.

The types of institutional responses in these examples illustrate another aspect to the performativity paradox, in that through the establishment of EDI functions, there are now dedicated spaces for equality work; this has the effect of diffusing responsibility from key functions that are accountable for strands of equality issues, to individual EDI practitioners. The knock-on effect of this is to silo complex equality concerns to EDI and away from specific institutional functions which have an obvious role to play in addressing these issues. Practitioners become 'sweepers' and EDI thus becomes a dumping ground for complex and messy issues that traverse various other functions which do not want to take responsibility for developing a solution. This analysis reveals a complex dialectical process through which HEIs simultaneously acknowledge transformative potential by claims of EDI policies and limit it by providing institutional responses ranging from lacking in integration to wilfully inadequate.

Despite the frequency of issues like these, responses are unpractised, reactive and uncoordinated. Responses are based largely on a case-by-case basis, with low fluency or familiarity with issues in the chain of reaction. Examples like these are not captured in official institutional data unless formal complaints are made. Even when complaints are made, HEIs are unlikely to publish summary data on the number of complaints in order to maintain reputation. Therefore, complaints do not go anywhere, complainants are silenced to service confidentiality of

themselves and other parties and there is low to no understanding of how policies work to address issues for staff and students (Ahmed, 2020). Sectoral audit frameworks do not capture the volume or nature of complaints, it is within the gift of HEIs to record this data, however there is no data from this inquiry that supports that this is a practice within the HEIs concerned. This returns us to the earlier cited edict that what is measured is important. Other examples of stymied enactment abound in the data, particularly in relation to the use of pronouns for gender diverse students, accommodations for neurodiverse students, staff willingness to undertake EDI training.

Lecturers' agency for enactments in the classroom and curriculum

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, lecturers in TUs are typically timetabled to teach 16-18 hours per week. Therefore, it is no surprise that the classroom was the most prominent site identified by lecturers for enactment. Lecturers have extensive autonomy in their roles to shape their teaching and learning on inclusive principles and do this in embodied and immediate enactments. The lecturer's bodily presence, voice and performative authority through an open posture and non-judgemental facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures, create immediate possibilities for modelling equality. Lecturers have embodied power to shape the nature of education and the type of learning that occurs (Freire, 1970). From the previous examples cited and others in the data, it is evident that when issues involve multiple institutional actors from various functions, progressive or even adequate solutions are unlikely. However, in the classroom, the lecturer is the powerful actor and can model inclusive values in their classroom management skills and facilitate critical conversations through the vehicle of the curriculum. They occupy a position of institutional authority that they may wish to democratise, yet it is this very authority that provides the platform from which they can model equality. The lecturer's body literally embodies this contradiction - they are simultaneously the agent of

hierarchical knowledge transmission and the potential disruptor of those same hierarchies (Brookfield, 2017). They can, guided by their values, influence students to produce particular ways of thinking, being, and acting within academic environments (Brookfield, 2017; Freire, 1970). However, as previously stated, this is entirely within the purview of the individual lecturer, there is no stipulation that they do so. The variation of responses from lecturers are given in the first example on the lack of supports for the visually impaired student. Lecturers give multiple examples of EDI enactment in the classroom and across various sites. Áine's example shows how she adapts the curriculum and assessments to address learning outcomes in an inclusive way:

So, I'm revamping a module for the first-year group in my undergraduate programme in the second semester that dovetails with an EDI project, or one that could fall under that in the college. And so, I'm really able to reshape that and make it focus on disability in particular. I'm just speaking from my experience that I can leverage my discipline in that way because it aligns with what I'm doing.

But you know, there are conservative elements that want to just repeat the canon and repeat the exclusionary model of the canon, you know, and debates do ensue in the modules. So, the modules are set and the learning outcomes are set and changing those is a bigger deal. But how you address those learning outcomes, where I feel I have scope and capacity as an individual within it and we do. You know, like where it comes up, interestingly, is more when a student is having an issue, like so, in the teaching side of things, that's where it comes up alright.

Another lecturer Oisín gives an example of using the curriculum to explore contemporary social issues and make equality issues visible. This is not straightforward and warrants thoughtful framing and attention to the 'rules of engagement' to ensure safe and constructive dialogue.

Oisín exemplifies Brookfield's framing of 'critical conversation' which suggests that the lecturer's voice becomes a crucial tool for equality modelling. Unlike the monological voice of traditional pedagogy, the critically conscious lecturer uses their voice to create space for multiple perspectives (Brookfield, 2017:47). This involves not just what is said, but how it's said - the tone, rhythm, and responsiveness of the lecturer's voice can signal whether genuine dialogue is possible.

So, this idea, kind of fear-mongering and putting all black African men as being child sexual abusers or rapists is just simply racist and discriminatory, you know⁴³? So, I've been kind of trying to counter those pieces and one of the ways I suppose where that's been feeding into pedagogy and teaching and learning is bringing that into the classroom environment. So, I suppose, interlacing that into the curriculum, do you know, when looking at opportunities maybe where we can discuss these kind of issues, particularly contemporary issues that are happening around the students. Because the students are affected by these issues as well and some of them hold very strong views, both pro and against, some of them legitimate, some of them not. But it's interesting to offer that space, to allow them to kind of reflect on those kind of issues, and see particularly if they're going out to work as professionals in a field where they could potentially be working with asylum seeking men, or refugee men, or children, or women, you know, to explore their own biases or prejudice first is critically important if you're going to be an effective practitioner or an anti-oppressive practitioner.

It can be dangerous in the classroom as well because you can alienate, isolate and stigmatise students you know by your

⁴³ The context for this response is the reporting of a stabbing incident, followed by riots in Dublin city centre in November 2023 and a far-right narrative on social media that promoted hostility towards immigrants.

response. Like a lot of it is, is opening up the discussion in a kind of very inclusive way. And I put parameters around the discussion as well. So, for example, if we're having a debate, there's certain kind of rules of engagement that I will talk about, you know, prior to debate, because I found in the past, like, if you don't put that in place, those kind of discussions in the class can get out of hand pretty quickly to the point like where people are not talking to each other leaving the room. So, you know, I asked people to, yeah.

Oisín alludes to the resistance that can manifest from students in the classroom when challenging topics are being discussed. Aoibheann talks about lecturer agency in the classroom and identifies bringing EDI into the curriculum as a key site of enactment for lecturers, although this can be stymied by the range of competing initiatives and the rigidity of the teaching contract.

Yeah, yeah. You see, when we're talking about lecturers with heavy teaching loads in a way, I think that maybe some of these agendas aren't really all that relevant to them. What is much more relevant to them is building EDI into their curriculum, and into whatever it is that they're teaching.

And the N-TUTOR can exist alongside it, and it might or might not be helpful or other initiatives might or might not be helpful, but the core is - what are they doing in their 16 or 18 hours? And does it incorporate EDI as part of what it is that they're doing? And I think that that's where we should be looking at, rather than us trying to encourage lecturers to respond to these kinds of initiatives, as they come up, because there's no coherence around them, they're all very different and they're all very valuable STARS, is absolutely important. SDGs absolutely important.

But they [lecturers] can only do so much.

To summarise, for lecturer participants in this research, inclusive practices are part of their pedagogy, values and professional practice, and are independent of and predate the EDI agenda. They view the classroom as a site of transformation and use their agency to foment transformative EDI and influence the future practices of students. The agency of lecturers is juxtaposed against the fragmented, uncoordinated and often contradictory institutional structures for equality, that circulate equality issues around the institution and often stymie transformative efforts. Given their proximity to the site of enactment (classroom) and from being with students, the lecturer's presence can become a site of immediate EDI modelling, though this potential is always contradictory and requires constant critical reflection.

Practitioners can influence structural change through local policies and initiatives but are more remote from sites of enactment. They have less power to effect change due to having to deal with to a proliferation of actors and structures, where responsibility is often diffused. In other words, if individual autonomous actors have power and agency, they can successfully address equality issues. When multiple actors are involved, the likelihood of successfully addressing equality issues seems to be significantly lower. This study is based on a small sample of participants, which does not typify all lecturers' openness to integrating an EDI lens into their teaching and learning activities, as participants were selected based on their involvement in EDI initiatives.

Conclusion

This chapter examined how participants understand and experience the enactment of EDI in higher education. Across the data, participants demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between EDI work and performativity. Rather than viewing performativity as simply positive or negative, they described it as an unavoidable feature of institutional life. The findings suggest that EDI enactment in higher education operates along a spectrum ranging from strategic and

necessary performative practices to forms of activity that risk becoming non-performative in Ahmed's sense, where declarations of commitment obscure limited institutional change.

The chapter identified three key patterns through which EDI is enacted: publicity and visibility, measurement and reporting, and what I have termed the choreography of EDI. Collectively, these findings highlight a central paradox. EDI work requires visibility in order to gain legitimacy, resources and institutional attention, yet the mechanisms that create visibility also risk reducing EDI to symbolic activity. Participants did not reject performativity outright. Instead, they recognised that policies, reports, events and metrics are often necessary conditions for institutional action. The challenge lies in ensuring that these activities remain connected to meaningful organisational change rather than becoming ends in themselves.

The three participant cohorts navigated this tension differently. Practitioners viewed performativity as a pragmatic necessity, while remaining acutely aware of the demands and frustrations it creates. Their accounts reflected ongoing efforts to balance compliance requirements, institutional expectations and the pursuit of substantive change. Lecturers, by contrast, drew attention to the gap between institutional narratives and lived realities. Through their interactions with students, they observed the limitations of highly visible EDI initiatives when these were not accompanied by follow-through, accountability or improvements in everyday experiences. Policymakers emphasised the importance of evidence, reporting and measurement as mechanisms for establishing legitimacy and demonstrating progress. Although they acknowledged the burden of reporting requirements, they expressed greater optimism about the potential for EDI processes to become embedded within institutional practice over time.

A further finding concerned the distinction participants drew between 'hard' and 'soft' forms of EDI work. Policy documents, action plans and

metrics were frequently positioned as more legitimate or consequential than relational, educational and community-building activities. This distinction reflects broader hierarchies of knowledge within higher education that privilege measurable outputs over embodied and relational forms of labour. The findings therefore raise questions about which forms of EDI work become visible, valued and resourced, and which remain marginal despite being central to cultural change.

Overall, the chapter suggests that the key issue is not whether EDI work is performative, but how performativity is mobilised and to what effect. Participants recognised that strategic engagement with institutional processes may create opportunities for incremental change while simultaneously generating risks of tokenism, fatigue and symbolic compliance. These tensions are not incidental; they constitute the conditions within which EDI work is enacted in contemporary higher education. They also provide fertile ground for institutional resistance. The next chapter therefore turns to the question of resistance, examining how participants understand the obstacles, oppositions and institutional dynamics that constrain EDI enactment in higher education.

Critical Summary

As a critical scholar-practitioner working in an EDI role in a HEI, I recognise many of these tensions in my own practice. My role requires me to participate in the very performative processes examined in this chapter: producing reports, evidencing progress, coordinating initiatives and translating institutional commitments into visible activity. At the same time, I am conscious that visibility can become a proxy for change, creating an appearance of progress that is not always matched by transformation in institutional cultures, practices or lived experiences. The findings therefore challenge simplistic distinctions between ‘authentic’ and ‘performative’ EDI work. From my own location within the institution, performative activity appears neither wholly enabling nor wholly constraining. Rather, it functions as a site of ongoing negotiation,

where opportunities for incremental change coexist with pressures towards compliance, reputational management and symbolic action. This inquiry has reinforced my understanding that EDI practitioners occupy an inherently ambiguous and complex position: we are tasked with advancing institutional change through the very structures that may reproduce inequality. Maintaining a critical and reflexive stance is therefore essential, not to reject performative mechanisms outright, but to continually interrogate what they make possible, what they obscure, and whose interests they ultimately serve.

Chapter 10 Findings on Resistance

Introduction

Chapter 9 explored the challenge of EDI enactment and forecast how and where resistance manifests in HE. I understand resistance to mean explicit or implicit opposition, reluctance or indifference to EDI initiatives within HEIs, and more broadly the HE sector which can impede institutional progress toward inclusivity. Resistance emerges from multiple sources and for multiple reasons, some opposing EDI altogether, others opposing its current enactment, still others resisting the conditions under which EDI work must be performed. Little is known about how resistance to EDI work is experienced in Irish HE and this chapter will explore this phenomenon. The positional perspective of participants shapes how they experience resistance; as does the context for enactment; the power dynamics in operation; and the type of resistance experienced and how it might be addressed.

