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Rethinking Inclusion: EDI in a
Time of Uncertainty

Edited By Pilar Luz Rodrigues and Su-ming Khoo

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Email: sociology.ie@gmail.com

Designed and produced by Pilar Luz Rodrigues

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Introduction

Pilar Luz Rodrigues and Su-ming Khoo

Over the past few years, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies and initiatives, also known as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), have become increasingly embedded in organisation and institutional practice (Park *et al.* 2025). Universities, public bodies, and private companies alike have embraced EDI frameworks as part of their commitment to fairness and representation. These efforts have aimed to ensure that everyone has equitable access to opportunities and is not treated differently or discriminated against on the basis of personal or identity characteristics such as age, disability, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion (Smith *et al.* 2025). EDI policies seek to create fair and supportive environments where all members can participate and thrive, recognising and valuing difference while addressing the structural and cultural barriers that limit full participation (Toroghi *et al.* 2024).

However, EDI has become the subject of renewed debate. In some national contexts, this debate has taken place alongside organised political opposition to EDI policies, resulting in the dismantling of programmes and the scaling back of institutional commitments, particularly in the United States (U.S. Department of Education 2025; Sands and Ferraro 2025; Reuters 2025; Robinson *et al.* 2025). These developments reflect broader uncertainty about how EDI initiatives should be pursued and

evaluated, and whether they can still deliver meaningful change. Scholars have also noted that initiatives are not always effective and highlight the need for monitoring and evaluation (Leslie 2017; Ruggi and Duvvury 2024; Duvvury *et al.* 2025). Yet moments of tension can also open space for renewal. Could this period of uncertainty also offer an opportunity to rethink and reframe EDI?

In Ireland, EDI continues to develop across education, research, and community settings (Rothwell and Woods 2025). There is much to acknowledge, from race equality strategies to the growing visibility of anti-racist, gender, and intercultural initiatives, but persistent challenges remain (Royal Irish Academy 2024).

This issue of the *Sociological Observer* reflects on these tensions and explores what inclusion can mean in practice during a time of policy uncertainty and social change. It brings together Thought Pieces, Research Notes, and Brief Reports that approach EDI from different sociological perspectives, organised across three broad sections.

The first section ‘Rethinking and Reframing EDI’ features contributions that re-evaluate the role of EDI. Ebun Joseph critiques compliance-driven EDI in Ireland, drawing on critical race theory to explore how institutional narratives of inclusion and belonging often fail to translate into structural change. Philomena Mullen focuses on how EDI operates as a performative institutional practice in predominantly white academic spaces, arguing that it can function as symbolic compliance without producing substantive institutional change. Nata Duvvury and Lennita Oliveira Ruggi examine how EDI is monitored and evaluated in higher education, focusing on the role of grassroots Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in capturing institutional change. Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain situates Ireland within a wider international context, contrasting current developments in Irish higher education with EDI retrenchment in the United States, and discussing the implications of this

contrast for higher education policy and practice. Together, these pieces highlight both the fragility and the continuing importance of EDI.

The second section ‘Practising EDI: Policy, Education, and Community’, turns to the work of translating EDI commitments into everyday settings. Bríd Ní Chonail examines the persistent gap between anti-racism policy and practice in Irish higher education, focusing on the development and implementation of anti-racism action plans and the institutional constraints that shape them. Carol Ballantine, Declan Fahie, Margaret Hodgins, Sarah MacCurtain, Pádraig MacNeela, Patricia Mannix McNamara, and Caroline Murphy explore gender-based and sexual violence and harassment in higher education through an intersectional lens, with particular attention to disclosure, reporting, and institutional response. Hazel O’Brien, Pilar Luz Rodrigues and Monica Rudi Kent discuss racial equality in the South East of Ireland, examining the role of universities as regional actors. Sarah Carol, Maeve O’Rourke, and Patrick Bresnihan examine how Irish institutions support students and scholars at risk, identifying gaps and proposing coordinated approaches to inclusion. Fahmeda Naheed reflects on how community education can serve as a foundation for anti-racist action. These contributions demonstrate how EDI is shaped through everyday institutional practices, constraints, and relationships across higher education and community contexts.

The final section of this issue ‘EDI in Global and Comparative Perspectives’ moves beyond Ireland to take a wider view of the subject. Guillaume Negri compares France and Ireland to analyse how EDI policies function as ‘band-aid’ solutions for forced migrants, failing to address structural barriers related to migration regimes and access to education and work. Finally, Pooja Priya examines the experiences of Nigerian and Congolese migrants in India, showing how bottom-up placemaking emerges in the absence of institutional EDI frameworks. These pieces

illustrate how EDI is shaped by different national, institutional, and policy perspectives.

Across these contributions, EDI emerges both as a set of institutional commitments and practices and as a field marked, in some cases, by tension and limitations. While it can open possibilities for greater fairness and belonging, it also risks becoming an administrative exercise that obscures deeper inequalities. In a period of uncertainty, this issue of the *Sociological Observer* brings together contributions that examine how EDI is understood, experienced, and contested across different contexts.

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Pilar Luz Rodrigues

Dr. Pilar Luz Rodrigues is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), School of Population Health, where she is currently working on a Community Health Needs Assessment of the Dublin North East Inner City (NEIC). She previously held two postdoctoral positions at the University of Galway, where she worked on projects focused on intersectional discrimination in higher education (funded by the Higher Education Authority) and on migration and intercultural communication in rural Ireland (funded by Research Ireland). Dr. Rodrigues is a sociologist whose research focuses on marginalised communities, with particular expertise in migration, racial and gender equality, and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). She has worked across academic, international organisation, and NGO contexts, including with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS). She is also Co-Convenor of the Sociological Association of Ireland (SAI) Race and Ethnicity Study Group.

Su-ming Khoo

Su-ming Khoo is Professor in Sociology at the University of Galway and Visiting Professor in Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation (CriSHET) at Nelson Mandela University (2022-27). Su-ming was born in Malaysia, and received her BA from University College London, and PhD from the Queen's University of Belfast. She researches, teaches and writes about critical development studies, human development, human rights, public goods, development alternatives, decoloniality, global activism and learning, higher education, and transdisciplinarity. She is co-Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Creative Research Methods* with Sophie Woodward and Harriet Shortt. Her newest publication is: *The Modern World After Colonialism: Remaking the Social Sciences*, edited with Gurminder

Bhambra, Ipek Demir, Paul Gilbert, and Lucy Mayblin, published by Bristol University Press, 2026.

Section I

Rethinking and Reframing EDI

1. From Compliance to Commitment: Reframing EDI in Ireland Beyond the Mask of Inertia

Ebun Joseph

Introduction

Across Ireland's public and private sectors, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) has become a dominant language of institutional self-presentation and a mode of institutional governance rather than a mechanism of structural change. Universities, government departments, NGOs, and corporations routinely publish EDI strategies, establish working groups, and showcase equality awards. Yet these visible commitments have not fundamentally altered the lived realities of racialised communities in Ireland. Persistent racialised policing practices, entrenched workplace discrimination, anti-migrant hostility, the marginalisation of Black women, Travellers, Roma, and the enduring harms of Direct Provision continue to expose the limits of Irish EDI infrastructures.

This thought piece offers a critical sociological intervention into contemporary Irish EDI discourse. Drawing on critical race theory (CRT), intersectionality, and my positionality as a Black academic and racial justice researcher working within Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), this analysis treats positionality not as anecdote, but as situated sociological knowledge. I argue that EDI in Ireland is largely characterised by

procedural compliance, bureaucratic optimism, and limited accountability. Rather than functioning as a mechanism for structural transformation, EDI often operates as a performance of progress that leaves underlying racial hierarchies intact. The proliferation of EDI initiatives should not be automatically read as evidence of social change. As Sara Ahmed (2012) has argued, diversity work can become a site of institutional ‘non-performativity’, where the appearance of action substitutes for meaningful transformation. In the Irish context, EDI frequently serves to manage reputational risk, satisfy external compliance requirements, or align with funding incentives, rather than to confront institutional racism directly. As a result, responsibility for inclusion is subtly displaced onto racialised individuals, who are expected to integrate, adapt, and demonstrate belonging within institutions that remain structurally unchanged.

Belonging has emerged as a central trope within Irish EDI discourse, framed as an aspirational and inclusive goal. Sociologically, however, belonging is neither neutral nor benign. It is a boundary-making process that determines who is recognised as a legitimate member of the social body and under what conditions (Yuval-Davis 2011). In practice, belonging places the burden on racialised and migrant communities to perform cultural fit, loyalty, and integration, while obscuring the institutional practices that render belonging unequally available.

This article proposes acceptance as a more analytically rigorous and justice-oriented framework for understanding and transforming EDI in Ireland. Acceptance shifts the focus from individual adaptation to institutional responsibility. It demands that organisations demonstrate their willingness to recognise, accommodate, and value racialised difference through structural change rather than symbolic gestures. Using Ireland-specific evidence—including racialised policing, Direct Provision, workplace discrimination, the limitations of Athena SWAN, and the experiences of Black Irish women in academia and the teaching profession—I argue that current EDI models reinforce,

rather than disrupt, racial inequality. Reframing EDI around acceptance offers a pathway beyond institutional inertia toward accountability, institutional courage, and meaningful racial justice.

Theoretical Framework: CRT, Institutional Inertia, and the Politics of Belonging

This framework establishes acceptance as the evaluative lens through which Irish EDI is assessed. The analysis is grounded in three interconnected sociological frameworks: critical race theory (CRT), intersectionality, and the politics of belonging. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual tools necessary to interrogate how EDI operates in Ireland not merely as a set of policies, but as a mode of institutional governance that often reproduces, rather than disrupts, racial hierarchy. Rather than treating racism as episodic or attitudinal, these frameworks foreground structure, power, and institutional responsibility. CRT offers a lens for understanding how racial inequality persists despite formal commitments to equality. Intersectionality reveals how race operates in conjunction with gender, class, migration status, and precarity to produce uneven exposure to harm. The politics of belonging, in turn, illuminates how inclusion is conditional, regulated, and policed through institutional norms. Read together, these frameworks expose the limits of compliance-driven EDI and create analytic space for the alternative framework of acceptance developed in this article.

Critical Race Theory in the Irish Context

Critical race theory provides essential tools for analysing racial power within institutional settings. Three CRT concepts are particularly relevant to the Irish context: the permanence of racism, interest convergence, and counter-storytelling.

First, the permanence of racism underscores that racism is embedded in social, political, and institutional structures rather

than occurring as isolated incidents. Irish evidence—including racialised immigration controls (Fanning 2018; Lentin 2020), disproportionate policing of Black and Brazilian communities (Michael 2024), and persistent labour market discrimination (McGinnity *et al.* 2020; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2023; Joseph 2024)—demonstrates that racial inequality is durable and systemic. Second, the principle of interest convergence explains why institutions adopt equality measures primarily when they align with institutional interests (Bell 2005). In Irish higher education, initiatives such as Athena SWAN are widely embraced not because they fundamentally disrupt power relations, but because they are tied to research funding, reputational capital, and regulatory compliance. This dynamic helps explain why EDI can expand in visibility while remaining limited in transformative impact. Third, counter-storytelling centres the experiential knowledge of racialised communities as a critical source of insight into institutional racism. Narratives from Black Irish women in academia and teaching directly challenge celebratory institutional accounts that frame EDI as evidence of progress (Joseph 2025). These counter-stories reveal the disjuncture between policy rhetoric and lived experience, making visible the everyday practices through which exclusion, marginalisation, and racialised labour are reproduced.

Belonging, Boundary-Making, and the Limits of Inclusion

Belonging has become a central organising concept within Irish EDI discourse, frequently presented as an inclusive and aspirational goal. Yet sociological scholarship consistently demonstrates that belonging is not a neutral or universally accessible condition. Rather, it is a political and institutional process through which boundaries are drawn between those who are recognised as legitimate members of the social body and those who remain conditionally included or excluded altogether (Yuval-Davis 2011). In this sense, belonging is best understood not as a feeling but as a governance mechanism. It operates

through norms, values, and institutional practices that determine who is perceived as fitting, deserving, and intelligible within a given social order. In the Irish context, dominant narratives of cultural homogeneity, Catholic heritage, whiteness, and postcolonial vulnerability continue to shape these boundaries, often positioning racialised and migrant groups as perpetual outsiders or ‘newcomers’, regardless of citizenship, longevity, or contribution (Fanning 2021).

Crucially, belonging places the burden of inclusion on individuals rather than institutions. Racialised subjects are expected to demonstrate adaptability, cultural competence, loyalty, and gratitude in order to belong. Inclusion thus becomes conditional and performative: something to be achieved through conformity to dominant norms rather than guaranteed through rights or structural protection. Within EDI frameworks, this logic is reflected in initiatives that prioritise ‘integration’, ‘fit’, or ‘culture’ while leaving institutional power relations largely untouched. Belonging discourse also obscures responsibility. When inclusion is framed as an outcome to be felt or achieved, institutional failure can be reframed as individual deficit – a lack of engagement, resilience, or willingness to integrate. As a result, the persistence of racial inequality is rendered ambiguous, depoliticised, or attributed to slow cultural change rather than structural racism. Sociologically, belonging functions less as an emancipatory project and more as a disciplinary one.

Acceptance as an Institutional Obligation

Acceptance offers a fundamentally different analytical and political orientation. Rather than asking whether individuals belong, acceptance asks whether institutions are willing to change. It shifts attention from micro-level performances of inclusion to meso- and macro-level processes through which difference is recognised, protected, and accommodated. Acceptance is not affective tolerance or symbolic recognition; it is an institutional obligation. Where belonging is conditional,

acceptance is structural. It demands that institutions name racism, redistribute power, transform decision-making processes, and embed accountability mechanisms (Joseph 2020). Acceptance requires material investment: race-disaggregated data collection, sustained racial competency training, meaningful resourcing of EDI units, and enforceable protections for those who experience racism, including racialised survivors of gender-based violence and workplace harm. Importantly, acceptance refuses the displacement of labour onto racialised staff, who are routinely expected to educate institutions, mentor others, and represent diversity without recognition or reward (Joseph 2024; Joseph 2025).

Empirically, acceptance aligns more closely with what racialised and migrant communities consistently articulate as their demand: not assimilation or conditional inclusion, but the acceptance of difference without penalty (Joseph 2020). Belonging, in this sense, is not a prerequisite for acceptance; rather, belonging emerges where acceptance is already in place. People belong where they are accepted – not the other way around. By foregrounding acceptance, this article reframes EDI as a question of institutional courage rather than institutional culture. Acceptance exposes the limits of compliance-driven equality frameworks and challenges institutions to move beyond symbolic commitment toward structural transformation. In an Irish context marked by widening racial inequalities and growing backlash against equality work, acceptance provides a more rigorous and justice-oriented foundation for reimagining EDI.

EDI in Ireland: Symbolism, Bureaucracy, and Non-Performativity

This section examines how compliance-driven EDI falls short of acceptance in practice. Ireland's EDI landscape is best understood as a system oriented toward institutional reassurance rather than structural change when viewed through the lens of acceptance. While strategies, action plans, and

reporting mechanisms proliferate, they rarely compel institutions to transform the conditions that produce racial inequality. Acceptance requires demonstrable institutional change; compliance-driven EDI, by contrast, allows institutions to signal commitment without altering power relations. This mirrors Ahmed's (2012) argument that diversity work often allows institutions to appear progressive while maintaining racial hierarchies. Irish HEIs overwhelmingly prioritise gender equality, particularly through Athena SWAN. While valuable, this focus sidelines racial inequality in several ways:

- Unlike the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland does not have a national race equality charter, though the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has introduced a set of anti-racism principles for Irish HEIs.
- From an acceptance perspective, the limitations of Athena SWAN become particularly visible. While the framework has contributed to important gains in gender equality, it does not require institutions to accept racialised difference as a structural concern. Race is frequently acknowledged rhetorically through the language of intersectionality, yet remains marginal in practice. The absence of race-specific accountability mechanisms in areas like recruitment, promotion or in addressing claims of racism means that institutions can satisfy equality benchmarks while leaving racial hierarchies untouched.
- Institutional award cycles prioritise gender outcomes, leaving racialised women invisible in gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and career progression discussions.

Even HEIs with Silver awards show limited engagement with the realities of Black and migrant women's daily experiences—exclusion, micro-aggressions, gatekeeping, and overrepresentation in the workplace and precarious academic

roles (Joseph 2024; Joseph 2025). Viewed through acceptance, the routine extraction of unpaid EDI labour from racialised staff signals a profound institutional failure. Rather than transforming structures, institutions rely on the affective, intellectual, and emotional labour of those most marginalised to sustain the appearance of inclusion. Acceptance would require institutions to resource this work properly, recognise it in promotion and workload models, and redistribute responsibility away from racialised individuals themselves. Institutions frequently adopt anti-racism policies without creating mechanisms to enforce them. Common examples include: ‘zero-tolerance’ statements without reporting structures; one-hour racism or bias training used as a substitute for structural reform; diversity roles without budget or authority; and institutional reluctance to name racism explicitly. These practices constitute institutional inertia, allowing the appearance of action without meaningful transformation.

Ireland-Specific Realities: Racism as Structure, not Event

These cases illustrate how the absence of acceptance produces material harm across institutional domains. Ireland’s racial formation provides empirical evidence which reveals structural racism across multiple domains including racialised policing, the racialisation of the Direct Provision system, employment, labour market inequality, anti-Black racism and Traveller inequity. Reports demonstrate disproportionately high rates of stop-and-search and surveillance targeting Black and Brazilian communities (Michael 2024). When evaluated through acceptance, racialised policing practices in Ireland reveal the limits of institutional equality frameworks. Acceptance would require the State to acknowledge racial profiling as a structural problem, embed enforceable safeguards, and redistribute power within policing institutions. Instead, EDI units coexist with practices that continue to disproportionately target Black and Brazilian communities, illustrating the disjuncture between

symbolic commitment and lived reality. These practices echo global patterns of racialised policing and reinforce the permanence of racism. The Direct Provision system represents a profound failure of acceptance at the level of the State. Rather than recognising migrants and International Protection Applicants as rights-bearing subjects, the system institutionalises segregation, immobility, and precarity (Arnold and Quinn 2017; Lentin 2020). Employing an acceptance perspective, EDI units within relevant departments cannot compensate for a policy architecture that is premised on containment rather than inclusion. Belonging discourse is rendered largely meaningless in a system that structurally denies safety, autonomy, and dignity. These threats, which have intensified in recent years, reflect a broader socio-political environment in which misinformation, xenophobia, and organised anti-migrant mobilisation have created significant risks for those seeking protection.

One of the most alarming developments has been the escalation of arson attacks and attempted arson incidents on buildings used, or rumoured to be used, as accommodation for people seeking international protection. Such attacks not only amount to serious criminal acts but also produce profound fear, trauma, and instability among displaced individuals who have already fled conflict, persecution, or violence. The burning of prospective International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) centres, often fuelled by online conspiracy theories and targeted misinformation campaigns, has at times forced the State to abandon or delay planned accommodation solutions—leaving many people in prolonged states of uncertainty, housed in temporary settings such as tents, repurposed offices, or overcrowded emergency shelters. For IPAs living in existing centres, these incidents create an ongoing sense of vulnerability. Reports from communities across the country indicate that the presence of hostile protests outside accommodation sites can be deeply distressing for residents, many of whom experience the demonstrations as direct intimidation. Yet, all the departments responsible for IPAs have robust EDI units.

In addition, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) research and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) research on the experiences of Black people in Europe show that migrants and Black Irish workers face wage penalties, underemployment despite higher qualifications, exclusion from leadership, and discrimination in hiring (McGinnity *et al.* 2020; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2023). These outcomes illustrate race as structural determinants of economic opportunity. In a similar way, the Irish Travellers experience some of the lowest socioeconomic outcomes in Europe, despite state recognition of Traveller ethnicity. Persistent discrimination across education, housing, healthcare, and employment exposes the limits of Irish EDI in addressing longstanding racialised inequalities. Finally, persistent labour market inequalities experienced by migrants, Black Irish workers, and Travellers demonstrate how racial difference continues to be penalised rather than accommodated. Wage penalties, underemployment, and exclusion from leadership persist not because individuals fail to integrate, but because institutions have not accepted racialised groups as legitimate holders of authority, expertise, and power.

Acceptance as a Framework for Racial Justice

The limitations of belonging in racialised Ireland are visible in policies that encourage individuals to integrate but ignore the conditions that make belonging unequally available. Racialised and migrant groups are continually told; to ‘fit in’, adapt culturally, demonstrate loyalty and/or to prove their Irishness. Belonging thus functions as a disciplinary project, not an emancipatory one. Acceptance on the other hand, provides a more demanding institutional framework than belonging. It requires; naming institutional racism, restructuring decision-making power, embedding accountability mechanisms, collecting race-disaggregated data, investing in racial competency training, protecting racialised survivors of gender-

based violence, transforming institutional culture, not individuals. Acceptance insists that institutions—not racialised communities—must change.

Conclusion: Reframing EDI for an Ireland in Transition

EDI in Ireland stands at a crossroads. It now operates within a context of intensifying racial inequality, political backlash against equality work, and growing hostility toward migrants and racialised communities. In this environment, symbolic commitments to diversity are no longer merely insufficient; they risk becoming complicit in the reproduction of harm. This article has argued that Ireland’s dominant, compliance-driven approach to EDI functions less as a mechanism of justice and more as a mode of institutional reassurance—one that allows organisations to appear progressive while leaving racial hierarchies intact.

The limitations of contemporary EDI become unmistakable when interrogated through the lens of acceptance. Across higher education, policing, immigration governance, and the labour market, equality frameworks coexist with practices that continue to penalise racialised difference. Belonging discourse, while rhetorically appealing, offers no meaningful pathway for institutional accountability. It offers cohesion by asking individuals to adapt to systems that refuse to change, reframing structural exclusion as a problem of integration, culture, or time.

Acceptance, by contrast, demands institutional courage. It requires organisations and the State to move beyond declarative commitments and toward demonstrable transformation: naming institutional racism, redistributing power, embedding accountability mechanisms, resourcing equality work properly, and protecting those who experience racialised harm. Acceptance reframes EDI from a question of aspiration or culture to one of obligation and responsibility.

Crucially, acceptance also clarifies what is at stake. Where institutions fail to accept racialised difference, belonging remains

conditional and fragile. Where acceptance is enacted structurally, belonging (often) emerges as a consequence rather than a demand. In this sense, acceptance is not an abstract ideal but a sociological threshold—one that exposes the gap between institutional claims and lived realities.

As Ireland continues to negotiate its changing racial and social landscape, the future of EDI cannot rest on compliance, branding, or symbolic inclusion. If EDI is to function as a project of justice rather than institutional self-congratulation, it must be grounded in acceptance and oriented toward structural change. The challenge facing Irish institutions is not whether they value diversity in principle, but whether they are willing to accept difference in practice—and to be held accountable for the structural changes that acceptance demands.

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Ebun Joseph

Ebun Joseph is a Black feminist economic sociologist and academic. Her research focuses on intersectional analyses of race, gender, migration, and institutional power, with particular attention to how racialised inequalities are produced and sustained within state and organisational structures. She is the founder of the Institute of Antiracism and Black Studies and currently serves as Ireland's Special Rapporteur on Racism and Racial Equality. Dr Joseph is a lecturer and module coordinator at University College Dublin (UCD), where she established Ireland's first Black Studies module in 2018. She is also the

founder and former chair of the African Scholars Association Ireland (AfSAI). Her work bridges critical race theory, feminist political economy, and applied sociological research. Beyond academia, she is a documentary producer, including *Equity in the Workplace*, host of the DEeP Table Dialogue, and is currently developing *Echoes of 2004*.

2. Performing Inclusion and Decorative Diversity: On the Limits of EDI in White Academic Spaces

Philomena Mullen

The university is all about community engagement until the community engages the university (Young 2024)

This thought piece examines whether the rise of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) discourse in Irish higher education has transformed the conditions faced by Black scholars. Drawing on Ahmed's (2015) concept of non-performativity and Mbembe's (2015) critique of commodified diversity, it asks whether EDI is about access, power-sharing, epistemic redress, institutional optics or interest convergence, as seen through the lens of a Black academic in a predominantly white university. If power is not redistributed, if marginalised knowledge remains peripheral, and if racialised scholars remain absent from decision-making, why is EDI viewed as threatening by its opponents? Perhaps EDI fails not in its implementation but because its design may never have intended structural change. Against the projection of inclusion, this piece asks what forms of refusal are needed to confront what, and who, remains absent?

EDI initiatives in Irish higher education have become a central axis around which institutional strategies and identities revolve. Yet these programmes, imposed increasingly by agencies such as

the Higher Education Authority (HEA), reveal tensions inherent in translating liberal ideals of fairness and opportunity into concrete institutional practices. The imposition of EDI frameworks, including commitments to widening participation of non-traditional students and adherence to charters such as Athena SWAN and the Race Equality Charter, reflects a contemporary form of what might be understood as neo-white liberal guilt (Ellison 1996; Korver-Glenn and Mayorga 2024). This phenomenon encapsulates a political affect marked by embarrassment, pragmatism and retreat from radical transformation, whereby institutions nominally recognise racial and social inequalities but do so in ways that preserve existing power structures through one-size-fits-all models that suppress specificity in the name of universality. These universalising gestures echo the colonial universalisms that, as Davies (1994; 2003) demonstrates, have long regulated knowledge and authority within the academy.

The concept of neoliberal racial projects (Omi and Winant 2014), which rework the racial conservatism of previous decades within a centrist, moderate redistribution framework, finds clear expression in how EDI functions in many universities today. EDI's appeal to universalist values such as fairness, inclusivity and representation tends to mask the persistence of structural inequalities and racialised hierarchies, echoing their observation that neoliberalism seeks to reorganise (or 'recalibrate') (Lentin 2025, p. 4) racial projects under a more palatable guise. What I would term decorative diversity functions as an institutional ornament, offering symbolic reassurance while deflecting scrutiny from structural racism.