For EDI work to make progress it is important to understand and develop strategies to address resistance. Ahmed (2012), Bhopal (2023), MacKenzie et al. (2023), Tildesley et al. (2022) have analysed diversity workers' experience of resistance in higher education in Australia, UK, Canada and Spain. Ahmed (2012) and Bhopal (2022) established that deep cultural and structural barriers exist alongside the imperative within neoliberal higher education to sustain the status quo. Resistance can manifest at individual, group or systemic levels, each will be examined in this study. Wiggins-Romesburg and Githens (2018:180) view resistance 'as the dynamic interplay of individual and collective behaviours, with individual resistance rooted in unconscious motivation and organizational resistance rooted in the collective behaviour of individuals.' The data shows that resistance is experienced most acutely by EDI practitioners as they seek to translate and embed EDI policies; lecturers sometimes encounter resistance from students in the classroom or from the institution in terms of supports given to staff or

students; policymakers are largely removed from experiences of resistance.

Any discussion of resistance to EDI in higher education cannot be isolated from the social conditions and discourses in play at that particular point in the time. The Dublin riots took place on 23 November 2023 and marked a watershed moment in Ireland and unsurprisingly are referenced by several participants in their responses. The riots, described by the Gardaí (Irish police force) as the most violent in modern Dublin, erupted following a knife attack outside a city centre school that injured three children and a school care assistant. Far-right groups falsely portrayed the attacker as an immigrant, though the individual was a citizen of the State. This misinformation led to widespread violence, arson, and looting across Dublin's city centre. Social media platforms were used to mobilise crowds and disseminate footage of the riots. The riots were part of a broader pattern of anti-immigration sentiment that had been building since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which brought tens of thousands of refugees to Ireland. There were also increasing numbers of localised protests about new residences for asylum seekers and displaced people at sites throughout the country, while a rising homelessness crisis, a lack of affordable housing and a rise in child poverty and cost of living all featured consistently as pressing social issues. These events created a climate of tension around issues of immigration, integration, and cultural diversity. Some HEIs responded by implementing enhanced security measures and support services for students from immigrant backgrounds who felt vulnerable in the wake of the riots. These developments were set against the backdrop of a global rise of populist political movements in Italy, Hungary, Finland, Slovakia, Croatia and the Czech Republic (Mudde, 2016), including Trump-era discourses in the United States, influenced political conversations in Ireland. So, it is clear to me that resistance to EDI policy in Irish higher education must be viewed in the context of both local social tensions

and global developments, emphasising the interconnected nature of institutional policy-making and broader social dynamics. Fairclough, (2001: 20) describes this as the interconnection between the ‘social conditions of production and social conditions of interpretation’, both the immediate and remote conditions of institutional and social structures. EDI practitioners implementing EDI policies at this time were deeply aware of how this confluence of national and international developments effect the take-up of EDI discourses by people in their HEIs and resistance to EDI work.

Figure 13: Levels of animation by participant type, theme (Resistance) and subthemes

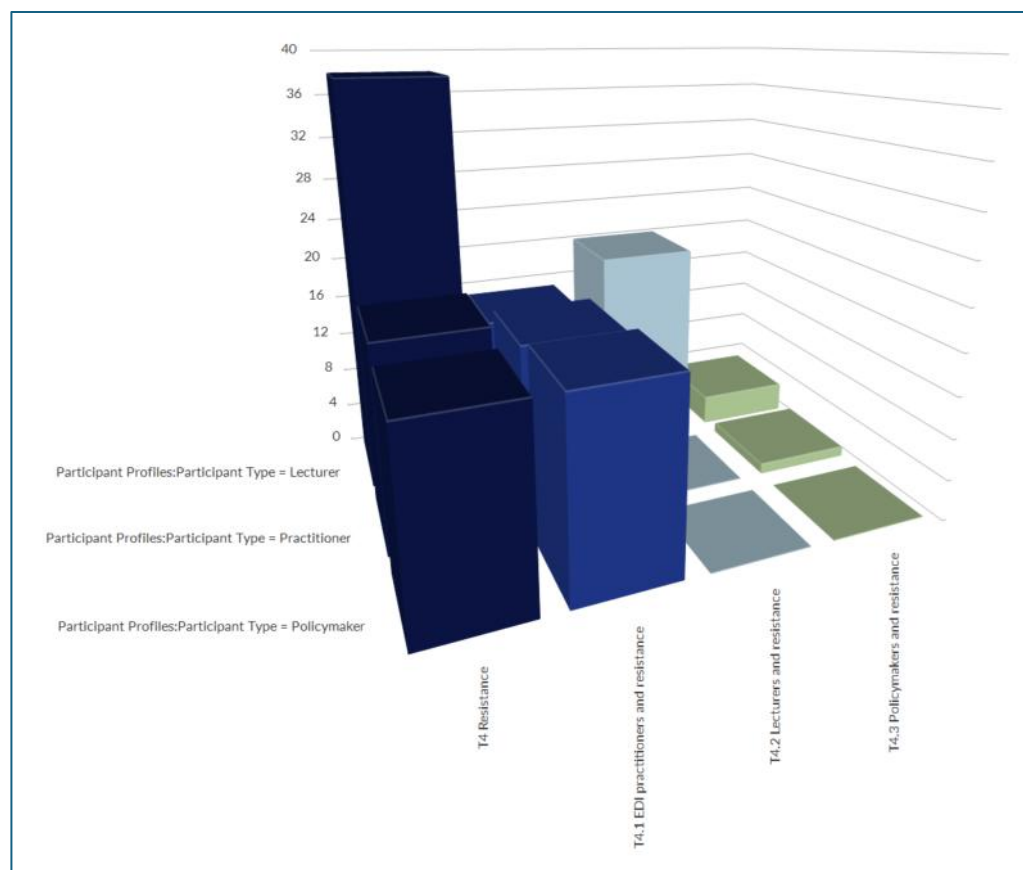


Figure 13 maps the terrain of resistance to EDI work as articulated across participant groups, revealing how experiences and perceptions of opposition are fundamentally shaped by institutional positioning. It demonstrates that lecturers are most animated about resistance overall,

reflecting their front-line encounters with unwilling peers, pushback, and active opposition in academic spaces where EDI challenges disciplinary norms and pedagogical practices. Practitioners experience resistance most acutely, both the resistance they face in advancing EDI initiatives with colleagues and senior managers and the institutional barriers they navigate in attempting to embed change.

EDI Practitioners and resistance

Of the three cohorts, the practitioner group experience resistance most acutely, and this is also acknowledged by the other two cohorts of policymakers and lecturers to be the case. Practitioners occupy a specialised position with a clear mandate within the HEI, serving as advocates for systemic change and policy translators (Ball, 2012). Despite the clear mandate and equivalence with other managers in terms of seniority of role and reward, practitioners experience their role as having limited authority and nominal traction across the university. It is pertinent to remind the reader of Aoife's description in chapter 7 of the perception amongst peers that EDI roles only exist because they were mandated by the HEA: *'oh, the HEA made them have those roles'*. This implicit resistance reframes EDI work and practitioners as nominal and tokenistic and lacking genuine authority or purpose. This results in practitioners being positioned outside of core decision-making structures or having their work treated as second tier in terms of priority. Practitioners frequently encounter internal resistance to resource allocation, social credibility, and as members on important institutional committees and decision-making bodies. Resistance can take the shape of what MacKenzie et al. (2023) call 'institutional gaslighting', discussed earlier in chapter 3. This is a conceptual frame for thinking about how resistance manifests in institutional contexts and includes four specific forms of 'institutional gaslighting': the slowdown (a type of strategic delaying tactic), the pushback, the shutdown and the

blowback. Aoife gives an example of how the slowdown tactic operates and its effect:

So I remember our most recent gender equality action plan, it was our first one in [the HEI] right?

So, we'd taken all the ones we've had in [campuses], done a big review on them all, looked at all the Horizon Europe criteria, new Athena Swan [guidelines], and drafted a new plan. We've put a lot of time and effort into the new plan, so I brought it to [senior decision-making body] and then of course, ... you know, we got like, 'Why isn't this costed? Why aren't all the actions costed?'. But the time it takes to cost it, like that's no problem, and bearing in mind no other action plan is ever costed right. Like our bloody strategic plan wasn't costed, it only a rough estimate.

So, I said, 'OK, take a deep breath, go off and cost it, here I go'. So, I went off and spent about a month, had to cost every single item, predict out costs over three years. It took a lot of work. Brought it back. Like, we had to cost everything? I mean, I was joking, kind of saying like literally, I had to cost your time going to the toilet. They wanted everything costed, finance did.

So anyway, I did it, brought it all back, costed it, and I said to myself, well, at least now it's costed, they're going to see the cost of it and we might actually get the money. That's grand, back to [senior decision-making body]. [participant paraphrases the discussion] 'Lovely, this is a lovely action plan. Costings great to see this. Everyone should cost their action plans, grand – [it's] approved, and on to governing, body, [it's] approved and....' And what budget did I get that year? The same as every other year. So it made no difference. I felt like saying like ...And nobody else since by the way, has had to cost an action plan like that. So I

don't know, it really annoyed me, like it really annoyed me. I could probably think of more [examples], but like that was the one that drove me mental. It was like, why did you make me do this? Like it's always, there's always something else more important on the agenda....

In Aoife's example we can see the effects of resistance can translate into an onus to justify EDI work, and limited success in embedding EDI. Aoife worked to demonstrate necessary and also strategic performatively but ultimately the result was non-performative, with no additional funding allocated. Eimear typifies this sentiment:

I think it's so tricky. I think EDI units are in this space where if you want EDI to be integrated into the core services of the institution, the core reason higher education institutions exist ... and they're caught between being able to do that work behind the scenes, which can be not super visible, but really important. And then also having to make the case for themselves... why they exist, and do all these highly visible things that can be really resource intensive and take up time. And I remember in my exit interview when I left [an institution] saying that, like, I really felt like, I constantly had to defend why I existed, like, why my role existed and that just took up so much energy.

Eimear articulates a punishing double bind where practitioners must simultaneously embed EDI the behind the scenes, while also justifying their existence. The resistance operates through the requirement to continuously prove the value of the work, thereby positioning EDI work and practitioners as permanently provisional. As we have already seen these efforts understandably take a toll on EDI practitioners, a theme that I wish to explore in more depth now .

Emotional burden of EDI work on EDI practitioners

Aoife becomes emotional when she talks at length about the unique position of practitioners, the level and type of resistance encountered and the lack of parity in institutional response when compared with other functions:

But it makes our lives very difficult in EDI, you know, because every single thing we do is challenged. You know, every time there's an event, every time there's a training, every time there's, you know, it's like you're waiting for this stream of objections and abuse to start, you know. Yeah, it's bad enough members of the public too, but when your own staff, or your own colleagues are undermining your work, or trying to... that's difficult, I think. There is a big emotional toll in that. You know, it's not easy and you don't always get back up where you think you'll get back up. You know, it's uh, like it's definitely challenging. It's not a big cohort, but they can make life very difficult, and I feel like, if that was any other area of work in the university, it would not be allowed, you know, in terms of the abuse that people have to take and are subjected to. But you know, if that was a colleague, in Registry, and someone went and you know, whatever, they're entitled to go and say what they want.... but they wouldn't do it....where we're expected to put up with this kind of abuse for doing our job, you know, which is hard to take. You know, it's like, it's OK freedom of expression and all that. That's grand. But like, there's also a way of doing things, you know, and a way of behaving. And I think we're expected to just suck up all the nastiness and the abuse that's out there, as well, and just kind of, take it on the chin.

So, look, it's a difficult one, but I think ... you're in kind of almost a unique kind of position in the EDI in higher education ... like because you have the kind of public elements and public role, you know, it's a very public role, you know, and you're very exposed in

the work that you're doing. It can easily go wrong. You know, like things can happen and I think yeah, where are the institutional supports then for EDI practitioners?

Aoife's experience of resistance is the most pronounced amongst practitioners. Aoife recognises that the EDI role is different than others in that it has more public-facing elements than most roles; practitioners become the public face of the HEI at initiatives or events that are covered in regional or national media, events that address contemporary social issues such as immigration, racism and the trans debate. Aoife highlights that resistance, which can be either internal or external or both, is normalised by the institution and treated as if it is 'par for the course' for practitioners. This in itself denigrates both the work of EDI in the HEI and the role of practitioners when the institutional response is that neither are worth sticking up for and is suggestive of the lack of esteem that EDI work and EDI roles are held. These instances demand significant emotional labour and take their toll on practitioners.

Another practitioner Ciara delineates the categories of HEI actors across three groupings:

And so, there's certainly a strong cohort of champions and people who are willing to engage. There's also then a cohort of people who are actively resistant, and who see it [EDI] as an ideology, and just, yeah, don't want to engage in it at all, who would maybe claim that it's, you know, maybe there's too many resources being put into it and those resources would be better put elsewhere. And then there's a cohort of people who are on board because they know they should be, rather than because they actually genuinely believe in it. So that to me, is the spectrum on it.