In Ireland, widening participation schemes provide a useful lens through which to observe these dynamics. These programmes are designed to extend access to higher education to those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and ethnic and racialised minoritised groups. The small numbers admitted through such routes, coupled with the ongoing dominance of

traditional student cohorts (I am thinking here of middle-class feeder schools to my own university), signal the limits of these efforts. The institutional embrace of widening participation is partial, shaped by pragmatic concerns such as funding incentives, reputational gains and compliance with policy mandates from the HEA. In this context, EDI frameworks act as mechanisms of control and not sites of radical intervention.

The pressure placed upon universities to follow the Athena SWAN Charter and the Race Equality Charter speaks to the dual-edged nature of EDI. Although these frameworks have created important conversations about gender and race equality, their bureaucratic and performative dimensions cannot be overlooked. The requirement to produce evidence, alongside targets and policies, encourages a tick-box approach that prioritises appearance over transformation (Ahmed 2012; Ahmed 2015; Mbembe 2015). This aligns with Berlant's (2011) analysis of political affect, where liberal guilt manifests as a retreat into pragmatism and risk-aversion, particularly within institutional contexts where utopian projects are deemed politically hazardous.

Such dynamics are not peculiar to Ireland. In many jurisdictions, EDI initiatives face critiques for their limited impact on power redistribution and for maintaining the managerial logics of neoliberal governance (Ahmed 2017). Omi and Winant's (2014) insight that neoliberalism seeks to avoid the subject of race through euphemism and coded language finds purchase here. Universities may nominally notice race but restrict its meaning to cultural diversity or inclusion, sidestepping systemic issues such as racialised access barriers and everyday racial discrimination. The problem, as I see it, is that diversity concepts tend to default to representation, without interrogating structures of power. This tendency produces what I would term a diversity of diversity, a discursive inflation in which difference is catalogued for bureaucratic purposes as decorative diversity, while modern racisms remain untouched beneath the surface. The

consequence is that EDI initiatives, while rhetorically committed to justice, can operate as extensions of neo-white liberal guilt, an affective state characterised by political embarrassment and defensive posturing, with little movement toward structural change. The institution's 'liberal' self-image remains intact through the adoption of diversity policies that assuage guilt without confronting the deeper colonial and racial legacies embedded within the university system (Bhambra 2017).

Within the context of a critical examination of EDI in Irish higher education, the man on the couch metaphor crystallises the institutional reluctance to engage fully with the challenges posed by systemic racial and social inequalities (Ellison 1996). Universities, while signatories to frameworks such as the HEA's Race Equality Charter or Athena SWAN initiatives, frequently treat these commitments as bureaucratic obligations, not as sites of institutional change. Like the patient resistant to psychoanalytic therapy, institutions may sidestep uncomfortable conversations about their own complicity in reproducing hierarchies of race, class and gender. As Asare (2023) argues, anti-Blackness persists even within the DEI industry itself, where the expertise and labour of Black practitioners are devalued and marginalised, exposing how EDI frameworks reproduce the exclusions they claim to address. Institutional gestures remain confined to aspiration, lacking concrete measures that advance inclusion or equity. The talking cure, understood as sustained dialogue and critical self-reflection, remains deferred, leaving institutions trapped in cycles of defensive pragmatism. Recognising this dynamic is necessary for moving beyond compliance to an EDI praxis that confronts structural inequalities.

This should not lead to wholesale dismissal of EDI efforts. Understanding EDI as a field marked by the contradictions of liberalism's legacy allows for a better critique and opens avenues for transformative possibilities. The recent interventions from disciplines such as Black studies, critical legal theory and

feminist scholarship, which position the Other as author and agent, offer pathways to reimagine EDI beyond institutional imposition (Crenshaw 1991; Wynter 1968; Wynter and McKittrick 2015). Following Wynter and McKittrick, this would mean refusal of the colonial categories through which inclusion is granted; following Crenshaw, it would mean interventions grounded in intersectional analysis that demand structural accountability, not mere representational presence.

In this spirit, Irish universities could reposition widening participation and race equality as projects co-produced with racialised and marginalised communities, and shift from compliance to genuine partnership. For this to occur, institutions must move beyond the politics of embarrassment and pragmatic risk management to embracing the political risk of ‘becoming minor’, to borrow Berlant’s (1995, p. 315) phrase, whereby they relinquish their hegemonic privilege and engage in the difficult work of structural transformation. This requires candid reflection on the limitations of current EDI frameworks and a robust confrontation with institutional racism. It also demands investment in initiatives led by those most directly affected by this racial violence.

The imposition of EDI from above, while framed as a corrective, risks alienating those it purports to empower when it fails to register the affective and embodied realities of racialised and ‘other’ disadvantaged students. The neoliberal university’s reliance on metrics and performance indicators displaces lived experience and obscures the complex negotiations of identity and belonging that such students navigate (Lynch and Ivancheva 2015). Recognising this calls for a shift in institutional culture that values relationality and trust. It also demands embracing the slow, uncomfortable work of decolonising curricula and governance structures, although what people understand and misunderstand as decolonising the curriculum would necessitate a volume unto itself.

EDI in Irish universities today sits at the fraught intersection of aspiration and constraint. Its rise, mandated by bodies like the HEA and embodied in initiatives like Athena SWAN, is an instance of the persistence of liberal frameworks that manage race and difference through evasions that permit modern racisms to remain institutionally embedded. Anti-Blackness, which we can understand as the ‘beliefs, attitudes, actions, practices, and behaviours of individuals and institutions that devalue, minimise, and marginalise the full participation of Black people’ (Boston University 2022), continues to be reproduced by powerful institutions and actors who administer EDI without disrupting their own authority. While this may lead to the recognition of inequality, it simultaneously circumscribes the scope of institutional change to what is framed as manageable reforms that end up preserving and intensifying existing hierarchies. The problem, as throughout, is that representation is privileged over structural interrogation, leaving the architecture of racial power intact. By acknowledging that diversity is concerned with how certain groups are systematically privileged over others, and by confronting this tension and embracing political discomfort, EDI has the potential to evolve into a genuinely transformative project, one that reimagines the university as a space of justice and inclusion and not simply as a site of compliance.

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Philomena Mullen

Dr. Philomena Mullen is Assistant Professor of Black Studies at Trinity College Dublin, and director of the MPhil in Race, Ethnicity, Conflict. She returned to TCD in 2016 as a Government of Ireland scholar after a career in Irish NGO work, undertaking a PhD examining the racist and racialised conditions through which women of African-Irish descent who grew up within the Irish industrial school system constructed their identity. Her research focuses on the voices of individuals of African-Irish descent across the twentieth century and on the recovery of

African presence in Ireland prior to the Celtic Tiger period. She is a ministerial appointee to the Advisory Committee on the Restitution and Repatriation of Cultural Heritage set up in 2023; a Trustee of the Association of Mixed-Race Irish; a director of the not-for-profit Skein Press; a member of African Scholars Association of Ireland; and a member of UNIDPAD Steering Committee for the International Decade for People of African Descent.

3. Tracking Changes Arising from EDI: Building a Positive Narrative

Nata Duvvury and Lennita Oliveira Ruggi

This Thought Piece rests on an assumption that is also a promise. One version of it was voiced by an outsourced worker from the University of Galway in the context of an interview about Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI/DEI) efforts in higher education¹. She said it neatly: *‘the university is such a perfect little incubator for the rest of society. There is no reason why it can’t be a space where really progressive democratic processes take place and are celebrated’*. Such understanding - that universities can be spaces for change where equality, diversity and inclusion are practised daily - is also a hope for a collective future we defend and try to build.

During the 2010s, the University of Galway in Ireland faced a gender crisis that was detrimental to its internal relations and public image (NUI Galway 2016; Oliveira Filha and Ruggi 2020). The crisis was sparked by Micheline Sheehy-Skeffington’s groundbreaking case proving discrimination against women lecturers in promotion processes (Sheehy-Skeffington 2016; Quinlivan 2017). In this context, Kelly Coate, then a lecturer in Higher Education Practice, based in the Centre for Excellence in

¹ Data discussed here is sourced from the PhD project “The bottomless care pyramid: a decolonial feminist ethnography of equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives at the University of Galway” (Ruggi 2023), for a discussion on the methodology: Ruggi 2022.

Learning and Teaching , started an online list named ‘*Change 100 Things for Gender Equality*’. The first item demanded to ‘remove the pictures of the “great men” of the university from the boardroom in the old quadrangle building and hang them somewhere less public’ (Coate 2015). She argued these walls represented the exclusion of women from power.

Indeed, Sheehy-Skeffington described on social media the experience of sitting in the ‘*boardroom where [promotion] interviews took place with all those intimidating male portraits staring you down*’ (23 Jul 2018). Thanks to the work of Sheehy-Skeffington and several other feminists, three years after the first publication of Coate’s list, the male-centred decoration of the boardroom was dismantled. The portraits of previous Presidents and Deans (until then, all male) were sent back to their home colleges. Although an important outcome of EDI efforts, this change, ironically, can no longer be *seen*. We argue that this potential invisibility is an important dimension to consider when addressing the common benefits of EDI. It highlights the need to produce a positive narrative capable of protecting the changes, founded on the remembrance of how things used to be.

Coate’s list offered 16 initial suggestions and invited others to contribute to it until it reached 100 items. It is appealing to picture EDI as a list that is incomplete and ought to be collectively compiled, for it demonstrates this is an ongoing effort, a process of transformation that is open-ended while happening. Dismantling the wall of male power is only one dimension in the visual culture of the university. Other initiatives followed at the University of Galway. Examples relate to the mandate to have women role models standing in prominent positions at graduation stages while having their full names read by the master of ceremonies, an initiative incorporated in the institutional Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP). Similarly, inspired by the Women on Walls project, the first portrait of a senior woman at the university, the former Vice President for Students’ Experience, Pat Morgan, was commissioned by the

then Office of the Vice President for Equality and Diversity from a woman artist.

The list of demands for gender equality is, thus, slowly being compiled. Other dimensions related to visual culture show how EDI endeavours are multi-layered and ever-expanding. Staff in certain units at the University of Galway feel self-conscious about placing pictures of their families, especially their children, on the desks or walls in their offices, for it could be taken negatively by colleagues and read as a lack of commitment to the university. In parallel, precarious staff resent being excluded from the visual memory of the institution. As voiced by one temporary teaching staff *‘There needs to be education around that as well. I mean, [organising] a staff photo and telling a part-time member: “you don’t need to be here”. That’s disgusting behaviour that needs to be eradicated’*. So, while celebrating the dismantling of the patriarchal wall, EDI efforts ought to, simultaneously, support demands that have not yet been acknowledged by institutional action plans.

We believe one of the thorniest challenges in considering EDI efforts is how to describe change. Such a description is theoretically and politically charged since merely celebrating success can shun demands that have not yet been met. This is an issue that involves contemporary feminisms as a whole. There seems to be a methodological difficulty in terms of analysing transformation without being caught in an ideology of progress that emphasises incremental changes. As part of this, one of EDI’s core problems lies in assessing if change has happened and how much. What is, indeed, the appropriate measure to evaluate change?

The Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) EDI policy is creating key performance indicators (KPIs) to standardise and communicate change. This monitoring and evaluation (M&E) work is crucial to sustain momentum for transformation (Duvvury 2011). The HEA KPIs are, however, primarily quantitative, focusing on trends in time and comparisons

between institutions. They are tailored to grasp EDI issues that have been consolidated in the policy, but they do not necessarily help expand the EDI agenda or deepen its remit. Following the European model, most HEA indicators focus on the increase in the number of women in senior positions (Ruggi and Duvvury 2023).

Instead of focusing on the development of KPIs within the field of policy, our Thought Piece considers the collective attempts made by rank-and-file staff to assess EDI changes. Several indicators are effective and already operational at the University of Galway. As we have argued elsewhere (Ruggi and Duvvury 2024), KPIs are one of the ways to dispute power and influence the future of universities. Since KPIs are premised on institutional transformation, they are helpful for EDI efforts. A robust M&E system must be premised on the understanding that EDI is not limited to its quantitative measurement, that several forms of social inequality (race/ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, disability) intersect, and that multiple and diverse actions at all institutional levels are required.

Traditional methods to develop KPIs in higher education draw from the input of a ‘panel of experts’ primarily composed of senior managers who are knowledgeable about the internal processes and institutional goals (Suryadi 2007; Badawy *et al.* 2018; Varouchas *et al.* 2018; Kim *et al.* 2018; Bashir *et al.* 2023). In terms of EDI, however, evidence shows that senior managers are not prepared to identify or address crucial issues (Grummell *et al.* 2009; Treanor 2015; O’Connor 2020). For this reason, it is vital to design alternative approaches to foster EDI-targeted KPIs. We suggest one possibility is to adopt a bottom-up method built on how staff assess EDI initiatives.