Ciara's tripartite mapping of colleagues means practitioners expend energy managing not just opposition but also the unreliability of

superficial allies, who qualify as non-performatives in the performativity spectrum of EDI enactment proposed at the end of the previous chapter. Policy documents work on the assumption that there will be cooperation amongst staff in HEIs to implement policies, however, based on the literature (Ball et al. 2012) and practitioner data in this study, this cannot be assumed.

Impact of public discourses on EDI work

Cian alludes to the changed global political landscape.

It's a real worry, like these are really worrying times. Like I think it's a really pivotal year globally, let alone Ireland.

Aoife and others echo this concern about evolving public discourses and their impact on institutional EDI work:

So, I think the discourse around [EDI] has just become hugely political, you know, and it's going to become increasingly political, so that worries me. From the perspective of working in the space, I don't want to be at the butt end of everybody's, you know, everybody's political views. Like my political views are irrelevant to my work. I'm doing the work that I'm supposed to do. You know, there's an agenda set by the HEA. There's policy in certain areas - we're implementing the policy, you know, if people don't like it, they don't like it.

Like it's not political, but I just feel, I just fear that, you know, it's becoming so much more political and that's just going to make it so much more.... It's just gonna be divisive rather than ...like what we're trying to do is the exact opposite...It's trying to include.... It's trying to bring people together. So, I just think the discourse around it is really changing quite rapidly, and I am fearful for that, I would say...as to how that's going to play out, you know, especially with all the race equality, some of the recommendations, they are quite are far-reaching, you know, the

mandatory training for all staff... I just think we're going to reach a tipping point where it's, you know, it's going to become much more difficult for us to do our work and it's a worry, but...

Aoife insists that her work in EDI is not political, even as she acknowledges it's '*becoming hugely political*', and exposes how public discourses are not just creating institutional resistance but fundamentally transforming practitioners' professional identities from policy implementers into perceived ideologues and as result of this, potential targets. She notes that this is the opposite of EDI's stated purpose, which is '*to include ... to bring people together*'.

Lack of support from (other) senior managers

Aoibheann talks about having to cajole fellow senior leaders as a way of overcoming resistance.

Now I'm still... I'm still pulling people along to get it done. But, that was the only way I could overcome that resistance.

The data shows that practitioners have an expectation that resistance is part of EDI work: it is not unexpected; it goes with the territory. Practitioners assume this by the nature of the work. Nonetheless, practitioners are sometimes blindsided by where resistance comes from, the form that it takes and how institutions respond or ignore the source of resistance. This has been discussed in previous sections. It is evident from the data that not all actors are created equal, and practitioners experience a lack of esteem for their role and position and seem to experience resistance disproportionately.

Participants say that it is exhausting both dealing with resistance and also anticipating where it will come from. Sometimes it comes from the least expected places.

Cian speaks at length about the cross-section of responses to EDI work from within the HEI.

I think there's a cohort of white middle aged men who are completely disengaged with it, it's just not relevant to them. Umm, I think there's a cohort of managers who will be suffering from initiative fatigue and don't really have the bandwidth or interest to engage? And so I think there's different sections of the organisation with different views. But I think that there's a chunk of the organisation, I think, we sometimes underestimate it, of people who, you know, can make the connection to it, from their own lives and their own experiences with people they know, and they're keen to support it, and we need to make it easy for them, and rather than it be something daunting, and we need to help them to engage with it. But I think there is goodwill there, but there's certainly fatigue there. And when you talk about the policy change in Ireland and then there's an introduction to some significant policies, there was a whole big hullabaloo about it. So there was, you know, high profile, it's the thing to do - senior managers had to be engaged with it; we're now getting into the sort of embedding stage, which is the long slog, and that interest wanes a bit and that's a challenge. And that's just managing change. It's not specific to EDI. I think that's any change within an organisation...

And so I think it's a real cross section, Mary and yeah. And then you've got absolutely die-hards that think that we're wasting our time and the world has gone mad. Yeah, but you'll have them, and you focus on that group of people on the ground who are engaging with it.

Cian notes, 'there is goodwill there, but there's certainly fatigue there'. He identifies a type of exhaustion that is acute in the TU institutions that have had a diet of continuous change and restructuring over the last 5 years. His overall tone is positive and accounts for the time it takes to embed change and the need for senior managers to get on board with the

message. He concludes that after the initial enthusiasm that practitioners are now into the hard slog of embedding EDI, and that the resistance is part of this slog and not specific to EDI per se.

A key dilemma emerges for practitioners as they seek to understand their own place and power within their HEI. The data evidences that they have a sense of being displaced or adjacent to leadership teams within the HEI, as if they have not earned their right to be there - even though by role and grade, they are peers. Ironically, the EDI practitioners are routinely not *included* in their own organisations. Practitioners are widely exposed to resistance through the public-facing dimension to their role. They experience resistance from their colleagues, the wider staff and student body, as well as from external actors, who usually remain anonymous. They experience resistance from managers within the HEI in terms of inertia or strategic waiting behaviours. One practitioner recounted having received several hate mail letters from anonymous external sources. Unsurprisingly, this resistance takes a toll on practitioners with some practitioners showing low levels of optimism in their responses, and reference the turn to far-right and individualistic, protectionist nation-building discourses.

The positional perspective of participants, based on their values and institutional role shapes the experience of resistance; as does the context for enactment; the power dynamics in operation; and the type of resistance experienced and how it might be addressed.

Lecturers' and resistance

I remind the reader of the partiality of the sample: lecturers recruited for this inquiry are actively involved in EDI work in their HEIs. Patfield et al.'s (2021) research on teacher professional identity demonstrates how educators systematically attribute their own behaviours to positive internal motivations while attributing colleagues' behaviours to external constraints or character deficits. In this research, participants often

view their own behaviour more positively than that of peers. Although this is not resistance as described earlier in this chapter, the data shows that lecturers in this study experience a lack of support for their EDI work in a number of ways: structural (promotional criteria and incentivisation), peer behaviour and norm setting, competing priorities and emotional labour. They also observe, and to an extent understand, the ambivalence of peers to enacting EDI in their work. I include this in my chapter on resistance, although evasion, deflection, disengagement and reluctance may more accurately describe the general lecturer behaviour in relation to EDI work, as recounted by lecturers who participated in the research.

Participants sense resistance from hierarchical structures and actors when they perceive a disconnect between espoused institutional values and the practical support needed to implement these values effectively in their teaching roles, such as in the stories recounted in the previous chapter. Although it may not explicitly be categorised as resistance, the invisibility of an EDI component in institutional documents and practices, as a credible part of lecturer responsibilities, ensures that it has low/no profile for lecturers. There is no contractual obligation for lecturers to integrate an EDI perspective into their teaching and learning. This stems from the rigidity of the standard lecturer contract which has not changed since 2007 which predates the establishment of EDI as a fixture in HE in Ireland. It does not take account or offer a 'buyout' of teaching hours for EDI or other work, although buyout is possible for other work, such as research and fixed term projects. As mentioned in chapters 6 and 7, a standard contract, negotiated by their representative union body exists for Assistant Lecturers/ Lecturers in the TU /IoT system. They are required to teach 16-18 hours per week, and in addition to carry out administrative duties associated with teaching including grading, assessment, and to participate 'in appropriate activities necessary to the development of their department/school and of the

Institute’⁴⁴. There is no reference to EDI and neither is it listed as a criteria in promotional schemes or the role description of Senior Lecturers. This does not stop lecturers from becoming involved in EDI work, but it does serve to delegitimise and disincentivise the work and this has an obvious effect on lecturer behaviour. Its absence in sectoral role descriptions, promotional criteria and institutional practices does little to court engagement or raise the profile and perceived value of EDI. When describing the non- engagement of lecturers with EDI work, ‘evasion’ may capture this complexity more precisely than ‘resistance’, suggesting a more passive dynamic of sidestepping EDI work not through active opposition but through strategic avoidance.

Impact of peer behaviour

The community of peer lecturers significantly influence values development. New lecturers observe how experienced colleagues engage with EDI and balance their teaching responsibilities. Róisín remarks on the effects of this non-involvement and strategic weighing up by lecturers of where to sink their time and effort. New to a career in lecturing, she describes the shock she felt when she realised the complete lack of oversight that lecturers experience in their professional roles and how this can encourage inertia and withdrawal from EDI work on the part of lecturers:

So, if you've got someone who's very fixed in their role and they've been here for decades and they've no obligation to do CPD, they've no obligation to do these additional things. They just aren't gonna do it. They just don't want to do it. But you know, I just think how can you be an educator and not be constantly educating yourself.. like that's.. I can see how people just grow roots out their feet and into their desk, under their desk, and just do the bare minimum and you know, and some people I actually think, ok,

⁴⁴ Teachers’ Union of Ireland Assistant Lecturer/Lecturer contract for IoTs and TUs

that's actually a strategic approach. Do you know that, there is a whole thing about working, you know, working to rule, working slowly, not burning yourself out and all of that, but that does come at the expense of the students in my opinion. As a mother and as someone who deals with so many students with so many additional needs in that, you know, that kind of attitude is endemic to be honest. And then I can't speak to that, I suppose, because I'm fairly new to academic life, and you know it's the one thing that really sort of has shocked me, is that kind of apathy that you see from certain... And I'm sure that's every institution you know... And so, as a real public sector issue, because, this is someone who hadn't understood that before, there is no other industry that where people would get away with the lack of oversight on their functioning. If you get me, I'm trying to say this in a tactful way.

Competing priorities and overwhelm

Resistance can also stem from competing agendas, or, as described by Ball et al. (2012:9) 'initiativitis', when there is a continuous stream of new initiatives introduced. This constant cycle of change and proliferation of initiatives can leave staff overwhelmed and ultimately decrease engagement. We have seen already that EDI is in competition with other institutional initiatives⁴⁵. A continuous, unrelenting pipeline of initiatives can result in change fatigue and resistance even amongst lecturers who support EDI goals in principle, reflecting back to Oisín's comment at the end of the last chapter on the continuous cycle of production and creating for the sake of creating. Milian and Wijesingha (2023: 458) found that backlash to EDI policies is not unprecedented where lecturers believe that they are being asked to do additional things. Prior to this,

⁴⁵ These include Sustainable Development Goals (13 out of 17 SDGs mention equality), Sustainable Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (STARS), National Technological University Transformation for Recovery and Resilience (N-TUTOR), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Academic Integrity (AI) and others

Dobbin et al. (2015) found that EDI initiatives that aim to control worker's behaviour can be expected to 'spark managerial rebellion' (2015:1015).

Expertise limitations

Lecturers can also experience resistance in the classroom when they incorporate an EDI lens into teaching and learning and class activities. An example from Oisín of this was given in the preceding chapter on enactment. Lecturers, in their professional role, have the power and agency to control discussions and the dynamic in the classroom, however this requires skill, a skill that not every lecturer will have. They might deflect EDI work by claiming expertise limitations as evidenced in Áine's excerpt. She identifies this strategic distancing technique deployed by lecturers when they weigh up the cost of getting involved in EDI-related work and conclude that it is not on their priority list below. This may be another reason why fewer lecturers elect to engage in EDI work, although was not addressed directly in the data and warrants more research.

So, you get people who don't want to engage or just like, 'that's not my problem' and they have the privilege to say, 'that's not my problem, Uh, I've got a big grant to deal with', and you know, whatever or whatever their reason is for not [engaging], or, 'I've been doing this for a long time'. You know I've encountered that as well, you know, 'if the student can't make it, that's on them'.

Disciplinary differences

There is also a difference across disciplinary traditions in terms of disposition to EDI, the research suggests STEM disciplines being less inclined to commit to advancing EDI work than Business and Humanities based disciplines. A STEM lecturer, Clodagh describes the difference:

See if you go into the STEM areas, they don't want to know all about a lot of stuff. They want to know, well, what do I need to do, you know, to get this over the line or whatever. So, there's always

going to be competing agendas. There's always going to be competing priorities. Some people's personal value systems will lead them in a certain direction. But what we do need is to have information that's relevant, that's timely and that kind of makes people act, you know, get engaged with it.

Aisling describes the gap that she has observed with STEM colleagues in terms of their understanding of EDI, and how she needs to loop conversations with these colleagues back to basic arguments due to their lack of familiarity with the rationale:

And I think Humanities, as a department, in general, are open to and are doing EDI work. They don't realise they're doing it, but through sociology and social policy and care professions, and like, we have a [X discipline], our part of humanities here in [my institution], so Universal Design for Learning is a huge part of what we do. And I definitely, from being, and this is to my point a minute ago, I can see other departments, and have been in sessions with other departments and other disciplines, that are 10 Steps behind us. They are very much, 'why is this a thing? Why are we talking about it?' And I do feel like sometimes when we're trying to have these broader conversations across the university, we're preaching to the choir a lot of the time. It's the humanities staff who tend to turn up because they have an inherent interest in it. And then we bring other staff members into it and we're back to basics again. And I sense the frustration there now in that there's definitely differences in the disciplines in where we're at, in terms of, do we understand what EDI is, and then how do we go about actually embedding it into curriculum. It don't think everyone is on the same page of that in terms of disciplines.