It is possible to synthesise three main goals emanating from the grassroots efforts of staff to monitor institutional transformation: firstly, EDI must be an institutional priority. Secondly, EDI must be integrated into decision-making processes. Thirdly, EDI ought to be embedded in everyday functioning. KPIs thus need to be

grounded in these three goals, be transparent and be substantial, moving from incremental increase in numbers to embedded processes. In this context, we highlight two grassroots KPIs that foreground such framing:

1. EDI needs to be integrated into the decision-making processes. This is done by ensuring inclusive institutional practices, both in terms of the representation of different demographics and of different staff cohorts and grades. The continuing effort to materialise change in universities requires pressuring powerful groups to relinquish power and privilege (Hodgins 2021) while implementing equitable management (Vara-Horna *et al.* 2023). Indeed, one relevant grassroots KPI is ensuring that underprivileged groups are represented in decision-making fora.
2. EDI units need to be fully resourced, and this includes avoiding hiring precarious employees to perform EDI tasks. Under-resourcing was criticised by staff, who abhor the opportunistic use of EDI. Indeed, the refusal to allocate appropriated resources has been identified by literature as a form of institutional resistance to transformation (Hodgins and O'Connor 2021). To make sure that EDI is an institutional priority, transparent, easily accessible, and updated information on resource allocation models must be part of the M&E system.

Our investigation revealed that staff at the University of Galway resent the misuse of EDI as a PR exercise, shifting the aim of promoting equality to promoting the institution. Interestingly, nearly all research participants highlighted that one of the indicators for institutional transformations is the dislocation of EDI issues from the margin to a legitimate position within university politics, confirming previous research (Agócs 1997; Hodgins and O'Connor 2021). The discursive shift is crucial since it empowers internal questioning through participation in

decision-making processes. The very fact that the list of demands for equality expands and deepens is an indicator of change.

It seems fair to argue that there is virtually no dimension of higher education that is untouched by EDI aspirations for transformation. This is a promise that, we believe, is worth sustaining. To contribute to this endeavour, our Thought Piece considered developing grassroots KPIs for EDI. Such indicators can effectively connect EDI goals to the everyday functioning of the university, preventing the opportunistic use of EDI as a marketing tool and revealing that decision-making processes and employment conditions are crucial to prioritise EDI. Grassroots KPIs serve a dual function: assessing change and expanding EDI goals. Staff's informal indicators can be synthesised to become the source of a robust EDI M&E system. As such, they help consolidate a collective narrative about change, capable of protecting what has been accomplished by EDI/DEI policies (even when it can no longer be seen in the present) while simultaneously pushing for further transformation. Only when embedded in the everyday functioning of an institution can we collectively protect the central aims of EDI.

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Nata Duvvury

Nata Duvvury is Senior Lecturer and Director, Centre for Global Women's Studies and Co-Leader of Gender and Public Policy Cluster in the Whitaker Institute at National University of Ireland, Galway. Dr. Nata Duvvury is an international development expert with more than 25 years of experience in gender, development and empowerment. Her work includes research and advocacy on gender-based violence, women's property rights, and HIV and AIDS in a variety of settings including conflict and post-conflict contexts.

Lennita Oliveira Ruggi

Lennita Oliveira Ruggi is a lecturer in Sociology of Education at the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR - Curitiba, Brazil). She did her PhD on gender equality in higher education in the Centre for Global Women's Studies in the School of Political Science and Sociology at the University of Galway (Ireland). She is currently a Postdoctoral fellow at Charles University (Prague).

4. The Irish Advantage: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion as the Foundation of Irish Democracy

Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain

When I left California in 2003 to move to Ireland, I never imagined that I would be living in an Ireland that has same sex marriage, abortion healthcare choices for women, and a fast growing Asian population, and that parts of the United States (US) would not have these things. The political and social world we live in today was almost unimaginable then.

Today, we stand on the precipice of a watershed moment for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives, also known as DEI, in higher education in Ireland. While the ‘formerly democratic’ nation known as the US tries to de-fund, criminalise and eliminate EDI, it provides Ireland with a unique opportunity, an advantage even, to make its stamp on global equality initiatives in higher education. While for some the pace of change in this area has been too slow, it is worth remembering that there are legal bases for the EDI work done in universities, most recently under the call to comply with the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission 2025) as well as employment laws, etc. We do this both because it is legally our responsibility but also

because it is helpful for our institutions of higher education and the right thing to do.

EDI, unlike other units within the university, are there to challenge and transform higher education. While some may feel that there is no genuine commitment and that recent programmes make universities more like businesses, there is good work being done, but of course, more work to do. For example, the EU Horizon programme requires gender equality compliance or institutions will not be allowed to even apply for EU funding for research. Fifty-three percent of institutions across Europe are not in compliance, but Ireland, for most projects, is. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) made a recent call for universities to develop Race Equality Strategies and all major universities in Ireland have taken this responsibility seriously. This is a good thing, as it is possible that funding opportunities in the future may be dependent on being able to show gender and racial equality compliance. This 'stick' approach (you do not get any money unless you do this), has motivated many to participate in programmes such as Athena SWAN, and in the United Kingdom (UK) this has been expanded to racial inequality as well, so perhaps Ireland will not be far behind.

In addition, while the rest of the world turns away from EDI, it gives Ireland a huge opportunity in the 'market' (for those who think of higher education as a market) in terms of recruiting international students from Asia who no longer see the US as a possibility. It also makes universities more innovative (and in some cases profitable), and it makes us unique across the world. So, while the pace of change may feel like it is too slow, change is happening and is valued.

Unfortunately, when I look at what the EDI staff (and there are far too few of them for the workload they have) spend their time doing, they spend an inordinate amount of time doing 'compliance' work. Filling in forms to prove equal access, promotion, retention, etc. and preparing for Athena SWAN applications. This is important work but takes them away from

the more innovative and transformative work that needs to be done. For example, Maynooth University estimates (again, there is no real good race/ethnicity data on students with a good response rate) that 10% of its student population identifies as Black and 10%+ identify as Asian. These are diverse groups in terms of immigration status (citizens, second generation, migrants, and international students), ethnicity, gender, class and religious backgrounds. The students in many ways have made our jobs in EDI easier. Most academics can see the demographic change in their classrooms and realise that teaching a module like ‘Sociology of the Family’ must change to reflect the growing diversity of what people consider a ‘family’ even to be. To serve our students, our academic staff needs to be more racially and ethnically diverse - and not just at the assistant professor level or contract staff where most people of colour tend to cluster. If we wait for all those junior staff of colour to get promoted (assuming the promotion process values all research and teaching equally, which it does not) then we will be waiting a very long time.

There is urgent need for the collection of better race and ethnicity student data, and this is not a difficult task logistically. Students could be asked this when they fill in the CAO or other admission documents to indicate their race and ethnicity. Having this data would help us to see if there are patterns of achievement (marks), retention (dropouts) or barriers to study, which cluster alongside racial or ethnic identity. If we have this data, we will be better able to help our students. There is urgent need to hire more academics of colour and not just into junior positions, but to allow them to come in at the top. There are no professors of colour, no VPs of colour and no one on the executive at Maynooth University who identifies as a person of colour. This has to change.

The work of the EDI units within Irish higher education are vital resources, particularly in the current political climate. Their

work will set us apart, give life to our democratic values and protect the rights of us all.

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Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain

Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain is Professor in the Department of Sociology at Maynooth University and Chair of the Maynooth University Race Equality Steering Group. She has published in journals such as: *Continuum*, *New Media and Society*, *Global Networks*, *Ethnicities*, *Sociology Compass*, *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *Sociological Research Online* and in many edited books. She is the lead author of *Global Mixed Race* (New York University Press) and sole author of *Pure Beauty: Judging Race in Japanese American Beauty Pageants* (University of Minnesota Press). Her current research explores global interactive forms of digital popular culture in Asia (Korea and Japan) and Europe.

Section II

Practising EDI: Policy, Education, and
Community

5. Reflections on Bridging the Gap Between Anti-Racism Policy and Practice in Irish Higher Education

Bríd Ní Chonail

Racism is part of many people's daily lives in Irish society including in higher education institutions (HEIs) where its impact on staff (Joseph 2025) and students (Darby 2022; Fingleton 2025) is an undeniable reality (Higher Education Authority 2023). Race equality and anti-racism have thus gained increased attention in the Irish higher education policy context. The findings of the first race equality survey among staff in HEIs were published in the Race Equality report (Kempny and Michael 2021). Drawing on the report's recommendations, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) launched the Race Equality Implementation Plan 2022-2024 (2022) to progress anti-racism work across the higher education sector. Funding was subsequently allocated to HEIs to implement actions at institutional level. One such institutional action was the creation of Race Equality Action Plans to function in accordance with the HEI's ongoing Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) work.

The Anti-Racism Principles for Irish Higher Education Institutions (Higher Education Authority 2023) were launched in March 2023 and 21 HEIs have signed them (Oireachtas 2025). The first of these principles acknowledges the presence of racial inequalities 'on a daily basis' in Irish HEIs (Higher Education Authority 2023, p.5). Drawing from definitions provided in

national government policy (now the *National Action Plan Against Racism*), racism is outlined as multidimensional, including institutional, structural, historical and individual, overt and covert, ‘manifest[ing] itself in everyday interactions, processes, behaviours (e.g. microaggressions)’ (Higher Education Authority 2023).

HEIs also have legal obligations to staff and students to challenge racism and racial discrimination under the Employment Equality Act 1998-2015 (staff) and the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 (students), as the race ground is one of the protected characteristics. Additionally, under the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, HEIs have a statutory obligation to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their staff and service users (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission 2019).

However, the tangible impact of these at an institutional level is questionable. Despite legal obligations, research shows Black and minority ethnic students experiencing racism, discrimination and unequal educational experiences and outcomes, often compounded by intersectionality (Darby 2022; Fingleton 2025; Carron Kee *et al.* 2024; Nwanze 2024). Staff also experience racial inequalities (Enwerem 2025; Kempny and Michael 2021). Since anti-racism is rooted in action (Lally 2022), how do we avoid what Ahmed observes: that ‘having a policy becomes a substitute for action’ (2012, p.10)? This piece focuses on a collaborative project between the local development company Empower and TU Dublin Blanchardstown which was funded by the PATH 3 Higher Education Access Fund. It reflects on how the project learning can inform the development of anti-racist practice in higher education and bridge the gap between policy and practice.

One project output was action research which examined the experiences of people affected by racism and the community services they engage with as they seek support and to report (Ní Chonail *et al.* 2025). Twenty-five people participated in this

qualitative study - community service providers, representatives of local community groups, and key informants¹. Participants included those with both professional and lived experiences of racism, with a significant representation from minority ethnic groups.

The first theme of the action research findings was understanding, experiences and the impact of racism. Racism is understood by participants as a prevalent and complex issue that can manifest in both overt and subtle ways. Participants described racism as occurring across a spectrum - *'sometimes it's subtle, sometimes it's really compromising and sometimes it's very, very aggressive'* (P15). Participants provided numerous examples of the different forms and types of racism, operating at the individual, structural, and institutional level. In keeping with a key principle of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado and Stefancic 2001), Black and Roma participants in particular described racism as a norm in Irish society: *'it's everywhere, in clinics, in hospitals, in schools, everywhere, the shops, to the works everywhere'* (P17). Examples of racism provided were not just limited to individual verbal and physical abuse, but also at an institutional and structural level. Participants outlined discriminatory treatment in terms of the Gardaí, statutory bodies, in retail and education, for example staff in statutory bodies not assisting a person from a minority ethnic background: *'the way they might assist a White Irish person'* (P4). The social construction of race, another key tenet of CRT (Ladson-Billings 2013), was manifested in the experiences of stereotyping. Discriminatory behaviour was based on stereotypes of racialised groups, questions of identity and belonging and who is considered Irish or not. An example of online racist abuse shared is *'Ireland is for Irish people'* (P15), namely White people.

¹ Key informants for this research are professionals working in interculturalism/anti-racism/advocacy in community or voluntary organisations with a regional or national remit

Racism is not only overt but also covert. Black and Roma participants spoke of the 'subtle' (P15) nature of racism as problematic and difficult to 'prove' (P17): '*racism in Ireland...if you're not really aware or if you haven't gone through it...don't see it in the surface...it's more kind of like silent; doubt yourself, it's hidden*' (P21). Examples of microaggressions as everyday racism (Sue *et al.* 2019) such as complimenting someone on their English (assuming a non-native speaker) were also provided. However, while subtle, these operate within 'the context of systemic racism' (Carr and Khandoker 2025).

The impact of racism on individuals and communities is '*huge*' and wide-ranging. It is psychological, emotional, but also impacts people's sense of safety, identity and belonging with younger Roma '*hiding their ethnicity*' in schools and university to avoid racism, discrimination and trauma experienced (P18). A common theme was '*rising hate and hostility*' and anti-immigrant sentiment in Irish society. Racism is now '*more focused, more aggressive, more targeted*' (P25) and '*it's creating a very scary atmosphere for those who are visibly different*' (P12).

HEIs need to recognise the reality, complexity and systemic nature of racism as outlined by participants, including at the institutional level. The whiteness of HEIs and the systemic advantages and disadvantages it reproduces must also be acknowledged (Kalwant 2024). HEIs need to move beyond 'doing the document' to 'doing the doing' (Ahmed 2012), and take action informed by such lived experiences of racism.

The final theme of the research - participants' recommendations in addressing racism - demonstrate a set of concrete actions, which if implemented, have the potential to develop anti-racist practice within community and voluntary service providers and HEIs. The most common recommendation was education required at all levels, including higher education, on racism and its reality, people's rights, to counter '*the disinformation and misinformation*' circulating, particularly around international protection applicants, and anti-racist action people can take.

Second, at a workplace/organisational level a focus on racism is essential: *'It's not given the focus it needs'* (P1). Training is required, not just a *'tick-box exercise'* but *'participatory'*, *'centres lived experience'* is *'on-going'* and *'transformative'*, *'for actually understanding [racism] and really thinking about it through their lens of their work'* (P14), thus, leading to anti-racist praxis. Leadership is also required: *'before we get to the frontline staff, we need to start raising awareness at the managerial level'* (P12), as well as representation from minority ethnic groups: *'There should be people of colour, people of my colour in different departments, government departments, every other organisation'* (P10). Furthermore, *'an anti-racism policy'* is necessary *'that shows we're an anti-racist organisation'* (P21).

Several participants highlighted the need for a reporting mechanism, a particular person or office within an organisation (P12) *'who is there to actually take this person, guiding all through to the stage of reporting...someone that you trust, that you can talk to'*. There needs to be an awareness of protocol and an interagency approach. Additionally, a response or action after reporting is required. A support system for people who experience racism is also necessary: *'a phone number'* or someone *'there to listen'*, *'that will not judge'*, *'that really understands how I feel at that moment...And then that person will help you through the process. Or somebody will even tell you when this happened you can do A B or C'* (P15).

The penultimate recommendation involved the pertinent *'need'* to gather data to evidence racism occurring (P13) and monitor initiatives to address it. There is a dearth of data disaggregated by ethnicity on unequal outcomes of staff and students from minority ethnic groups in Ireland (Fahey *et al.* 2019). This challenges the recognition of structural racism. Data is also needed to inform the final recommendation, which is at the core of anti-racism, action to be taken. The organisational anti-racist roadmap developed (Moyo 2025) following the project partners'

reflections on the research findings provides HEIs with a resource to improve organisational responses to racism.

In conclusion, the Anti-Racism principles (Higher Education Authority 2023, p.5) acknowledge the ‘significant role’ of HEIs in advancing anti-racist policies and actions across society. By signing them, HEIs have accepted responsibility for systemic, ‘long-term culture change’ (Higher Education Authority 2023, p.5). However, substantially more work is required at an institutional level around education, data collection, leadership, and resources to implement policies, bring about structural change and embed sustainable anti-racist practice in HEIs.

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Bríd Ní Chonaill

Dr Bríd Ní Chonaill is a Senior Lecturer in TU Dublin based on the Blanchardstown campus. She lectures on the Community Development and Youth Work and Social Care programmes. Her research focuses on migration, integration, racism, and anti-racism, and she collaborates with community and voluntary sector organisations. She is currently part of a PATH 4-funded project developing anti-racist practice on student placements.

6. Race, Migration, and Disability in Experiences of Gender-Based and Sexual Violence and Harassment (GBSVH) in Irish Higher Education: Intersectional Perspectives

Carol Ballantine, Declan Fahie, Margaret Hodgins, Sarah MacCurtain, Pádraig MacNeela, Patricia Mannix McNamara, and Caroline Murphy

Gender-based and sexual violence and harassment (GBSVH) is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality, as well as a type of inequality in itself (Anitha *et al.* 2024; Hearn *et al.* 2025). In higher education worldwide, this type of violence is recognised to be a significant problem, leading to educational gaps, physical and mental health issues, and persistent inequality (Bondestam and Lundqvist 2020; Humbert and Strid 2025). Research shows GBSVH to be pervasive in Irish higher education as elsewhere, affecting both students and staff (MacNeela *et al.* 2022b; MacNeela *et al.* 2022a).

Within higher education, acts of gender-based and sexual violence and harassment are best understood as an expression of power and oppression, operating along intersecting lines of inequality (Humbert and Strid 2025). While these actions can

have severe and at times devastating impacts on individuals, it is further argued that, by reinforcing structures of exclusion, they serve as discrimination against women as a group (Bull 2022). Intersectional analysis notes that a unitary focus on women, while politically valuable, should not be allowed to overshadow local specificities and changing patterns. For instance, research shows that exposure to GBSVH in higher education is comparatively highest for trans and non-binary people (Humbert and Strid 2025). The research literature notes multiple intersectional features that underpin patterns of vulnerability: including race, class, ethnicity, migration status, dis/ability, sexuality, gender identity and others (Bondestam and Lundqvist 2020; Humbert and Strid 2025; Lipinsky *et al.*; 2022; Dawson *et al.* 2024). By limiting the opportunities and freedoms of individual victim-survivors, and reinforcing harmful social and cultural norms and structural arrangements, GBSVH supports and reconstitutes, not only gender inequality but a range of intersecting inequalities. These in turn underpin the perpetration and acceptance of GBSVH, resulting in what McCarry and Jones (2022) have termed an ‘invidious circle’ of sexual harassment and inequality.

In conceptualising gender-based violence in higher education, Hearn *et al.* (2025) draw attention to the contextual specificities of higher educational institutions. They note that such institutions are ‘shaped by academic hierarchies, precarious employment conditions, student-teacher power dynamics, and institutional norms of competition and collegiality’ (p.8; see also O’Connor *et al.* 2021). These cultures and structures lend themselves to particular dynamics of GBSVH, distinct from those that may be familiar from other social settings. Economic violence in academia, for example, can manifest through control of research funding, career opportunities and professional advancement (Hearn *et al.* 2025, p.8). GBSVH in higher education, then, must be understood contextually and indeed locally. This extends to understanding the precise relevance of intersecting inequalities, which are relevant not as absolute

categories, but rather as forms of local context (Hearn *et al.* 2025).

In Ireland, intersectional thinking in higher education has led to recent expansion of Athena SWAN initiatives and the introduction of numerous interventions to improve inclusivity beyond ‘just’ gender (Porter *et al.* 2025). We argue that initiatives to address Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) cannot succeed without taking into account the intersectional impact of GBSVH in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), a fact recognised in the most recent report of the Expert Group on Gender Equality (Higher Education Authority 2022b). At the same time, efforts to end sexual violence in higher education must address the issue intersectionally. This is not to say that GBSVH should be consigned to an ‘EDI container’, which already aims to address a vast number of issues; but rather, as the expert group highlights, that these two priorities overlap in vital ways and must therefore be addressed with a mutually supportive approach. In the rest of this research note, we turn to the intersectionalities of GBSVH in Irish higher education.

The first implementation plan for ending sexual violence and harassment (SVH) in higher education in Ireland (Higher Education Authority 2022a) makes limited reference to intersecting factors, outside of questions of data collection. This is far from unique. Analyses of HEI policies responding to GBSVH internationally identify a tendency to use universal/ neutral language that does not name patterns of gendered or intersectional vulnerability or exclusion (Anitha *et al.* 2024; Bull and Shannon 2025). By rendering actual inequalities and power systems invisible through ‘neutral’ framings, HEIs can naturalise/ conceal these systems, placing minoritised people at further risk when they attempt to address or even disclose their experiences of violence (Bull and Shannon 2025; Anitha *et al.* 2024; Lipinsky 2026). The overarching result can be one of HEIs paying lip service to the idea of intersectionality without doing the detailed

power analysis it requires, a phenomenon described by Lipinsky *et al.* (2026) as ‘ornamental intersectionality’.

This brief research note draws on a qualitative study funded by the Higher Education Authority. The study sets out to explore experiences of disclosing and/ or reporting (or not) of gender-based and sexual violence and harassment in higher education in Ireland. At the time of writing, fieldwork is complete and data analysis is ongoing. This research note responds to the levels of minoritisation that arose in the sample that we collected¹.

Eighteen interviews were conducted with victim-survivors of GBSVH. Six of these were HEI staff, and twelve students; sixteen were women and two men, from a total of seven different HEIs (for full details, see table in appendix). While the study makes no claim to be representative, and participants were self-selecting, the intersectional detail stood out (see appendix). Out of eighteen interviews:

- Five had a physical disability or chronic health condition
Three described themselves as autistic
- Six were international or migrant students or staff
- And six were racially or ethnically minoritised²

Within this sample, only two participants did not self-identify any factor of marginalisation or minoritisation apart from/ in addition to their gender. The diversity in this sample, we argue, invites us to develop considerations of the precise dynamics of

¹ A detailed discussion of the study methods is beyond the scope of this research report. In sum: Recruitment was conducted mainly online, with support from HEIs and community organisations. Demographic details were not collected systematically, but participants were asked at the beginning of interviews whether they had any relevant minority status or identity.

² These identifications are not mutually exclusive, and overlapped in different ways.

intersectionalities as they pattern experiences of GBSVH and disclosures and reports in higher education in Ireland.

Our research study calls for reflection on two specific areas of inequality that stood out in the sample data: first, the distinct but connected fields of race and migration status; and second, disabilities including physical impairments, chronic health conditions, and neurodivergence. The largest international prevalence study yet conducted on GBV in higher education, the Unisafe study, found that coming from a minoritised ethnic background or having a disability or chronic illness was associated with increased prevalence of gender-based violence (Humbert and Strid 2025); thus, these questions are highly significant. Gender and intersectional inequalities underpin GBSVH; they also lead to non-disclosure or non-reporting behaviours within the HEI (Pilinkaite-Sotorivich *et al.* 2025). In Ireland, people disclosing to the Speak Out anonymous reporting tool for higher education indicated a high degree of minoritisation, with 24% of those who gave demographic details having a minority race or ethnicity, and 37% having a disability of some kind (Speak Out National Office 2025).

In Ireland, the equalities agenda has been dominated by gender equality, creating the well-known issue of privileging hegemonic white, Irish women within equality work (Porter *et al.* 2025). Research into race and racism is in its relative infancy in Irish higher education (Porter *et al.* 2025). From its beginnings, intersectional feminist theory has noted that gender-based violence is both structurally and politically different for women who are marginalised by race (Crenshaw 1991). While contextual factors vary over time and place, the structures of racial exclusion can render racialised women vulnerable in unique ways. Meanwhile, the politics of racism, anti-racism and feminism impose specific barriers to disclosure and anti-violence activism for many racialised women (Crenshaw 1991). The net result is that race-neutral approaches to GBSVH frequently fail

racialised women, and can reinscribe both sexual and racial exclusions.

Internationalisation of higher education plays an important role in this dynamic. Evidence from Ireland suggests that international students face racism; but notwithstanding their desire to grow the international student body, HEIs to date have not addressed the phenomenon (Finn and Darmody 2017; Porter *et al.* 2025). International staff and students face particular barriers which are barely touched on in policy or research, including visa issues, housing precarity, the development of academic networks, and linguistic dominance/ exclusion (Porter *et al.* 2025; Ruggi, 2024; Lipinsky *et al.* 2026). Vulnerability to exploitation, and powerlessness to address this, are key dimensions in experience of GBSVH within institutions, which is why scholars draw attention to the significance of precarity as a structuring feature of the phenomenon (O'Connor *et al.* 2021, Bondestam and Lundqvist 2020; Hearn *et al.* 2025). The sacrifices and commitments that international students and staff often make for their academic opportunities can cause them to believe they have too much to lose by disclosing or addressing experiences of violence in higher education (Forbes-Mewett and McCulloch 2016). Non-disclosure, in addition to denying victim-survivors the opportunity to access help, can render such experiences invisible to service-providers and policy-makers, potentially resulting in critical misreadings of patterns of perpetration and vulnerability (Pilinkaite Sotirovic *et al.* 2024; Lipinsky *et al.* 2026).

Disability also arises as a key vector of inequality in this dataset. Eight out of eighteen participants described themselves as having a disability, with three identifying themselves as autistic, and five identifying physical or chronic health conditions. Survey data on student experiences of SVH in Ireland found that students with disabilities were significantly more likely to experience sexual violence than those without; while as many as 85% of students with a mental health difficulty had experienced

sexual harassment from someone in their HEI, a significantly higher proportion than those without any disability (National Disability Authority 2024). Barriers to the equal participation of people with disabilities have been clearly identified, in Ireland and internationally (McCarthy *et al.* 2025). The outcomes of systemic ableism against academic staff and postgraduates in Irish higher education include: fear of disclosing a disability; difficulties accessing reasonable accommodations; lack of representation in decision-making forum and ‘advocacy exhaustion’ (Rath 2022). In the context of GBSVH, such systemic ableism is likely to be exploited by perpetrators to exacerbate vulnerability to GBV (Humbert and Strid 2024). Ableist attitudes can also come into play when victim-survivors attempt to disclose experiences of GBSVH. Recipients of disclosures have been shown to respond in ways that pathologise disabled and neurodivergent victim-survivors, locating the problem in the individual and their disability, rather than in the violent behaviour (Ridout 2020; Robinson *et al.* 2021).