Emotional labour

Lecturers also talk about the emotional labour of EDI work with students. Engaging in EDI work for lecturers often involves supporting students with project work or targeted initiatives in areas of identity such as sexual violence, race, ethnicity, LGBTQ+ etc., or individually with aspects of their identity that they are struggling with in the institutional environment such as identifying as transgender, neurodiverse etc. This kind of identity work, when taken on by lecturers, in addition to the time required, brings with it significant emotional labour and often exhaustion. Caoimhe talks about *'the emotional labour of teaching diverse students'*. Participants comment that other lecturers see the level of work involved and decide that they are not up for this. Róisín alludes to this:

You know, I think across all of the institutions of the emotional labour that comes with being involved heavily with an equality, diversity, inclusion and justice, you know. Because you know, I'm certainly known by students as someone that they can come and talk to that, you know, that I have been visible, that I am in the Allies group. And you know, I think it's we have to mind ourselves as well in that space. So, I think there are staff being proactive and it's really challenging as well around this because, you know, all again is on a voluntary basis and the emotional labour is something, yeah.

To summarise, lecturer participants articulate what they see as an inbuilt structural resistance to EDI work in terms of how the teaching contract and promotional criteria are framed in institutional documentation. They also observe resistance from peers, as rational actors, when they see that there is no material benefit to be gained from doing EDI work. The lecturers who participated in this study have a positive disposition to EDI enactment, they see resistance arising from the 'doing' of EDI work, when the workload inequality with their peers becomes apparent. Lecturer participants report the lack of incentives or supports for EDI

work encourages their lecturer peers to adopt strategic distancing techniques, whereby they consciously decide not to get involved as there is no material benefit for them to do so. Other issues such as competing priorities, work overwhelm, differences across academic disciplines, and the emotional labour of EDI work are all factors that either make lecturers desist in EDI efforts or experience burnout when there is an absence of structural supports from the HEI (Bhopal, 2023, Milian and Wijesingha, 2023). This multi-directional experience of resistance places EDI-disposed lecturers, such as the cohort in this study, in the position of enacting EDI and institutional EDI policy commitments, while other lecturers are inadvertently encouraged to become resisters due conditions such the employment contract. It is clear to lecturers that taking on an EDI element to their work will not reward them in a notional or material way. Their reward is in terms of realising their authentic commitment to their values in their professional role. Accounting for the partiality of the research sample, it can still be argued that from the literature and the research, it seems that EDI work is not perceived as credible or held in high esteem as knowledge-producing for academic institutions. It is perceived as 'soft', pastoral care, feminised and lacking in power. Returning to (Ball et al 2012:9) assertion, 'policies are permeated by relations of power'; in the case of EDI, the permeation of power is weak and dependent on the commitment of other more powerful actors.

What's in it for me?

Lecturer participants in this study who are involved in EDI work experience lack of institutional valuing of their EDI efforts. This can be fomented through a lack of acknowledgement of this work by managers, material resource constraints, the toll of the emotional labour of EDI work. Others may have a personal or disciplinary values conflict, or some may also have concerns about their competence to navigate sensitive EDI-related discussions. The research suggests that EDI-

oriented lecturer participants in this study experience workload inequality when they compare themselves with peers who prioritise work activities on the basis of what is rewarded by the institution, such as research output, contributing to important committees and other high-status work, although some account must be taken of the subjective bias of participants. EDI work is considered less valued for promotional purposes than measured institutional priorities such as research outputs by academic staff which are valued in institutional practices and documentation.

Lecturers weigh up the benefits and drawbacks of their efforts in their professional context and the research suggests that unless they have a personal commitment to EDI, they can easily mobilise a plethora of arguments to justify not getting involved in EDI work. This suggests strategic avoidance. In the data, participants recount that many of their peers resist EDI work due to this lack of incentivisation and a clear understanding of their role requirements based on their contract of employment.

Policymakers and resistance

Due to their professional role, policymakers are the least exposed to resistance than other cohorts and have an awareness of this. Orla comments:

I think we maybe experience it differently in that you know, part of our role as a policymaker is to respond or provide information for the department, or you know respond to queries from politicians, members of the public like that. So, I think, yeah, we probably just experience it differently to how it's being felt in HEIs. But I would say, yeah, in, in your experience in a HEI it's probably more acute and immediate, whereas for us it's different.

Eimear concurs with the higher level of protection afforded in a policy maker role:

You are more protected from it because I work with colleagues who care about EDI work and most of my interactions are with EDI practitioners or people who have bought into [EDI work]. I do have a degree of protection and separation from the naysayers other than like cranky emails, or like weird interactions occasionally. It's much harder in an institution. It just is. Mm hmm. And you have to work more directly with naysayers.

Orla is cognisant of resistance from broader societal discourse and leverages data to legitimise the need for the work and to shield the resistance.

Yeah, I think we're conscious of them for sure. In terms of, you know, whether that comes in, whether that's in the media, or it comes in through different queries we receive or just like that in conversation with HEIs. So yeah, we'd be aware of that kind of rhetoric and narrative that comes through and as kind of you know, objecting to some of the work that's been done in HEIs, or at national level. But I think it's also a case of, we'll try and respond, in a way that points to, how the work that we're doing is evidence-based and, it's not something that somebody just dreamed up because of some 'woke' agenda. One of the strengths of the higher education sector is that we've got a huge concentration of experts, so we are able to say that that our work is informed by experts. And also then you know the lived experience as a staff. So, like, yeah, I keep banging on about the data and the evidence.

Eimear is also aware of the impact of societal discourses, global politics and the social conditions of interpretation on national discourses.

And I think I'm starting to see a little bit of that with the race equality work as well, not to the same degree yet, but I wouldn't be surprised if that...if the backlash kind of grows there in terms

of... it's kind of the culture wars stuff that you see in the US and the UK, I do see some importing of that, and I am not sure, I don't know... I sometimes think, I'm like, oh, maybe it won't happen to the same degree here. Then sometimes I think, it's just, it just hasn't yet... and I don't. And it will be... It would be different. There's going to be different contexts. But I remember for a while when I first started this work, it always felt like Ireland was just more, like pretty up for doing progressive things. And it was really lovely environment and I had worked in [another jurisdiction] for about X years, and then Ireland was just a little bit more refreshing to work in and now I just feel a bit more of that backlash and a little bit of concern as well. Like just? Yeah, I don't know. I am worried about it.

Liam is similarly cognisant of the challenges raised in broader societal discourses. He returns to deployment of hard policy levers linked to funding and soft measures such as campaigns, as a means of countering these narratives that threaten EDI and societal cohesion :

You know, in some of these areas and all it takes is Trump, gosh. All it takes is the likes of Trump to come in and start, you know, to start the narrative and say, well, they're, taking their jobs and, you know, the language and migrants and all that kind of thing given where America comes from. So, look, I think especially in light of what's happened in the last couple of years with the far-right, I think it has been useful to do some of the knowledge and understanding piece, and I know it's slightly harder to measure. But I think you know, running the campaigns, and maybe measuring the campaigns, and funding the campaigns, they are useful, but I suppose on the other side then you want your hard measures to see if it's making a difference.

Conclusion

Resistance to EDI is peppered through the preceding three chapters of findings. It is also pervasive enough in the data to merit its own chapter. It emerges across this study as simultaneously pervasive and highly differentiated amongst the three participant cohorts. Policymakers remain largely insulated from direct resistance. Lecturers can exercise classroom authority to manage student pushback, though they acknowledge institutional and peer resistance to broader change. EDI practitioners, however, are on the frontlines of resistance. As part of their EDI work, they are continually required to justify their existence, and navigate colleagues who range from champions to active opponents to hollow allies. This differential exposure across cohorts matters because it reveals how resistance operates not as a single force but as a multi-layered phenomenon that strategically targets EDI practitioners, who arguably have least institutional power in the most recently established institutional fixtures. Practitioners occupy an interstitial space between institutional aspirations and institutional reality, becoming both visible symbols of EDI and convenient focal points for wider opposition.

Based on the data, resistance cannot be understood solely as internal institutional dynamics. EDI has become increasingly contested and embedded in broader societal discourses: anti-immigration sentiment, the mobilisation of far-right political movements, culture war narratives around race and transgender rights, and resource allocation anxieties such as housing and medical treatment. These external discourses do not simply influence institutional EDI work; they actively reconstruct it, as actors within HE draw on and extend these narratives to cluster EDI initiatives into a monolith which can be dismissed as a type of mission creep by the HEI or ideological overreach. Resistance to this push against equality initiatives is one of the ways that policy is reconstructed and remade by actors in HE (Ball et al., 2012). In the current moment, participants recognise that the changed discursive environment is

'pushing against equality type initiatives' (Cian) in ways that make established equality gains suddenly fragile.

What emerges is that participants must navigate between positioning EDI as neutral policy implementation and confronting its unavoidable politicisation; between doing invisible integration work and performing constant self-justification. This reveals EDI not as a stable institutional function but as a contested space where progress is permanently provisional and reversible. All participants have an awareness of resistance as multi-layered, politically situated and unevenly experienced, and generates considerable anxiety particularly for policymakers and practitioners about what comes next. Critically, it is worth considering whether resistance functions not simply as opposition to EDI but as a mechanism through which institutions regulate the pace and scope of change.

Critical Summary

From my locus as a critical scholar-practitioner, I find these findings difficult to view as detached observations. They resonate strongly with my own experience of occupying a position that is simultaneously institutionally authorised and institutionally vulnerable. While practitioners are tasked with advancing institutional commitments to EDI, they also become highly visible sites onto which anxieties, frustrations and resistance can be projected. The findings suggest that resistance is rarely experienced as a single act of opposition. Rather, it is encountered as a continual process of negotiation, justification and accommodation that shapes how EDI work is undertaken on a daily basis.

My interpretation of these findings is inevitably shaped by this location within the institution. I recognise in participants' accounts the tension between pursuing transformative ambitions and navigating institutional realities that constrain what is considered possible, legitimate or

strategically wise. The data reinforces my understanding that resistance is not simply external to EDI work but constitutive of it. Resistance shapes priorities, limits the scope and pace of action and influences which forms of equality work are deemed acceptable.

These findings have also prompted me to critically reflect on the precarity of progress. Participants' concerns about the fragility of equality gains mirror my own observations that institutional commitments to EDI can expand and contract in response to changing political, economic and reputational pressures. From this perspective, resistance appears not only as a barrier to change but also as a reminder that progress remains contingent rather than guaranteed. Maintaining a critical and reflexive stance therefore requires attention not only to overt acts of resistance but also to the organisational conditions that enable resistance to persist, evolve and re-emerge. This chapter highlights the ongoing challenge of advancing EDI within institutions whose commitment to transformation remains uneven, contested and potentially reversible.

Chapter 11: An EDI Lifeline

Introduction

This research has its roots in in six years of professional practice and dilemmas and a lifelong commitment to equality and social justice. My starting point as a critical scholar-practitioner was that we need a description of the EDI world, its language, discourses and practices, in order to account for its institutional impact and status within Irish HE. It became very clear to me the disjoint between policy and practice and that a traditional understanding of policy implementation reliant on top-down structures, were not working. I set out to critically examine EDI language and policy discourses and how these were understood and enacted by people working in Irish HE and their potential to lead to transformative change. It examines the EDI 'world' in the TU sector of Irish higher education from the inside-out and from the outside-in and contributes to understanding the challenges, complexity and contributions of EDI practitioners, lecturers and policymakers to this work. .Where my work as an EDI practitioner revealed the 'what' and the 'how' of institutional resistance, my work as a researcher illuminated the 'why', uncovering systemic patterns and dynamics of how institutions absorb and neutralise challenges in their existing orders. It is this dual perspective that has been crucial to understanding the complexity of EDI work.

While it takes a multi-perspectival view, the research is weighted to the experience of EDI practitioners. By centralising their voices, the thesis offers a detailed and rich account of the understanding and interpretation of EDI from the perspective of people who lead this work and with a view to contributing to knowledge on how meaningful institutional change is approached, blocked and can be advanced in the future. To distil the outcomes of my research into one broad perspective, this study extends to the Irish context, the claim that EDI work is complex, messy and enacted in slow and uneven ways in HEIs.

The thesis demonstrates that EDI enactment in Irish higher education is not a process of policy implementation but a contested form of institutional labour conducted across multiple intersecting institutional lines. Existing theories of equality, policy enactment and diversity work explain aspects of this process but insufficiently account for how compliance structures, relational labour, institutional reputation, practitioner positionality and resistance interact.

The lines framework is presented as an analytical model for understanding EDI enactment in higher education. It offers a new conceptual vocabulary for understanding institutional dynamics and demonstrates that institutional transformation depends not on policy alone but on the ability to build lifelines connecting structural, relational and political forms of change.

The lines framework emerged inductively from analysis of policy texts and from participant accounts. EDI practitioners, lecturers, and policymakers consistently described their work using language that denoted spatial-relational lines, such as reporting lines, crossing boundaries, navigating between different groups, being sidelined. This language reveals how EDI enactment operates across multiple, often contradictory dimensions that rarely align. The lines framework proposes five interrelated 'lines' that organise the complex terrain of EDI in Irish higher education and is the principal theoretical contribution of this thesis. It integrates policy enactment, EDI enactment, performativity, resistance and practitioner labour into a single exploratory model.

Lines

Hardlines are the policy architectures, compliance requirements, and accountability frameworks that create institutional obligations. These include Athena Swan applications, HEA reporting mandates, schemes such as the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI) and EDI

Enhancement Fund, and legally-enforceable anti-discrimination provisions. Hardlines provide structural legitimacy and enforcement mechanisms, what Ball et al. (2012) call ‘policy technologies’. They make EDI visible, measurable, and consequential.

Softlines encompass the relational, affective, and cultural dimensions of EDI work, what Ahmed (2012) calls ‘hearts and minds work’. These include diversity events, coalition-building, awareness-raising, inclusive pedagogy, and the subtle work of shifting institutional culture. Softlines operate at the level of interpersonal connection and social energy rather than compliance. While essential for cultural change, softlines risk being dismissed as non-outcomes-oriented and feminised labour in neoliberal institutional contexts that privilege quantifiable metrics.

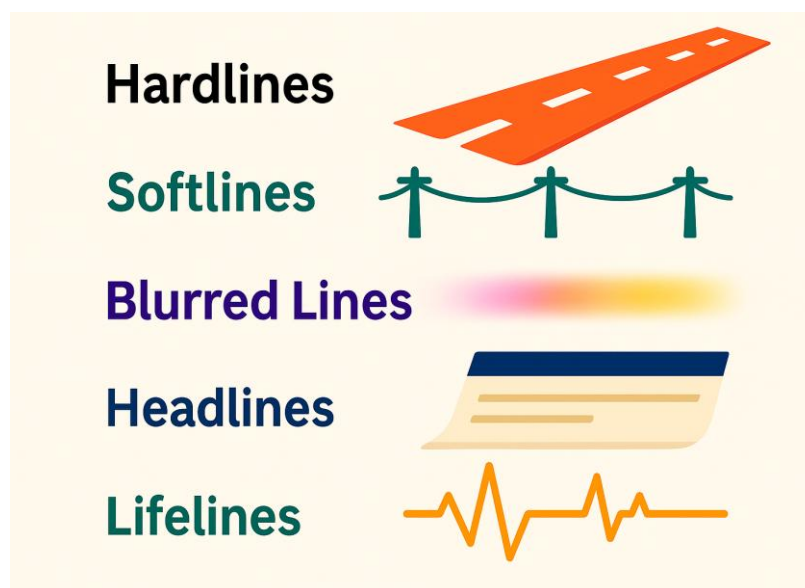
Headlines represent institutional performativity, the necessary and/or strategic use of EDI commitments for reputational enhancement. HEIs pursue ‘good EDI headlines’ (HEA, 2004) for marketing, rankings, and legitimacy. This is not necessarily cynical; as Ahmed (2006) observes, diversity workers must mobilise whatever arguments secure buy-in. However, headline-seeking can produce non-performative commitments that maintain the status quo while appearing transformative.

Blurred lines capture the ambiguous institutional standing of EDI work and EDI practitioners. Despite management grading and HEA mandates, practitioners lack parity of esteem with other professional services. They are simultaneously positioned as experts and outsiders, change-agents and institutional killjoys, essential and supplementary. This ambiguity reflects practitioners’ liminal status: present in the institution but not granted full residence.

In this chapter, I propose an additional term: lifelines. This term operates at three levels. Firstly, analytically, it represents necessary connections between equality’s hard-compliance dimensions and

diversity/inclusion's soft-cultural dimensions, alluding to the finding that change does not emerge primarily from policy or authority, but through relational infrastructures that sustain people doing difficult institutional work. Secondly, practically, lifelines denote the critical conversations and peer networks that sustain practitioner labour; thirdly, transformatively, lifelines can present a feminist theory of institutional change, connecting EDI campus work to broader justice struggles. Lifelines offer a way of thinking through EDI work orientated to building coalitions that integrate hard and soft dimensions.

Figure 14: The Lines Framework



These five lines are not discrete categories but intersecting dimensions that shape how EDI policies are interpreted, enacted, and resisted. This framework reveals why instrumental implementation models fail: they assume EDI follows a single line (policy to practice) when it actually operates across multiple, often contradictory lines simultaneously, concluding that meaningful transformation requires strategic integration across all five dimensions.

The findings demonstrate that EDI work cannot be understood merely as policy implementation but must be conceptualised as a form of institutional labour that is deeply embedded in questions of identity, institutional commitment and resistance and the broader social context for change.

Summary of key findings

Throughout the empirical chapters 7-10 I have woven in relevant research and spoken to that already. I am aware that I have given the reader a detailed and comprehensive overview of the findings so I want to begin by summarising the findings in brief.

1. Identity

The study demonstrates that EDI participation is strongly mediated by identity. Across all cohorts, engagement with EDI was rarely experienced as neutral administrative work but as values-based labour connected to personal histories, lived experiences of inequality and commitments to social justice. The notion of hard, soft and blurred lines surfaced organically from participants across the three cohorts indicating their familiarity with these informal discourses and the import of these terms irrespective of their professional roles.

This finding extends existing work on diversity practitioners by demonstrating that EDI identities are not merely individual but institutional. The emergence of dedicated EDI roles, offices, committees and discourses has produced what I term the ‘worlding’ of EDI: the formation of an identifiable institutional field with its own language, expertise and boundaries. While this development has increased visibility, it has also facilitated the displacement of responsibility for EDI work onto specialist ‘expert’ practitioners, thereby isolating responsibility from the wider institution.

Therefore, the identity of EDI in HE generally and in TUs, is an identity position that is in process and emergent. That it exists as a fixture and is

creating a shared language and interest in addressing inequalities and making sense of different issues of social justice is progressive.

2. EDI in view and EDI enactment

This section synthesises findings on how EDI comes into view (chapter 8) and how it is enacted (chapter 9), two processes that prove interconnected in practice. The data supports that EDI visibility and enactment operate through what I term a performativity spectrum and that enactment occurs across multiple institutional lines.

The performativity spectrum in EDI enactment ranges from authentic engagement to meaningless engagement across three distinct types: necessary, strategic and non-performative. Necessary performativity creates institutional visibility and accountability through policies and metrics, while strategic performativity uses these commitments as leverage to work within structures for incremental transformation; both can be authentic, but are not necessarily so. Non-performativity represents the failure of EDI rhetoric to produce meaningful change, resulting in tokenistic engagement and a gap between institutional words and actions.

Against this spectrum, EDI work materialises through distinct yet interdependent forms of hardlines (reporting frameworks, Athena Swan awards, diversity monitoring systems, structural governance changes, enforcement mechanisms); and softlines (diversity days, exhibitions, awareness programs, coalition-building activities, interpersonal encounters). While hardlines provide structural legitimacy and enforcement mechanisms, softlines generate the social energy and relational work necessary for cultural transformation. Neither alone produces meaningful institutional change; both require strategic integration within a context where senior leadership commitment remains unevenly distributed. The findings suggest that softlines are the activities most central to institutional transformation and are

systematically devalued because they are associated with feminised forms of labour.

My analysis shows that three interconnected obstacles impede EDI translation from formal commitment to institutional reality. Firstly, policy awareness remains minimal; secondly, senior leadership commitment, including but crucially extending beyond the President to the wider senior leadership team, proves unevenly distributed, producing patchy enactment; EDI work depends on mobility and institutional structures affect how it circulates and is enacted. thirdly, expanding reporting requirements to the HEA are a significant draw on practitioner time that detracts from what is viewed as meaningful institutional transformation work, creating tension between external accountability and internal capacity. .

Contemporary Irish HE presents distinct obstacles to integrated EDI work. Increasing managerialism privileges quantifiable metrics over cultural transformation, while institutional mergers have created multi-campus Technological Universities spanning vast geographical areas. This dispersion makes interpersonal events challenging to organise, with most pivoting to hybrid delivery that compromises the social energy generated through in-person encounters. Post-Covid remote working accelerates this trend, with people physically on campus increasingly logging in online to attend meetings from their desks. The privileging of metrics reproduces gendered hierarchies of value by rewarding visible, measurable outputs while rendering relational and affective labour as comparatively invisible and inconsequential and risks reducing EDI to data systems and reporting requirements. Yet the HEA's resourcing of the EDI agenda, including mandated data collection, accountability frameworks, and funding, represents significant progress in keeping EDI visible and creating the evidence base necessary for change. The challenge lies in translating this data into action while maintaining the relational work that gives structural frameworks meaning.

In Irish HEIs, for EDI work to effectively embed in institutional life, it must circulate through multiple channels simultaneously: senior management meetings, EDI committees, data systems, reporting mechanisms, cultural events, and coalition-building initiatives.

3. Resistance

The unevenness of enactment accounts for some resistance, but not all. Resistance exists independent of people's experience of patchy enactment of EDI, and comes outside of the HEI and from discourse in society, again reflecting the complexity and messiness and interconnectedness of EDI with the wider world. For HEIs, it is key that senior leaders consider the HEI's role in maintaining ideology, or sets of principles and social mores that tend to perpetuate the status quo in relation to race and other inequalities.

Positionality effects how participants experience resistance, with it being felt most acutely by EDI practitioners as the translators of policy. They expect and anticipate resistance to their work and invest time into getting managers on side to support EDI work. The resistance can even be to the existence of the EDI practitioner roles. EDI practitioners are aware that they can be easily sidelined in HEIs. A nuanced understanding of enactment across the hard, soft, blurred of EDI in HE in Ireland is key to understanding resistance.

A key finding of this research is that EDI practitioners face a distinctive form of resistance that operates at a more complex level than practical implementation challenges. This resistance draws legitimacy from theoretical discourse, invokes principles of academic freedom, and positions itself as defending the integrity of scholarly inquiry, requiring practitioners to engage with fundamental philosophical, epistemological, and ethical debates about the nature and purpose of higher education. These findings position EDI practitioners as critical

interpreters of institutional power rather than simply policy implementers.

The findings suggest that resistance in higher education operates through what I term 'institutional sidelining' - the tendency to separate EDI concerns from 'real' or 'core' academic work. This sidelining allows HEIs to express commitment to EDI in hardline measures while not addressing practices that systematically disadvantage certain groups. My analysis demonstrates that leadership commitment to EDI is unevenly distributed (Ahmed, 2006:761), and this is not gendered. It operates through non-performative and various 'institutional gaslighting' (MacKenzie et al. 2023).

These findings extend existing knowledge on EDI work in HEIs and the critical role of EDI practitioners in enacting EDI. Participants identified contradictions, tensions and complexities in the creation of the EDI fixture in HE and in institutional enactment of EDI, including through language, policy, practice and relationally.

Theoretical and Methodological Reflections: reading in between the lines –towards a critical understanding of the EDI world in HE

This study draws on three theoretical frameworks, Baker et al.'s (2004, 2009) equality of condition, Ball et al.'s (2012) policy enactment theory, and Ahmed's (2012) analysis of diversity work. Following Murphy and Costa's (2022) call for hybridised theory, they are brought into dialogue to create an analytical framework capable of addressing the complexity of EDI enactment in Irish higher education. Murphy and Costa argue that theory should be shaped by the research phenomenon rather than applied as a fixed tool. Consistent with this approach, the three frameworks are combined to form a more comprehensive explanatory architecture than any could provide individually.

Against this theoretical architecture, I developed the 'lines' framework as an analytical model for understanding EDI enactment in higher

education. The framework demonstrates how hardlines, softlines, headlines and blurred lines interact to shape EDI enactment outcomes. Institutional change depends on the connections between these dimensions, conceptualised here as lifelines.