Across the board, the high incidence of marginalisation and minoritisation in this study invites us to look closely at the power dynamics of higher education, and how these underpin both GBSVH and inequality in Irish institutions. It questions the framing of a ‘typical’ or ‘ideal’ victim-survivor as implicitly white, able-bodied, cisgendered and heterosexual (Lipinsky *et al.* 2026), and directs us to consider whether strategies and services are designed to respond to those most likely to need them. It draws attention to the intersections between precarious contracts and other forms of minoritisation, such as race and international status (Kempny and Michael 2021; Porter *et al.* 2025; Lipinsky *et al.* 2026), disability (McCarthy *et al.* 2025), and gender (Lipinsky *et al.* 2026; HEA 2022). This in turn highlights how the vulnerability to exploitation inherent in contract precarity (O’Connor *et al.* 2021) has a knock-on impact on the overall equalities agenda (Lipinsky *et al.* 2026; HEA 2022). It further highlights the risk that hypervisibility can impose on minoritised people, in turn reimposing silence and concealing

minoritisation from data and policy (Lipinsky *et al.* 2026; Plinkaite Sotirovich 2024). It calls on us to question, at the very least: how are marginalised groups represented in decision-making structures around GBSVH in Ireland?

On the whole, the study invites a reflection on GBSVH, not only as a problem of gender and violence, but unquestionably a vector of inequality, false universality and exclusion. It points to the importance of GBSVH for EDI agendas in Irish higher education; and simultaneously, the relevance of intersectional equalities issues for the SVH policy agenda.

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Appendix: Breakdown of Demographic Information Voluntarily Shared at Interview

	Students	Staff	Total
Total	12	6	18
Women	12	4	16
Men	0	2	2
Bisexual	1	0	1
Queer	1	0	1
Any physical disability or chronic condition	4	1	5
Autistic	1	2	3
International/ migrant (any racial identity)	4	2	6
Racial or ethnic minority (Irish or international)	5	1	6

Carol Ballantine

Dr. Carol Ballantine is a critical feminist sociologist working in gender and equalities studies. Her expertise relates to gender-based violence, queer and intersectional feminisms, and polarisations related to gender and sexuality. She is particularly interested in creative and trauma-informed research methods including research dissemination. Carol’s research has been published in journals including *Violence Against Women*, *the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, and *Women’s Studies International Forum*; her creative writing has appeared in *The Stinging Fly* and *Banshee*. Carol’s current research focus is gender-based violence in higher education in Ireland, and narratives of sexual violence in everyday lives

Declan Fahie

Dr Declan Fahie is Director of School Placement and lecturer in sociology of education at the School of Education, UCD. A qualified teacher, Declan researches workplace bullying, toxic leadership, qualitative research methodologies and queer issues in schools.

Margaret Hodgins

Dr. Hodgins is a Professor in the Discipline of Health Promotion and a principal investigator with the Health Promotion Research Centre. She has been at University of Galway since 1995, first as Director of the Social Care programme and then as Director of the MA in Health Promotion, and was Head of the School of Health Sciences from January 2013 to November 2017. Dr. Hodgins was Principal Investigator on the ‘Irish Workplace Behaviour Study’ a national study on workplace bullying, violence and incivility, published in 2018. She is co-editor of a text book on Health Promotions Settings with Dr Angela Scriven from Brunel University, and is co- editor, with Professor Mannix McNamara, of a special issue of the International Journal of Workplace Health Management entitled “Reframing Bullying” and Workplace Health Promotion: Workplace Bullying and Workplace Wellness.

Pádraig MacNeela

Dr Pádraig MacNeela is a senior lecturer at the School of Psychology, University of Galway. He has published 38 peer-reviewed articles in journals on health psychology, sexual health, and nursing, and teaches in health care and applied psychology. Pádraig leads the Active* Consent programme, building on work in the area of positive, active consent that has continued since first collaborating with Rape Crisis Network Ireland in 2013. There are currently over 25 Higher Education Institutions nationally that collaborate with Active* Consent in workshop or

drama-based engagement strategies. Padraig's research work follows a cycle of knowledge generation, partnership building, and practical implementation, reflected in work on sexual consent and building resilience and positive mental health among young people.

Sarah McCurtain

Dr Sarah MacCurtain has been working in the University of Limerick since 2004 and is currently a Professor in Organisational Behaviour in Kemmy Business School. Sarah received her PhD from Aston Business School in 2005 and has since co-authored publications inclusive of books, monographs, book chapters, journal articles and conference papers. Her articles have been published in journals such as Management Revue, Personnel Review, International Journal of Human Resource Management, Industrial and labor Relations Review, Academy of Management Best paper proceedings and Irish Journal of Management. Sarah's continuing research interests include top management teams, trust and organizational performance, bullying, employee stress and well-being, organisational climate and innovation.

Patricia Mannix McNamara

Patricia Mannix McNamara is Professor of Education at the School of Education at the University of Limerick. She is Interim Director of Human Rights and Equality Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Limerick. Her background includes teacher education, health promotion, health education, empowerment, advocacy and educational leadership. Her research focuses on addressing systemic inequalities, barriers to inclusion, bullying, harassment, gender-based violence and workplace culture. More recently her work has centred on policy development, implementation and policy efficacy as well as on the protection of fundamental rights through collaborative, community-centred and trauma-informed approaches.

Caroline Murphy

Dr. Caroline Murphy is Associate Professor of Employment Relations at the Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick and Associate Research Fellow at the Digital futures at work research centre (Digit) at the University of Leeds and University of Sussex. She lectures in Employment Relations, HR Analytics, Human Resource Management and Professional Skills.) Her current research interests include job quality and precarious employment, female labour market participation, formal and informal care work, employee representation, and the impact of technology on work

7. What are the Challenges and Opportunities in Working Towards Racial Equality in the South East of Ireland?

Hazel O'Brien, Pilar Luz Rodrigues, and Monica Rudi Kent

Introduction

SETU is a technological university in Ireland and comprises 15,445 students (Higher Education Authority 2024). We won funding from SETU's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Office to conduct a small project on Race Equality in the South East. The key question for the project was: having signed up to the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) Anti-Racism Principles for Irish Higher Education Institutions, how can SETU ensure that higher education in the South East region (Waterford, Wexford, Kilkenny, Carlow) is ready to adhere to those principles? In a 2021 survey of Higher Education staff, the HEA defined race equality for staff in higher education as 'equal representation, equal experiences and equal outcomes of staff from minority ethnic groups' (Kempney and Michael 2021) but our remit goes beyond this, to also examine race equality in the South East and the role of the university in this regard, including the student experience.

The project aims:

- To provide a broad picture of race and race (in)equality in the South East
- To understand if and how race shapes our region socially, economically, and educationally
- To analyse how the higher education sector can promote race equality in the region

The racial and ethnic composition of Ireland is changing. Nationally, those who identified as White Irish were 82.2% of the population in 2016, but 76.5% of the population in 2022. Those who identified as Black or Black Irish were 1.3% of the population in 2016 and 1.5% of the population in 2022. Those who identified as Asian or Asian Irish were 2% of the population in 2016 and 3.2% of the population in 2022 (Central Statistics Office 2017; Central Statistics Office 2023).

This transformation is broadly mirrored within the South East region. Census data from 2016 to 2022 show a notable increase in residents in the region from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds and a decrease in numbers of White Irish (down from 90% in 2016 to 81.5% in 2022). The proportion of individuals identifying as Black or Black Irish rose from 0.78% in 2016 to 0.91% in 2022. Similarly, those identifying as Asian or Asian Irish increased from 1.11% to 1.84% over the same period (Central Statistics Office 2017; Central Statistics Office 2023). We also note that 5% of respondents in the South East did not disclose their racial/ethnic background in 2022, an increase of 3% since 2016 (Central Statistics Office 2017; Central Statistics Office 2023). As some of that 5% may be those fearful of declaring a minority status or have other reasons for non-disclosure, we acknowledge these figures are approximate.

This trend of increasing diversity is also reflected in HEA (2024) data on new entrants to SETU between the academic years 2016/2017 and 2024/2025. During this time, the proportion of Black or Black Irish students grew from 3.3% in 2016/2017 to

4.8% in 2024/2025, while Asian or Asian Irish students increased from 1.5% to 3.4%.

HEA (2024) notes that nationally, the academic year of 2024/2025 was the most diverse recorded. Those who were White Irish were 72.8% of national enrolments in 2024/2025, in contrast to 93% in 2007/2008. Comparing SETU to these national trends, we can see that those who are White Irish were 74.9% of enrolments in 2024/2025 and 91.4% of enrolments in 2007/2008. Thus, although the SETU student body is diversifying, it has a higher White Irish enrolment than we see nationally. As both the region and the university experience this period of demographic change, a key question emerges: How can SETU foster a more equitable university and, by extension, contribute to a more equitable society?

The project involves a number of outputs. One of these took place in January 2025 when we hosted a discussion event entitled *Understanding Race Equality in the South East* which was held in SETU Waterford with present and past students (undergraduate, postgraduate, and mature students) and staff, EDI office staff, community groups, and interested stakeholders. Participation was diverse; including those of migrant background and Black, Black Irish, mixed-race, Asian, Latin-American, European, and White Irish participants. The discussion event facilitated speakers to articulate their lived experiences of racism and discrimination in the university and in the South East region with a view to meeting our second and third aims for the project.

The event enabled conversations about how SETU can become a centre for change for race equality in the region with suggestions including but not limited to committing to diversifying the SETU workforce, mandatory training on racism and its manifestations for staff and students, and SETU embracing a role as a public leader in the region for driving positive change regarding social inequalities. The discussion event incorporated keynote presentations, including one by Dr Eburn Joseph (Special Rapporteur for the National Action Plan Against Racism). It also

included two panel discussions on ‘Experiences of Racial Equality in the University Context: Opportunities and Challenges’ and ‘Experiences of Racial Equality in the Community Context: How Can the University be a Centre for Change?’.

We identified six themes from the discussions. Two relate to participants’ thoughts regarding race and racism as it pertains to self and to family:

Intergenerational, Family, and Migrant Experience Dynamics

Identity, Self-Presentation, and Cultural Expression

Two relate to racism in society and the role of community mobilisation to combat this:

Ongoing Social, Political, and Systemic Inequities

Collaboration and Grassroots Mobilisation for Effective Local Change

And two which centre on how race and racism is experienced within the university, and on the specific measures identified by participants to work towards racial equality in the university:

Racism in Institutional, Academic, and Community Spaces

Professional Development, EDI, and Institutional Change

Below, we will discuss some of the ideas within these themes using participants words to give voice to the ideas discussed on that day. Though this is a short thought piece, we intend to discuss these in greater detail and in conversation with wider social, economic, and cultural factors and current research in future publications.

Can the South East Lead the Way Towards Race Equality?

If we were to identify one key ‘takeaway’ from the discussion, it would be that participants argued that racism in Ireland is increasing. Several participants linked this to ‘*the current political climate*’ in recent years which has resulted in a resurgence of the far-right. This idea is exemplified by one discussion participant who stated ‘*I used to be able to wander the streets of Dublin, jump on a bus at 7:00 PM, and go home. Now, I don’t feel safe*’. Dublin was especially noted as being ‘*unsafe*’, with several people referencing the 2023 Dublin riots as an example of this. This incident involved widespread damage and looting occurred followed by encouragement from far-right factions to protest in Dublin city centre in response to a violent attack on children by an Algerian person. ‘*Growing up in Tramore was OK but living in Dublin recently, I have never been less comfortable as I am now. I never feared for my life or safety in childhood in Waterford, but now it feels different*’.

Reflecting on this idea as it relates to the project’s original question, it appears that there is an opportunity for the South East and the university to actively work towards nurturing *any* sense of relative safety and belonging that racialised communities may feel in comparison to Dublin. In 2024 SETU was designated a University of Sanctuary which is helpful in this regard, but the region and the university can do more to ensure that racialised communities can feel a sense of true belonging there, even if this is not true across the country. This may position the region and the university as a leader in championing true inclusion. To achieve this, substantial focus and investment on local events and groups is essential as it is often at a local level in day-to-day encounters that exclusion and racism is most keenly felt. One participant spoke of entering a shop and being ignored by the people in the shop yet also simultaneously feeling the atmosphere in the room change to a focus on her presence as the only Black person in the space. She says, ‘*you are overlooked yet people are hyper-aware of you*’.