The conceptual contribution of the lines framework lies in its integration: rather than treating these as separate phenomena, the 'lines' framework reveals how they interact to produce the uneven landscape of EDI enactment. Hard measures without soft relational work become mere compliance exercises; soft measures without hard structural backing remain symbolic gestures; headline-seeking without genuine commitment produces non-performatives; and all three dynamics converge to create practitioners' blurred institutional standing. This integrated understanding modifies existing frameworks by demonstrating that EDI enactment cannot be understood through either policy analysis alone (Ball et al., 2012) or institutional diversity critique alone (Ahmed, 2012). Both are necessary but insufficient. The temporal, affective, and structural dimensions must be analysed together to account for why genuine institutional transformation remains elusive despite proliferating EDI infrastructure.

Finally, I introduce lifelines, as both analytical concept and normative intervention. Lifelines operate at three levels: firstly, theoretically, they represent the necessary connection between equality's hardline legal-compliance dimensions and diversity/inclusion's softline cultural dimensions, disaggregating E from D and I while re-integrating them through coalition-building; secondly, practically, they denote the critical conversations, peer networks, coalitions and support structures that sustain EDI practitioners' institutional labour; thirdly, transformatively, they invoke the potential of HE for social change, the 'life-giving' dimension that connects campus work to broader struggles for justice. Lifelines propose modes of building residence through strategic

coalitions that blur the boundaries between hardline compliance and the softlines of culture-building.

This conceptual framework emerged through my inquiry as a critical scholar-practitioner that holds onto, and works through, the tension of drawing on my insider knowledge and seeking critical distance. It offers a language for naming the complex dynamics that EDI practitioners navigate daily while providing analytical tools for understanding why certain interventions succeed or fail. The framework's value lies not in its novelty - all components extend existing scholarship - but in its integrative power: revealing how performativity, enactment, and resistance converge to produce the particular landscape of EDI work within the neoliberal HE context in Ireland.

This inquiry makes several significant contributions to knowledge. First, for practitioners, it explores their role, their 'blurred line' institutional positioning and their specialist knowledge of the relatively recent 'EDI world' in the Irish HE context. It creates knowledge about new TU institutions, the new fixture of EDI and EDI practitioners.

Second, the study demonstrates the inadequacy of instrumental models of policy implementation for understanding EDI work in higher education. The complex relationships between practitioner identity, institutional enactment, and forms of resistance reveal that EDI implementation is not an instrumental process of implementing policy in practice but is a site of contestation and struggle over the fundamental character of HEIs. This struggle can operate simultaneously at multiple levels, creating what Ball et al. (2012) describe as the 'messiness' of policy enactment, or what I term the 'blurred line'.

Third, the study foregrounds the 'softlines', or affective dimensions of EDI enactment. Both Ahmed and Ball et al. emphasise how policies are not simply cognitive constructs but embody particular feelings, desires, and anxieties about institutional transformation. The identity-based nature

of EDI buy-in and the emotional intensity of resistance suggest that successful EDI implementation must engage with the affective life of institutions, not merely their formal structures and procedures. These 'softlines' involve interpersonal connection, coalition-building and collective social energy to tackle inequalities, the EDI practitioner role is crucial here.

Senior managers are key actors and of particular importance relationally. Progress can be achieved when managers work with EDI practitioners to embed EDI locally in their departments and functions. For such networks to become established in newly merged, multi-campus and geographically spread TU entities, (where meetings are online by default and it is the exception to meet for an in-person meeting) effective coalitions between EDI practitioners and senior managers need to be nurtured to combat the isolation and social distancing of working remotely. The social and the 'softlines' are important for EDI work, which is as Ahmed described it, 'hearts and minds work' (2012).

Fourthly, the findings demonstrate the imperative for EDI practitioners to recuperate the language of EDI by deconstructing it into its component parts and framing it for HE audiences. This is part of the setting up of EDI in HE or the 'worlding' of the EDI identity in HE. The continuous 'linguaging' of EDI through policy documents, mission statements, strategic plans, and institutional communications and events works to perform the identity that EDI claims to describe. Yet, there can be a detachment from the words themselves as they become only a way of doing things. Ahmed points out that the very quest to find practical solutions to equality issues might in itself, paradoxically, foster new problems by concealing their deep structural roots.

Finally, the thesis also offers a feminist intervention into debates on higher education change. The findings reveal that forms of labour most critical to institutional transformation are frequently those granted least status within neoliberal universities. Coalition-building, relationship

management, emotional labour, trust-building and the cultivation of collective commitment are routinely positioned as secondary to measurable outputs, compliance requirements and performance indicators.

The distinction between hardlines and softlines exposes how institutional value is gendered. Activities associated with data, governance and accountability acquire organisational legitimacy, while relational and affective labour remains largely invisible despite being essential to successful enactment. This finding suggests that contemporary EDI infrastructures risk reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to disrupt.

Rather than treating relational labour as supplementary, this thesis argues that it constitutes a central mechanism of institutional change. A feminist understanding of EDI therefore requires recognising affective, relational and coalition-building work as forms of expertise rather than peripheral supports to policy implementation.

Implications for policy and practice

As a scholar-practitioner, I have critically reflected on the ‘blurred lines’ of EDI work as this is a position that I inhabit. For EDI to be mainstreamed within HEIs, institutional responses must address this complexity through: senior management engagement regardless of lived experience; contextually bound EDI awareness; institutional incentives for classroom and curriculum action; structural enforcement alongside performative events; and support structures that legitimise EDI practitioners. The performative dimension is essential to institutional change. I prioritise three implications for policy and practice:

First, the low levels of optimism among EDI practitioners revealed in this research signals a type of impending crisis: practitioners are increasingly unable to imagine the transformative futures they are supposed to be building. This erosion of hope is not individual failure but a predictable

outcome of resistance, under-resourcing, and prevalence of non-performatives. HEIs need to move beyond relying on commitment and resilience of individual EDI practitioners and instead create the conditions necessary for sustained institution-wide engagement with EDI work.

Second, despite the low levels of optimism, this research also demonstrates that social energy persists among practitioners and other allies in the wider institution, manifest in the EDI lifeline and peer networks of mutual support. The policy imperative is urgent: HEIs must find ways to harness and amplify this social energy by creating structural conditions that allow critical conversations to flourish. All three participant cohorts unanimously valued critical conversations for support, critical thinking, and driving progress. For practitioners, conferences and networks are essential for wellbeing and shared learning. Policymakers see them as crucial for reflecting societal needs and driving the next EDI iteration. These are necessary and this study has sought to give an account of and ascribe value to these critical conversations as both a restorative practice and as a way to harness the collective knowledge and social energy of EDI practitioners. Such measures can help sustain practitioner agency, counteract resistance and maintain a collective sense of purpose. Without such support, the possibility of attrition, burnout and disillusionment is real.

Thirdly, EDI practitioners see it as a major challenge to ensure that policy discourses circulate widely and are deeply understood across the HEI. This cannot rest solely with EDI practitioners and is stymied by practitioners lack of agency. Framing complex, intersectional equality discourses require powerful actors who can disseminate messages with conviction: power that EDI practitioners often lack. Consistent with Tzanakou and Pearce's (2019) moderate feminist position, EDI should be embedded through sustained and repeated engagement across institutional structures, processes, culture and everyday practices. This

involves moving beyond one-off performative events towards a coordinated approach in which powerful institutional actors reinforce EDI commitments and help translate policy aspirations into meaningful institutional change.

Fourthly, the findings challenge the dominance of managerialist accountability within contemporary EDI policy evaluation. While measurement and reporting remain important, they provide only a partial account of institutional change. Future evaluation frameworks should incorporate democratic accountability mechanisms that foreground dialogue, participation and critical reflection among policy actors. Consistent with Lynch's emphasis on the intrinsic values of education, EDI should be evaluated not only by what can be measured, but by how effectively HEIs create more equitable, inclusive and socially just conditions. Responsibility for this work must be shared across the state, HEIs and society, rather than delegated to individual institutions or practitioners alone.

This study advances critical scholarship in the field of EDI in HE. The findings have implications for HE, especially for senior leaders and EDI practitioners. The central challenge is embracing complexity and paradox in EDI enactment. Within neoliberal higher education, practitioners must be strategic and performative - a necessary dimension that can be harnessed for transformative change.

Limitations and areas for future research

Further qualitative and longitudinal studies could be undertaken to examine how students understand and experience EDI efforts in higher education in Ireland.

I would like to explore how the terms hard and soft should be replaced with terms that do not align accountable, data-driven, often funded work that tracks prestige, to the masculine and 'hard' measures; and

relational work with feminised, non-outcome-oriented work that is often associated with 'soft' practices.

As a critical researcher, I suggest a productive place for future lines of research is to explore the emergence of social change and how it interacts with policy and enactment in HE.

With policy and enactment in mind, I also see value in terms of future work exploring the emerging literature of institutional design of HEs as a way of moving beyond critical conversations toward approaches to enacting institutional change. For example, Grabill et al. adopt design discourse and methods to think about broad and systemic change of HE institutions in the US (Grabill et al., 2022).

Final Reflections

Ahmed writes in 2012, 'We need feminist critique and antiracist critique because we need to understand how it is that the world takes shape by restricting the forms in which we gather. The time for this is now'. This urgency underpins the lines framework – as a theory of institutional change, where transformation emerges through relationships, coalition-building, care, persistence and collective action rather than through policy compliance alone. It signals that 'soft' performatives must be taken seriously; that senior leaders must extend genuine support to EDI practitioners; that E must not be obfuscated by D and I; and that inclusive voices are essential to EDI policy and practice.

The development of the lines framework brings together performativity, enactment and resistance to explain how EDI is understood, negotiated and enacted within higher education. The framework demonstrates that institutional change does not progress in a linear manner from policy to practice. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of hardlines, softlines, headlines and blurred lines, each shaping the opportunities and constraints facing EDI practitioners. While these dimensions are analytically distinct, it is their interaction that explains the uneven and

often contradictory nature of institutional change. The novelty of the lines framework lies not in its individual components of performativity, enactment and resistance, but in their combined explanatory power to reveal EDI practitioners' limited agency in institutional change processes.

Drawing on Baker et al.'s (2009) equality theory, I map the hard and soft dimensions of equality of condition. Bringing Ball and Ahmed together illuminates this unevenness. Equality theory gives legibility to rights and responsibilities as 'hardlines'. Meanwhile, diversity and inclusion efforts in Irish HE have shifted rapidly from access and participation to gender and. 'Softlines' carry a double valence: softness is feminised, holding lower esteem in neoliberal universities, yet it is also the tissue of culture in diversity and inclusion. The very things dismissed as performative build HE cultures, practices, and policies we need. In this uneven landscape, some people, often those in critical senior roles and with significant influence, choose to stay on the sidelines.

I propose 'lifelines' as an additional term beyond hardlines, softlines, and headlines. Lifelines extend the lines framework by identifying the connections that make institutional change possible. They refer not only to the relationships, networks and critical conversations that sustain practitioners, but also to the links required between equality's structural dimensions and the cultural and relational work of diversity and inclusion. Lifelines therefore function as both an analytical concept and a critical feminist theory of institutional change, suggesting that transformation emerges through coalition-building, care, persistence and collective action rather than compliance alone. 'Lifelines' is life-giving and life-sustaining, referencing the transformative nature of HE and the far-reaching potential of institutional EDI work beyond campus walls. Critical EDI research must attend to the 'life-side': culture building, coalition-building, diverse people taking up opportunities, and

the abundance of life falling through hardline policy gaps. EDI lifelines bridge these worlds.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the future of EDI in higher education depends not simply on stronger policies, improved metrics or enhanced reporting structures, but on institutions' capacity to build and sustain these lifelines. As Ahmed (2012:176) reminds us, diversity work often involves inhabiting spaces that do not grant full residence. Yet the findings of this study suggest that what begins as a form of institutional survival can also become a source of transformative possibility. Lifelines offer a way of understanding how EDI practitioners, senior leaders, academics and policymakers might move beyond fragmented efforts towards more collective and enduring forms of institutional change.

Conducting this research has transformed both my understanding of EDI and my practice as an EDI professional. I am a critical scholar-practitioner, influenced by equality studies, critical feminism and policy studies. I have reflexively embraced this positionality and how it has effected my engagement with participants' experiences, policy discourses, the literature, and my own practice. I have come to appreciate more fully the relational, political and affective dimensions of EDI work and the limits of instrumental approaches to institutional change. The research has deepened my critical awareness of how institutions simultaneously enable and constrain transformation, and of how EDI practitioners navigate these tensions from liminal institutional locations. It has challenged me to move beyond seeking solutions to individual institutional problems and instead to attend more carefully to the structural conditions that produce them. As both a scholar and a practitioner, this inquiry has strengthened my commitment to using critical scholarship not only to understand EDI practice, but also to inform more thoughtful, reflexive and transformative responses to the complex challenges facing higher education today.

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Appendix 1

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY,
MAYNOOTH, CO. KILDARE, IRELAND



Dr Carol Barrett
Secretary to Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

04 October 2023

Mary Nestor
Department of Adult and Community Education
Maynooth University

Re: Application for ethical approval for a Project entitled: A critical analysis of discourses of Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) in Higher Education in Ireland as evidenced in documents and dialogues, and how these inform how we know and enact EDI initiatives

Dear Mary,

The above project has been evaluated under Tier 2 process, expedited review and we would like to inform you that ethical approval has been granted.

Any deviations from the project details submitted to the ethics committee will require further evaluation. This ethical approval will expire on 30/09/2025.

Please note: all projects now require an end of project report which is attached. Please complete and upload the end of project report to your RIS ethics record after the project end date.

Kind Regards,

Dr Carol Barrett
Secretary,
Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

c.c. Dr Fergal Finnegan, Department of Adult and Community Education

Reference Number SRESC-2023-37232

Appendix 2

INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

for Semi-Structured Interviews

A critical analysis of discourses of Equality, Diversity & Inclusion in Higher Education in Ireland as evidenced in documents and dialogues, and how these inform how we know and enact EDI initiatives.

Purpose of the Study. I am Mary Nestor, a doctoral student in the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University. As part of the requirements for Doctorate in Adult and Higher Education, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr Fergal Finnegan.

The inquiry is concerned with critically analysing discourses of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in Higher Education (HE) in Ireland, as evidenced in documents and dialogues, the resultant uptake in institutional practices and behaviours, and whether these discourses support the perpetuation and reproduction of inequality.

Who has approved this study? This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

What will participating in the study involve? The study will involve taking part in an interview at a time and location that is convenient to you. The interviews will be audio recorded and last between 1 and 1.5 hours. You will be given an overview of what will be covered and questions in advance.

You are also being asked to 'opt in' to a focus group which will take place following the interviews. The focus group will involve a presentation of the themes emerging from the interviews to facilitate further discussion and analysis. There will be a separate information sheet and consent form for this part of the research.

What information will be collected?

I will require your name, employing institution, role, contact number and email address. As part of the information sheet you have been given an indicative interview schedule which outlines the questions that will form the basis of the interview.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked because of your work

as an important actor in the Irish Higher Education (HE) sector, whose work is either directly leads or influences the enactment of EDI initiatives in Higher Education in Ireland. It is because of your role and experience as an EDI practitioner/ lecturer/ policy maker that your insights will be integral and invaluable to this research.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and be given a copy of this and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw during the interview and focus group (if applicable) or to decline to answer any of the questions you are asked without giving a reason.

After the interview and focus group (if applicable), you will be given an opportunity to receive by email a transcript of the interview to amend, clarify or redact your responses. You will have up to two weeks from receipt of the transcript of your contributions at the interview and focus group (should you opt in) to amend, clarify or redact any information you provided. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationships with me or Maynooth University in any way.

The deadline for communication to the researcher of your complete withdrawal from this research study is 30 June 2024.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, every attempt will be made to keep all information that is collected about you during the course of the research and your identity confidential. No names will be identified at any time: pseudonyms will be used instead of your real name and potentially identifying details will be changed or omitted from the research. The research will be conducted in a confidential space and the discussion will be facilitated so as to avoid naming specific institutions.

Should you 'opt in' to participate in the focus group you will be required to sign a focus group confidentiality agreement. By signing this agreement, you are agreeing to not disclose the content of the focus group discussion to persons outside of the focus group.

All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the researcher's place of work, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by the researcher (Mary Nestor).

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

It is not possible to guarantee full anonymity if you choose to partake in the focus group, as participants will meet each other in person and your identity will be known to others in the group. Participants will each sign a confidentiality agreement regarding respecting the confidentiality of the group and its discussions and not to discuss what happens during the focus group outside of the meeting. Your data collected at the focus group will be anonymised by removing all names/personal identifiers from transcripts.

What will happen to the information which you give? All the information you provide will be kept at Maynooth University in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed by the researcher. Manual data will be shredded confidentially, and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten.

What will happen to the results? The research will be written up and presented as a doctoral thesis to Maynooth University. The findings will be reported accurately and without misrepresentation. Research findings may also be presented at National and International conferences and may be published in academic journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. Your time and effort would provide valuable insights into this research and would be greatly appreciated. I recognise the right of all participants to withdraw from the research for any or no reason.

What if there is a problem? At the end of the interview and focus group (if applicable), I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. You may contact my supervisor, Dr Fergal Finnegan (fergal.finnegan@mu.ie) if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me: Mary Nestor email mary.nestor.2022@mumail.ie.

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Consent Form for semi-structured interviews

I.....agree to participate in Mary Nestor's research study titled 'A critical analysis of discourses of Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) in Higher Education in Ireland as evidenced in documents and dialogues, and how these inform how we know and enact EDI initiatives.'

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily.

☐

I am participating voluntarily in one interview.

☐

I give permission for my interview with Mary to be audio-recorded.

☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating.

☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data up to 30 June 2024.

☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access them on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet.

☐

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview.

☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below.

☐

[Select as appropriate]

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects.

☐

OR

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects.

☐

Signed.....

Date.....

Participant Name in block capitals

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed.....

Date.....

Researcher Name in block capitals: MARY NESTOR

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. The Data Protection office is located in Room 27, Rye Building, North Campus, Maynooth University, which can be contacted at dataprotection@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection>.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for PI

Appendix 3

Research Participant Interview Guide (practitioners)

Title: A critical analysis of discourses of Equality, Diversity & Inclusion in Higher Education in Ireland as evidenced in documents and dialogues, and how these inform how we know and enact EDI initiatives.

Participants will be informed of the background to study, overview of study aims and reminded of details contained in the Information Sheet re right to withdraw, no compulsion to participate etc. Permission will be sought to begin recording and start interview.

Potential discussion topics:

Introduction/ participant profile

- *Length of time working in current field/discipline*
- *How this work relates to EDI*
- *Appeal of working in EDI in HE*
- *The 'language' of EDI*
- *How others perceive EDI role/or the link between your work and EDI (relationship between policies; how they circulate; how people understand and misunderstand them; enactment and resistance)*

Values and principles underpinning your work in EDI

- What has informed your views / perspective/ values/ underpinning your work in EDI over this time? (prompts if required: lived experience, people you work with, formal networks/ communities of practice, policy, institution)
- Values that underpin your work in EDI
- How your views/ values influence / impact your work
- Do you feel your values are congruent with those of the organisation?
- Examples of work that aligns/diverges from values
- Equality and audit culture (performativity)
- Do you encounter resistance to EDI work?

Critical Conversations: How and where we talk about EDI, policy and what it means for our work

- Positioning of EDI on institutional agendas in HE (prompt if required: level of priority / respect / resourcing / how or whether it is being mainstreamed through institutional activities)
- How institutional EDI initiatives come about (prompts if required: top-down, bottom-up, competitive process)
- Usefulness of critical discussions on policy in terms of how it is shaping and informing EDI provision

Stop recording. See if participants wish to make a further contribution when recorder is no longer operating. Conclude the interview, thank participants, remind them of follow-up correspondence, timeline for forwarding transcript of interview and available supports if needed.

Appendix 4

Letter for EDI Practitioners to forward to lecturer sample on behalf of researcher

Dear Lecturer

Re: Participation in doctoral research - a critical analysis of discourses of Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) in Higher Education in Ireland as evidenced in documents and dialogues, and how these inform how we know and enact EDI initiatives.

I am Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Manager at Atlantic Technological University and as part of my doctoral research with the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University and Dr Fergal Finnegan I have asked your colleague x (the EDI practitioner) to contact up to three lecturers at your university, with whom the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Office at your university has collaborated previously, or whose work either directly leads or influences the enactment of EDI initiatives. I wish to invite you to participate in my research because of your role and experience as a lecturer and as an important EDI actor in your institution. I believe your insights will be integral and invaluable to this research and will contribute to understanding and amplifying the impact of EDI across TU sector in Ireland.

My experience of EDI in Higher Education (HE) motivates this research which aims to illuminate the knowledge, experiences and critical reflections of participants in the specific TU context. I worked as a lecturer for over 15 years, and more recently as part of an institutional EDI team. Through this research I want to contribute to the field of research on EDI and its impact on tackling inequalities. I view and value experience as knowledge, and this research explores the tacit and explicit knowledge and experiences of participants through dialogue and in a critically reflective space. Participants will be invited to discuss what EDI means to them, how they view it is being shaped by policy, and the implications of this for their work. With your contribution, this inquiry will explore participant knowledge that furthers the work of EDI in HE and address a current knowledge gap in this area. If you choose to participate in the study, it will involve taking part in:

- One semi-structured interview (1 and 1.5 hours)
- One focus group (1.5 to 2 hours)

The semi-structured interview will take place at a time and location that is convenient to you, or on MS Teams if meeting face-to-face is not practicable. All data from the interviews will be anonymized. The interviews will be audio recorded. You will be given an overview of what will be covered and questions in advance. All data will be treated confidentially. You will have the opportunity to withdraw from the research up until 30 June 2024, at which point your data can no

longer be withdrawn. Once you agree to participate, further detailed information will be sent to you along with a consent sheet for you to review and sign.

As the research develops, I want to share what I have found and will invite you to participate in the second phase of research, a focus group. Given the nature of focus group process, complete anonymity of each individual is no longer guaranteed but I will ask participants to maintain institutional anonymity. The focus group will involve a discussion of the findings emerging from the interviews and will focus on practitioner knowledge; we will not explore the practices of specific institutions. There will be a separate information and consent sheet for the focus group for you to review and sign, should you agree to participate. You may wish to end your participation in the research after the interview. There is no compulsion for you to participate in the focus group and your decision can be made after participation in the interview. The focus group will be approximately 2 hours in duration and involve up to eight research participants, all of whom will have also participated in the interviews.

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it. (or just include it as part of the info package?)

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate. If you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me. If you wish to participate in this study, please email mary.nestor.2022@mumail.ie by 20th October 2023 and contact you thereafter to arrange the interview.

Yours faithfully

Mary Nestor
Doctoral Candidate – Maynooth University

Appendix 5

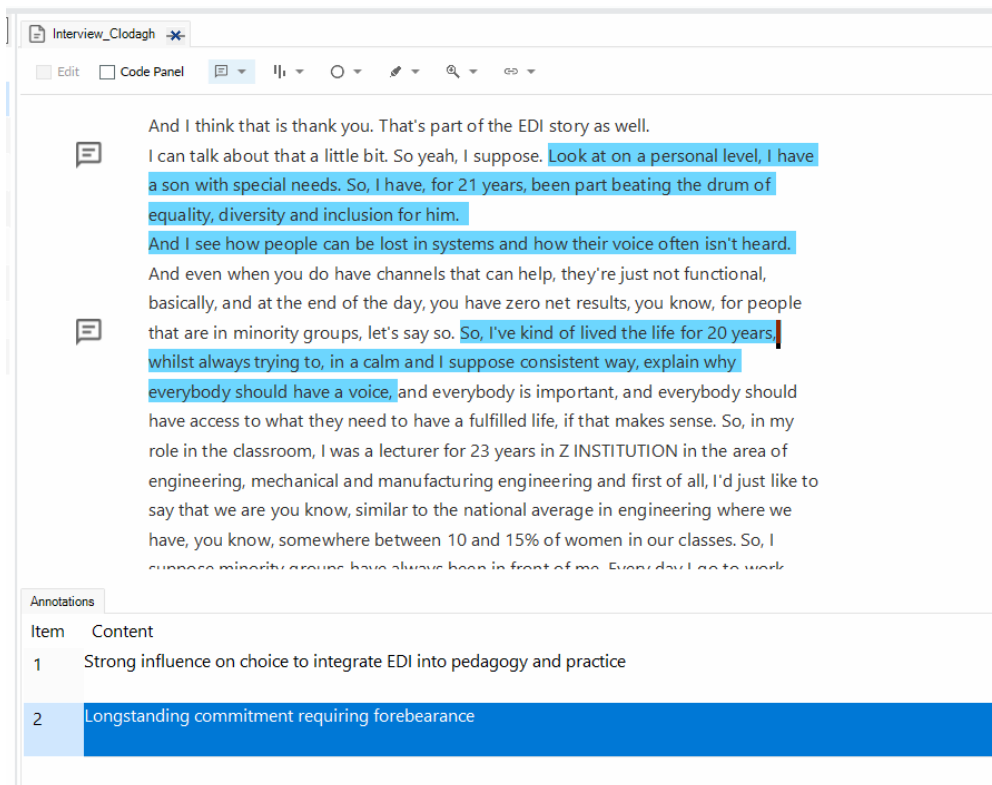
Phase 1 – 6 of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) 6 phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the data

Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) 6 stages of Thematic Analysis begins with familiarisation with the data.

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the data: this involved importing the interview transcripts and related briefing notes into the data management tool known as NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 14, 2023); then reading and re-reading the interview data, noting down initial ideas in annotations.