However, a lack of cultural events in the South East which might cater to young people with Black Irish and other minority identities was noted during our event. Participants observed that this lack of cultural events causes young people to travel outside of the South East region to access music and cultural events which support their identities. We are disappointed to find that young Black people in the South East (and probably other racialised people also) feel a need to travel to Dublin for social connection at precisely the same time that they feel that Dublin has become unsafe for them. One measure that key stakeholders in the South East could work towards then, is ensuring that cultural events cater to the variety of different cultures which we know exist within the region, with a focus on events likely to engage young people in particular. Whilst we acknowledge that Dublin as the capital city will always be a draw for major events, small cities like Waterford can work to ensure that smaller events cater for the interests of the various communities who call the region home. Are there opportunities for SETU to nurture the artistic and cultural talent that already exists within its community, by celebrating diversity and creating community connections through its existing Music, Theatre Studies, Art, Visual Art, and Content Creation and Social Media programmes?

The Role of the University in Race Equality

Participants had much to say regarding the challenges and opportunities for SETU in tackling racism. Keynote speaker Dr Joseph generously provided specific measures which SETU should undertake to improve its position on these issues. Central among them was a need to hire more minority staff and to teach specific modules pertaining to Black Studies and related subjects. Past and present students articulated their experiences of attending a university where almost all staff are White, even as the student body diversifies:

Students' day-to-day life is not senior managements' lives, nor is it university strategies. Their day-to-day life is classes, lecturers, supervisors, curriculum. So, designing a curriculum that is inclusive, having a diverse reading list, if you know you have students from other places find sources from those places that would be useful for them.

In email lists, my name is always last amongst Irish names on the list. This is the kind of thing that becomes a microaggression, it is so small, but these things are cumulative. They build a picture about how you are perceived and valued.

There needs to be better training and awareness for researchers about the effects of EDI for our work. This is improving here, but more could be done to ensure research staff are trained to think about how social issues like race and racism shape their research, affect their staff on projects, and affect human participants in projects.

Students noted progress in some areas, citing the designation of University of Sanctuary, SETU's Race Equality Forum, SETU EDI's Open Door project, and the discussion event itself as evidence that SETU is beginning to engage in these issues. However, community leaders noted that SETU could increase its engagement with the wider community including with grassroots community organisers and collectives locally. Participants emphasised that migrants and racialised communities should be facilitated to play a larger role in shaping the development of the university, and thus, the region. One participant suggested *'involve local migrant communities, not just the students. Don't just put migrants on a stage to talk about these things'*. This comment speaks to the sense that racialised groups are used performatively by universities; pictured in advertising images or used for events such as our own without the deeper engagement that comes from building relationships from the ground up with organisations and collectives in the community outside the

university. Another said ‘*invite me, ask me. Don’t do things for me, do things with me*’.

Conclusion

Connecting these suggestions to our project’s original question makes clear that if SETU is to live up to the HEA principles to which it has subscribed (Kempney and Michael 2021), and if it is to make reality its wish to be a global university (South East Technological University 2025) and a leader for the region on social issues (South East Technological University 2023), then it needs to do more work in implementing specific measures within the university, and in outreach to the wider community to be effective in these goals. In 2026, SETU’s EDI Office announced a campaign to improve its data gathering on the ethnic background of staff at SETU so as to ‘remove barriers and improve supports’, something which should help to draw attention within SETU to the very low numbers of minority staff. It must though, we maintain, be followed by a commitment to ensure that the staff of the university better reflects the diversity of the student cohort and the wider region. We intend to share our ongoing outputs with SETU through the EDI office and the Race Equality Forum to assist with this endeavour. Our thanks to all participants of this event and associated outputs for giving so authentically their expertise and their lived experience.

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Hazel O'Brien

Dr Hazel O'Brien is a lecturer in sociology at SETU. Specialising in qualitative and ethnographic methods, her research agenda commits to facilitating marginalised voices, generating participant-focused research, and effecting social change. Her work has been disseminated nationally and internationally and she has collaborated with colleagues in Ireland, the UK, and the US to build networks, generate conversations, and publish academic work. She is the author of *Irish Mormons: Reconciling Identity in Global Mormonism*, co-editor of the book series *Global Mormonisms*, and co-editor of *The Study of Religions in Ireland: Past, Present, and Future*. Dr O'Brien is an editorial board member for *Mormon Studies Review*. Her work within Global Mormon Studies often focuses on challenging the White worldview within Mormonism. Current research projects she is involved with include *The Experiences of Black Professionals in Irish Social Care Work* (Wioletta Jacob, SETU), and *Touching*

Distance (TO-DIST): A Biographic Narrative Study of Emotions and Transformations to Touch Practices in Irish Nursing Homes before and during Covid-19 (Patricia Robinson, SETU).

Pilar Luz Rodrigues

Dr. Pilar Luz Rodrigues is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), School of Population Health, where she is currently working on a Community Health Needs Assessment of the Dublin North East Inner City (NEIC). She previously held two postdoctoral positions at the University of Galway, where she worked on projects focused on intersectional discrimination in higher education (funded by the Higher Education Authority) and on migration and intercultural communication in rural Ireland (funded by Research Ireland). Dr. Rodrigues is a sociologist whose research focuses on marginalised communities, with particular expertise in migration, racial and gender equality, and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). She has worked across academic, international organisation, and NGO contexts, including with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS). She is also Co-Convenor of the Sociological Association of Ireland (SAI) Race and Ethnicity Study Group.

Monica Rudi Kent

Monica Rudi Kent is a lecturer in Italian and Intercultural Studies in SETU, whose academic and community work focuses on migration, cultural exchange, and social inclusion. She is actively involved with the Waterford New Communities Network, a non-profit voluntary organisation that brings together local migrant groups and individuals to foster an inclusive and supportive environment at community level. Through this work, Monica contributes to initiatives that promote long-term integration and encourage the sharing of lived experiences, skills, and knowledge for the benefit of all communities across County

Waterford. Combining academic expertise with grassroots engagement, she is committed to building meaningful intercultural dialogue and strengthening social cohesion through education, collaboration, and community-led action.

8. Support of Scholars and Students at risk in Ireland

Sarah Carol, Maeve O'Rourke, and Patrick Bresnihan

Introduction

At this time of increasing geopolitical conflict, the equality, diversity and inclusion of scholars and students from conflict zones is an important issue for universities across the world to address. This note provides an insight into a range of financial and other supports offered to scholars and students seeking to come to Ireland from conflict zones. It also discusses some of the challenges these scholars and students face. Based on data collected from 25 students and scholars at risk and other stakeholders in public institutions and civil society in Ireland, we identify five key areas for action. First, while several initiatives exist on the island of Ireland, more coordinated action is required to develop a sectoral approach. Second, the national supports should be reviewed to ensure greater inclusivity in their application to various conflict zones. Third, a hub that provides transparent information about available scholarships needs to be created. Fourth, structured initiatives to build 'science bridges' can foster research and exchange. Fifth and lastly, space for exchange and mentoring is a much-needed support.

The importance of international assistance to scholars and students affected by conflict is emphasised by numerous human

rights treaty provisions guaranteeing the right to education, and the related *Safe Schools Declaration* of 2015. These inter-governmental commitments complement long-standing international humanitarian law principles requiring the protection of civilians, civilian objects and societal foundations during armed conflict, and their necessity is demonstrated most starkly by the increasing acknowledgement of ‘scholasticide’ as an accompaniment to genocide.

Overview of existing support schemes and gaps: results from a survey

Members of the Young Academy Ireland researching the issue of ‘Science in conflict zones’ fielded a survey between the beginning of February and the end of March 2025, to which 25 individuals and organisational representatives responded. Using a snowballing approach, the survey was circulated among stakeholders including students’ union representatives, University of Sanctuary focal points, Irish governmental and state agency personnel, and organisations supporting students and scholars at risk in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The survey asked for information about existing supports from Ireland for scholars / students academic institutions in and displaced from conflict zones. It also asked about improvements that could be made to these supports, including international or comparative examples. Its questions categorised supports into those provided by organisations, government, inter-governmental bodies, and universities. The survey’s stated purpose was to inform discussion of Irish supports for students and scholars in and from conflict zones at a Roundtable event at the Royal Irish Academy in March 2025. This Roundtable was addressed by, among others, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Farida Shaheed, and its proceedings were reported (Bresnihan *et al.* 2025).

The 25 survey respondents were academic staff, administrative staff, programme officers and managers, and professional staff

working with scholars at risk either in the governmental or non-governmental sector, as well as at-risk scholars and students. Most respondents stated Ireland as their country of origin; Afghanistan, Hungary, Palestine, UK, and USA were also listed. The survey results cannot be considered a comprehensive account of available supports; nonetheless, they reveal a noteworthy range of financial and other initiatives operating in Ireland, Northern Ireland and internationally to assist displaced and at-risk scholars and students. Importantly, the responses also provide concrete recommendations for improvement based on knowledge and experience of the landscape.

Operating in the Republic of Ireland, the following Government-funded financial supports were listed:

- Research Ireland *Supplemental Grant for Displaced Researchers from Ukraine*
- Government of Ireland Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, *Higher Education Temporary Tuition Fee Support Scheme for Displaced Persons (Ukraine)*
- Government of Ireland Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, *International Protection Student Scheme*
- Government of Ireland *Ireland Fellows Global Scholarship Programme*
- Government of Ireland *Ireland-Palestine Scholarship Programme*
- *Education Pathways Ireland* (Government-funded, administered by UNHCR Ireland and Nasc)
- Research Ireland / Government of Ireland Department of Foreign Affairs *Andrew Grene Postgraduate Scholarship in Conflict Resolution*

- Government of Ireland / Higher Education Authority
International Education Scholarships

In addition to the above, individual university-level financial supports that could assist students or scholars coming from conflict settings were noted to include Trinity College Dublin's *Trinity Access Programme*, Maynooth University's *Excellence in Exile* initiative (including its *Scholars at Risk Fellowship*), placements under the aforementioned *Education Pathways Ireland* programme at various universities and—crucially—the *Universities of Sanctuary* initiative which operates at individual university level with some coordination through the Irish Universities Association (IUA). In September 2025 over 60 students began their studies at 11 Irish universities, having been evacuated from Gaza and provided with full scholarships and tuition fee waivers through collaboration of government departments, universities, students' unions and independent non-governmental benefactors (Alderson 2025; O'Kelly 2025).

Intergovernmental sources of financial support were noted to include the EU's *MSCA4Ukraine* and *Supporting at-risk researchers with fellowships in Europe Project (SAFE)* programmes. Further international sources of scholarship funding for at-risk students and scholars were the Palestinian American Research Center's *Tanya Baker-Asad Scholarship*, and the Institute of International Education's *Scholar Rescue Fund*.

In Northern Ireland, students and scholars at risk have obtained financial assistance from (among other sources) the cross-border Government/EU-funded *PEACEPLUS* programme, the EU's *MSCA4Ukraine* programme, the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA) *Fellowship Programme*, the British Academy/CARA *Researchers at Risk Fellowships Programme*, and university-specific schemes such as Queen's University Belfast's *Sanctuary Scholarships* and *Coptly Scholarships*, and Ulster University's *Asylum Seekers Scholarship* and *Salam Scholarships*.

Beyond financial scholarships, survey respondents identified sources of additional support such as information provision, visa assistance, and placement facilitation; these included Scholars at Risk-Ireland and Scholars at Risk Europe (including the *Inspireurope+* project), Front Line Defenders, the Government of Ireland Irish Refugee Protection Programme's support for both UNHCR resettlement and community sponsorship initiatives, and the Coppieters Foundation.

Significantly, the study also highlighted perceived gaps in support services, which can be categorised as (i) resource-related and (ii) organisational.

Several respondents stressed the importance of long-term funding across all academic levels, from undergraduate to postdoctoral and staff. Currently, there is some ad-hoc funding but a systematic integration across universities is only emerging. The University of Sanctuary/IUA working group is monitoring scholarships across Irish universities. There is a desire for these programmes to be integrated into national funding frameworks, with Germany and France cited as models. Many expressed the concern that current programmes may be exclusionary, especially if they focus solely on specific nationalities. Smaller, quicker-to-implement support measures, such as application fee waivers, were also suggested.

Support should extend beyond the scholarship itself. Participants noted the need for additional resources throughout the entire process, including relocation assistance, extending allowances to families, securing accommodation, and offering mental health services for refugees, who often carry significant trauma. Moreover, mentorship, language training, and career services are essential for ensuring successful integration.

After a scholarship ends, follow-up support (such as career counselling, job placement and internships) is critical for easing the transition to the labour market or further academic opportunities. One recommendation was to streamline and

enable automatic recognition of qualifications for displaced scholars, given that conflict can lead to lost or unrecognised transcripts. Concerns were also raised about the risk of ‘brain drain’, particularly for scholars who are unable to return to their home countries, and the need for exchange and support of scholarship and academia in conflict zones.

Organisational challenges are a significant barrier, starting with a lack of transparency that affects the ability to find scholarships, the availability of funds, and the absence of standardised practices. Improved coordination and joint action between universities were identified as key areas for improvement. Speedier visa processing and facilitation of scholars’ travel, including evacuation, were repeatedly highlighted as critical factors, especially for students and faculty attempting to flee conflict settings such as Gaza. Access to insurance for fieldwork was also raised as a related obstacle.