Example of annotation in Clodagh’s interview:



The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface. The main window shows a transcript titled 'Interview_Clodagh'. The text is as follows:

And I think that is thank you. That's part of the EDI story as well.

I can talk about that a little bit. So yeah, I suppose. **Look at on a personal level, I have a son with special needs. So, I have, for 21 years, been part beating the drum of equality, diversity and inclusion for him.**

And I see how people can be lost in systems and how their voice often isn't heard.

And even when you do have channels that can help, they're just not functional, basically, and at the end of the day, you have zero net results, you know, for people that are in minority groups, let's say so. **So, I've kind of lived the life for 20 years, whilst always trying to, in a calm and I suppose consistent way, explain why everybody should have a voice,** and everybody is important, and everybody should have access to what they need to have a fulfilled life, if that makes sense. So, in my role in the classroom, I was a lecturer for 23 years in Z INSTITUTION in the area of engineering, mechanical and manufacturing engineering and first of all, I'd just like to say that we are you know, similar to the national average in engineering where we have, you know, somewhere between 10 and 15% of women in our classes. So, I suppose minority groups have always been in front of me. Every day I go to work

Below the text, there is an 'Annotations' panel with a table:

Item	Content
1	Strong influence on choice to integrate EDI into pedagogy and practice
2	Longstanding commitment requiring forbearance

Phase 2 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6 phases of Thematic Analysis: Systematic Data Coding

Phase 2: Systematic Data Coding (Open Coding) involved broad participant-driven initial coding of the interviews so as to deconstruct the data from its original chronology into initial non-hierarchical general codes. These codes were assigned clear definitions and contained the units of meaning which were coded from the interviews.

Codes\\Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding

Name	Description	Files	#Refs
Competing agendas	Exploring whether EDI is impacted by a bandwidth issue for lecturers, whereby the multiplicity of competing agendas conspire against EDI being taken up and enacted, e.g. AI. SDGs, ntutor, etc.	8	12
Culture	Explore institutional culture, embedded practices and how EDI is reflected in these. The amount of time and work it takes to change culture.	4	27
Disciplinary differences in understandings of EDI	Exploring how different disciplines understand, value and enact EDI in teaching and learning. Explore distinctions between STEM and AHSSBL.	8	19
EDI in the classroom	Exploring how lecturers enact/embed EDI in their classrooms.	8	18
EDI in the university	Explore how EDI is perceived more broadly in the university; how you get an EDI lens. Also, see Culture.	4	6
EDI-related training	Explore the prevalence and effectiveness of EDI training as a means of embedding EDI and inclusive practices.	1	6
Emotional labour for staff	Explore participant views on EL associated with EDI work.	5	10
Emotional labour for students	Explore EL on students; the impact of having to seek resources for learning support etc.	1	1
Enactment	How policy documents and guidance is translated 'on the ground' and enacted or taken up in HEIs.	11	31

Name	Description	Files	#References
Evolving public discourse around EDI	Broader public discourses around EDI, immigrant debate, trans debate, rise of racism etc.	2	4
Examples of Inclusive Practice	Explore examples of inclusive practices across HEIs as recounted by participants.	6	30
Examples of lack of Inclusive Practices	Participants give examples of institutional practices that are not inclusive or counter inclusive.	2	2
Importance of Senior Leadership	Explore the importance of senior leadership in signalling EDI as a priority issue for staff and students, and attaching value and import to it.	10	26
Increase in diversity of population	Relating to changing demographic profiles in HE; from race, ethnicity, neurodiversity, disability etc.	1	2
Institutional Valuing of EDI	Explore the positioning of EDI on the institutional agenda and what level of priority it is given.	13	38
Burden of proof for EDI initiatives	Higher burden of proof required to resource EDI initiatives, to prove or justify that they are worthwhile/effective.	1	1
Language of EDI	The language of EDI is problematic and shifting. There is some divergence in how EDI practitioners view the term, its usefulness, and what it does. This code explores the breath of opinion in terms of how the language of EDI is perceived.	13	32
Mainstreaming of EDI	Explore how EDI can become mainstreamed in HEIs. May include examples of practices that were mainstreamed or obstacles to mainstreaming.	7	20
EDI in the Curriculum	Explore practices/challenges/opportunities/obstacles to embedding EDI in the curriculum.	6	8
Memorable quotes random	Stand-out quotes - may also be present/coded under other listed codes.	5	9
Perceptions of EDI roles and staff offices	Explore how designated 'EDI' functions/people are perceived in the broader organisation.	10	19
Communications with staff students	Explore views on the importance of not just doing EDI work, but on communicating this to staff and students to raise awareness.	1	1
Performativity	How participants view EDI as a performative act in HE - links to tokenism.	13	54

Name	Description	Files	#Refs
Documents	Explore views on the need to see EDI represented in important institutional documents.	2	2
HEA	Performativity as embedded in HEA policy documentation and mandatory reporting.	2	4
Policy circulation	Awareness of how EDI policy documents circulate amongst colleagues in HE; levels of awareness and understanding.	7	10
Policy discourses	How participants understand broader EDI policy discourses in the sector.	4	11
Resistance to EDI work	Explore participants experiences of encountering resistance to EDI work or initiatives; how this manifests; and the impact it may have.	4	10
Resourcing of EDI	How participants view how EDI is currently resourced across the HEI.	4	11
Sustaining EDI work	Challenges of sustaining EDI work over time. Ebb and flow of policy priorities. Sustaining momentum and keeping it on institutional agendas.	3	19
The value of having critical discussions	Exploring whether critical conversations with colleagues on EDI policy and enactment are useful to have with colleagues, with a view to engendering change.	11	21
TU merger-related issues	Issues, delays or blockages that participants causally relate to merger processes.	3	6
Blockages	Examples of specific blockages.	4	5
Values	Explore values from 4 perspectives - individual; PB or dept of CoP; the university; and within the TU sector.	5	12
Individual Values	The import of the individual values of participants on their work.	9	25
Values	I need to merge this code with Individual Values code.	5	11
Institutional values	Evidence or examples of institutional values as communicated through initiatives, behaviours or actions.	1	1
Values of Programme and or Dept	Explore participant views on existence of shared values amongst a programme team or department.	1	6
Institutional values	The perception of the collective values of colleagues in the HEIs on their work.	3	5

Name	Description	Files	#Refs
TU sectoral values	The perception of the collective values of colleagues across the sector on their work.	1	1
Values of Programme and or Dept	The import of the collective values of colleagues on their work.	2	7

Phase 3 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6 phases of Thematic Analysis: Generating Initial Themes from Coded and Collated Data

Phase 3: Generating Initial Themes from Coded and Collated Data (Developing Categories) involved re-ordering codes identified and coded in phase 2 into categories of codes by grouping related codes under these categories and organising them into a framework that made sense to further the analysis of the data set and guided by the focus of the inquiry. This phase also included distilling, re-naming and merging of categories to ensure that their definitions accurately reflected coded content. Categories could be described as a halfway-house between organising initial codes into logical groups and generating themes.

Phase 3 Codebook for Generating Initial Themes from Coded and Collated Data

Name		Files	References
Culture		9	39
Values		5	12
EDI as institutional performance		13	54
Performativity		13	54
EDI in the university		14	104
Disciplinary differences in understandings of EDI		8	19
EDI in the classroom		8	18
EDI in the Curriculum		6	8
EDI in the university		4	6
EDI-related training		1	6
Importance of Senior Leadership		10	26
Increase in diversity of population		1	2
People		10	19
Enactment (Policy)		13	110
Communications with staff students		1	1
Institutional Valuing of EDI		13	38
Mainstreaming of EDI		7	20
Policy circulation		7	10
Policy discourses		4	11
Resourcing of EDI		4	11
Sustaining EDI work		3	19
Language of EDI		13	32
Evolving public discourse around EDI		2	4
Memorable quotes random		5	9
Navigating resistance and backlash		14	63
Burden of proof for EDI initiatives		1	1
Competing agendas		8	12
Emotional labour for staff		5	10
Perceptions of EDI roles and staff offices		10	19
The value of having critical discussions		11	21

Phase 4 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6 phases of Thematic Analysis: Developing and Reviewing Themes

Phase 4: Developing and Reviewing Themes (Drilling Down) involved breaking down the now restructured categories into sub-categories to offer more in-depth understanding of the highly qualitative aspects under scrutiny and to consider divergent views, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours coded to these categories and to offer clearer insights into the meanings embedded therein.

Phase 4 Codebook for Developing and Reviewing Themes

Name		Files	References
Culture		16	90
Individual values		15	40
Institutional values		4	14
Values of Programme and or Dept		2	7
EDI as institutional performance		15	58
EDI in the university		17	150
Disciplinary differences in understandings of EDI		8	20
EDI in the classroom		9	22
EDI in the Curriculum		6	11
EDI People and Perceptions		13	27
Importance of Senior Leadership		12	28
Enactment (Policy)		17	193
Hardline levers		7	26
Institutional Valuing of EDI		15	46
Mainstreaming of EDI		11	26
Policy circulation		7	10
Policy discourses		6	13
Resourcing of EDI		5	10
Role of data, evidence, reporting reqs and experts		9	29
Softline levers		4	7
Sustaining EDI work		4	20
Language of EDI		16	40
Evolving public discourse around EDI		5	12
Memorable quotes random		5	12
Navigating resistance and backlash		11	57
Burden of proof for EDI initiatives		2	2
Competing agendas		4	4
Emotional labour for staff		5	18
The value of having critical discussions		8	14

Phase 5 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6 phases of Thematic Analysis: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes

Phase 5: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes (Data Reduction/consolidation) involved consolidating codes from all of the three cycles above into more abstract, philosophical and literature-based themes to create a final framework of eleven themes.

Phase 5 Codebook for Refining, Defining and Naming Themes

Name		Files	References
T1 Identity		17	107
T1.1 Personal identity		15	39
		13	27
T1.2 Role identity			
T1.3 The 'linguaging' of an EDI identity		16	41
T2 EDI policy in view		16	142
T2.1 The emergence of EDI units within HEIs		13	42
T2.2 EDI residency in established HEI structures		4	14
T2.3 Policy discourses and circulation		9	22
T2.4 Resourcing of EDI		5	10
T2.5 Building the baselines for EDI work- data, funding levers and accountability measures	 	11	26
T2.6 Working towards equality with senior leaders		12	28
T3 Enactment		16	140
T3.1 The Performative Paradox		15	58
T3.2 Publicity as enactment		4	20
T3.3 EDI box-ticking – 'it does what is says on the tin'	 	6	11
T3.4 Metrics as enactment		9	29
T3.5 The choreography of EDI enactment		9	22
T4 Resistance		15	77
T4.1 EDI practitioners and resistance		12	50
T4.2 Lecturers and resistance		8	20
T4.3 Policymakers and resistance		4	4

Phase 6 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6 phases of Thematic Analysis: Writing the Report

Phase 6: Writing the Report involved the final analysis and write-up of the report to tell the complicated story of my data in coherent, cohesive way that is well supported by empirical findings which offer a descriptive account of the study participants' experiences of EDI in higher education.

Example of analytical memo in Phase 6:

Phase 5 Refining, Defining and Naming themes

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T2.1 The emergence of EDI units within HEIs

The emergence of EDI as an institutional fixture of 'EDI' began when EDI posts, concomitant EDI offices and other supporting institutional structures were created. A fixture is an entity with a specific identity that is understood by others. The acronym EDI is relatively new in higher education and even more so in technological universities. Following recommendations from the HEA (2016) for all HEIs to have a senior post at VP level or equivalent, it was 2019-2021 when EDI posts were created in the five TUs or predecessor IoTs. Thus, a key EDI actor in HEIs is the senior EDI postholder. These mid to senior level management roles track a number of different titles as described earlier, and for ease and anonymity are referred to as 'practitioners' in this inquiry. Prior to the creation of EDI as a fixture, HE policy focused on issues like access and participation for students; this was addressed through Access Offices and Officers. Appointees to these roles were largely women. Once the HEI creates and fills an EDI post, postholders begin to talk about EDI, get it onto the institutional agenda and drive awareness and progress through their efforts.

The contours of the three participant cohorts were explained in the previous chapter. There are some differences in how cohorts describe the impact of the creation of EDI roles. For lecturers, there is a general pattern of observation of significant changes since EDI practitioners started in their roles. The fixture of EDI within the institution is largely defined by the role of the EDI practitioner. EDI offices in IoTs were typically populated by one individual when initially established, whose main responsibility was writing the institutional application for an Athena Swan Bronze award. This has increased to 2-5 people in EDI offices since mergers to TUs as evidenced in an analysis by Watts and Fink (2024) which compared staffing levels between 2010 and 2024. Lecturers describe the responsibility of the EDI