Conclusion

Based on our limited research, which included the Roundtable discussion of the survey results, we identified the following five areas for action:

1. Greater resources to support scholars in and from conflict zones are needed. A nationwide funding model is advisable. While individual universities have developed their own scholarship programmes, these efforts indicate an unmet demand that national and supranational funding bodies do not fully address. This suggests a need for a more *coordinated and strategic approach* to scholarships.
2. More equitable funding, open to applicants from various conflict zones and review of existing support, is needed. Some of the programmes were only accessible to Ukrainian researchers, neglecting scholars from other conflict regions

including (and not limited to) Palestine, Sudan and Afghanistan.

3. A more *transparent* overview of available support should be created with accessible information for everyone. This requires coordinated action of universities, funders and relevant organisations, ideally with a database that provides a systematic overview.
4. While funding individuals is essential, cooperation with institutions in conflict zones via *science bridges* (see Natour and Morgan 2023 for an example) can support research visits, joint supervision, collaborative research and workshops (see also Plews 2025) while at the same time responding to concerns about ‘brain drain’.
5. Consideration needs to be given to the complex emotional and language barriers experienced by displaced scholars and to establishing national and local, trauma informed, *personal and language supports and mentoring* to facilitate scholars at all levels of seniority to take full advantage of opportunities within the Irish higher education system.

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Sarah Carol

Sarah Carol is Assistant Professor in Sociology at University College Dublin. She earned her doctorate from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. In her research, Sarah focuses on the well-being, discrimination, religion, and social integration of ethnic and native minorities in Western Europe and Palestine. She combines quantitative and qualitative approaches using survey- and field-experiments, media data as well as semi-structured interviews. Her work has been published by Routledge, and in journals such as *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, *International Migration Review*, *Urban Studies* and many other journals. In 2018, she won the Distinguished Sociology of Religion Journal Award for an article on attitudes towards abortion in Western Europe.

Maeve O'Rourke

Maeve O'Rourke is an Associate Professor of Human Rights at the Irish Centre for Human Rights, University of Galway, where she is also Programme Director of the Law & Human Rights degree and Director of the Human Rights Law Clinic. Maeve's expertise concerns social care-related rights protections, gender-sensitive transitional justice methods, and 'movement lawyering' for social and climate justice. Maeve co-founded the 'Clann Project' and is a member of the 'Justice for Magdalenes Research' group; she has been central to efforts to bring about accountability and

institutional reforms regarding Ireland's institutional and family separation abuses. She is also a barrister in England & Wales.

Patrick Bresnihan

Patrick Bresnihan is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at Maynooth University. Patrick works across the interdisciplinary fields of political ecology, science and technology studies, and environmental humanities. His research has looked at different but related concerns around water, land, and energy in Ireland and how these speak to broader questions of colonial and postcolonial development, environmental politics and the 'green' transition. His book, *Transforming the Fisheries: Neoliberalism, Nature and the Commons* (University of Nebraska Press 2016) won the Geography Society of Ireland 'Book of the Year' in 2018.

9. Expanding EDI Through Community Dialogue: Anti-Racism Lessons from The DEEP Table

Fahmeda Naheed

Introduction

Ireland's contemporary social landscape is shaped by increasing cultural and ethnic diversity, driven by inward migration, changing demographics, and the longstanding presence of minority groups such as the Traveller community. As this diversity becomes more apparent, tensions, silences, and power dynamics related to racialisation and belonging also emerge (Joseph 2025a; Joseph 2025b). Both formal and community-based education are positioned as essential for fostering critical consciousness, equitable participation, and collective social responsibility (Freire 1970). Public dialogue spaces that prioritise lived experience, such as the DEEP Table Live Conversations hosted by Dr. Eburn Joseph, demonstrate that racialised communities experience multiple forms of exclusion in relation to belonging, representation, and voice. This highlights the significance of community-informed approaches to equity (Joseph 2025a; Joseph 2025b, Joseph 2025c; Joseph 2025d).

Understanding The DEEP Table

The DEEP Table is a six-part live conversation series (Season 1) that convenes diverse participants to engage in open, honest, and courageous dialogue at the intersection of race, gender, power, organisational culture, identity, and lived experience in Ireland (Joseph 2025a). Hosted by Dr. Eburn A. Joseph, CEO and Founder of the Institute of Antiracism and Black Studies in Dublin, each episode features community representatives and subject-matter experts who discuss how difference and inequality are experienced and negotiated in everyday life (Joseph 2025b). The series frames public dialogue as a vehicle for community education and collective reflection, with the aim of challenging silence, confronting myths about racism, and fostering shared understanding across racialised and non-racialised groups. The series title, ‘Pull up a chair – where real talk meets real change’, serves as an invitation to engage with uncomfortable truths as a catalyst for social transformation (Joseph 2025a).

Within this framework, The DEEP Table functions as a participatory pedagogical space rather than a conventional broadcast or panel event. It enables learners to engage in critical reflection, articulate lived experiences of racism, and collaboratively generate insights that extend beyond formal education settings (Joseph 2025b). These dialogues exemplify anti-racism as an active process involving attentive listening, the identification of exclusion, and the collective envisioning of inclusive possibilities. This approach is consistent with scholarship that contends meaningful inclusion requires the recognition of lived experience as a form of knowledge (Collins 2000), participatory structures that empower marginalised groups to influence decisions (Arnstein 1969; Young 2000), and justice frameworks that integrate both redistribution and recognition (Fraser 2008).

Expanding EDI Beyond Migrant Inclusion: The Traveller Case

A key intervention of the DEEP Table Live Conversations is the argument that Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in Ireland must address internal racial hierarchies, rather than focusing exclusively on migrant integration. In Episode 1, panellists such as Martin Collins (Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre) highlighted the historical and ongoing oppression of the Traveller community, including state-led discrimination, social exclusion, underutilised accommodation budgets, poorer health outcomes, and persistent educational inequalities. These accounts challenge dominant narratives that frame racism as an issue imported by ‘new communities’, instead exposing how structural racism is embedded in long-standing state practices and cultural attitudes (Lentin and McVeigh 2006). Episode 6 further developed this analysis by identifying anti-Traveller racism as one of the most socially accepted forms of racism in Ireland, described as ‘perfected’ on Travellers and subsequently extended to other racialised groups. The normalisation of anti-Traveller jokes, the placement of Traveller sites near waste facilities, and the chronic under-expenditure of Traveller accommodation budgets illustrate whose dignity is structurally valued and whose is not (Pavee Point 2020). These episodes demonstrate that racism in Ireland is not merely interpersonal but is deeply institutional and spatial, shaping access to housing, healthcare, education, and civic belonging.

The Traveller case reveals a significant conceptual and operational blind spot within EDI frameworks. Many institutional EDI policies in Ireland have historically prioritised multiculturalism, migrant integration, and internationalisation agendas (Department of Education Skills 2010), which risk neglecting forms of racialisation that existed prior to inward migration. In contrast, the DEEP Table illustrates that a robust EDI agenda must explicitly address anti-Traveller racism, recognise Traveller ethnicity and rights as central to race equality efforts, and involve Traveller-led organisations in the design of EDI policy, rather than merely consultation.

This approach aligns with broader critiques that EDI often emphasises representation and diversity optics over substantive structural change (Ahmed 2012), and supports research advocating for participatory decision-making by marginalised groups (Young 2000). The Traveller experience thus broadens the scope of EDI beyond a limited focus on newcomers and compels institutions to address internal forms of racialisation, coloniality, and national boundary-making within the Irish context. Furthermore, it highlights the necessity for anti-racism education to confront internal hierarchies of whiteness and belonging, rather than focusing solely on cultural difference, if EDI is to advance structural equality.

Community Education and Anti-Racism: Points of Intersection

Community education in Ireland has aimed to empower marginalised adults through group discussion, reflection, and active learning, inspired by Freire’s idea of ‘reading the word and the world’ (Freire and Macedo 1987), an approach which matches well with anti-racism, as both challenge power, fight oppression, encourage agency, and value lived experience. Community education creates safe spaces for tough conversations, intercultural dialogue, sharing stories, and peer support, helping people feel stronger in their identities. It also goes beyond schools to include parents, workers, and newcomers—groups that shape the wider social environment for children. By involving these groups, community education can break the cycle of bias, help people recognise racism, and build shared responsibility for inclusion. This way, communities become active creators of a fair, anti-racist society, not just recipients of policy.

National Policy Implications and Community Dialogue

The Irish Government's National Action Plan Against Racism 2023-2027 sets out a cross-government strategy to tackle structural and institutional racism (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2023). But the DEEP Table Conversations (2025, Season 1, Episodes 1-6) show that policy alone is not enough unless it is based on real experiences and active community involvement. Panellists stressed that for these national frameworks to succeed, they must be led by communities, have clear, measurable goals, ensure accountability, and be supported by sufficient ongoing resources. Without strong enforcement and genuine participation from those most affected, these policies risk being symbolic rather than making a real difference.

The DEEP conversations also showed that racism in Ireland is complex and deeply rooted in cultural, educational, media, and historical areas. The discussions highlighted how important it is to create open, honest, and sometimes difficult spaces for dialogue, since staying silent can often keep inequalities in place. Because of this, anti-racism needs to go beyond policy statements and actively influence how institutions work, including teacher training, policing, healthcare, media, and political involvement. Putting anti-racist principles into practice across these areas helps tackle not just individual cases but also the bigger systems that keep discrimination going.

In the end, policy and practice need to work together. Anti-racism education—both in communities and schools—is essential for promoting fairness, social unity, democratic participation, and overall well-being. Ireland's future depends on its ability to create inclusive communities that go beyond differences like colour, accent, or background. This means policies must be based on real experiences, have clear ways to measure progress, and be backed by long-term political commitment and investment, along with ongoing community dialogue and action.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both the policy landscape and the real experiences shared in the DEEP Table Conversations show a clear and urgent truth: tackling racism in Ireland needs more than just promises. It requires ongoing, structural, and community-driven action. The National Action Plan Against Racism 2023-2027 offers an important framework, but its success depends on how well it involves those most affected, how strictly it is put into practice, and whether it has long-term political support and enough resources (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2023).

The discussions throughout the DEEP Table series show that racism is not a separate problem but a system-wide issue, present in institutions, practices, and daily life. Because of this, anti-racism needs to move from the edges to the heart of policy and practice, influencing education, public services, media stories, and civic involvement. These conversations also stress the need to create spaces where voices from diverse communities are not just heard but play a key role in shaping responses and solutions.

Anti-racism education, especially in community settings, is a key tool in this effort. It helps people and organisations to think deeply about power, inequality, and exclusion, while also encouraging empathy, awareness, and shared responsibility. This kind of education is vital not just for tackling current inequalities but for creating a more inclusive and democratic future. In the end, the question is not just how Ireland deals with racism now, but what kind of society it wants to be. A future grounded in justice, inclusion, and belonging requires ongoing reflection, conversation, and action. It means making sure policies are real in people's lives and that all communities can take part fully and equally without fear or exclusion.

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Fahmeda Naheed

Fahmeda Naheed is a community development leader, researcher, and intercultural facilitator with over fifteen years of voluntary and civic engagement in Cork and across Ireland. Her work spans community organising, radio broadcasting, intercultural dialogue, anti-racism advocacy, activist, trainer and article writer. She is the founder of the Irish Pakistani Community of Cork, an initiative that promotes community

cohesion, supports underrepresented groups, interfaith dialogue and builds cultural bridges through shared projects and events, including tutoring fusion cooking. As a doctoral researcher, Fahmeda explores anti-racism education through the lens of community education, contributing to national debates on identity, migration, and the shifting landscape of Irish multiculturalism. She believes strongly in the power of community spaces, and often uses community cooking initiatives as a way to connect people, share culture, and spark dialogue. Recognised locally and nationally for her civic impact, Fahmeda embodies courage, compassion, and collective responsibility—amplifying marginalised voices and fostering solidarity across communities.

Section III

EDI in Global and Comparative Perspectives

10. Beyond the Band-Aid: Why EDI Policies Fail Forced Migrants

Guillaume Negri

This paper critically examines the effectiveness of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) policies, and focuses on the structural barriers faced by forced migrants in Ireland and France, highlighting how current approaches often fail to move beyond superficial ‘band-aid’ solutions. Incorporating the perspective of forced migration is essential for anyone working on EDI policies - especially within higher education - as it expands the conversation to include complex systemic issues such as the non-recognition of international qualifications and neocolonial perceptions that view migrants as mere economic commodities rather than people with valid professional and educational aspirations.

EDI policies are currently under the spotlight amid the rise of far-right rhetoric across the world, including attacks from Donald Trump and his administration. EDI policies have regularly been accused of constituting ‘positive discrimination’, benefiting certain groups at the expense of others regarding access to jobs or progress in companies. The sudden calls for defunding and abolishing such policies have opened the way for further targeting of, and discrimination against, minority groups. These controversies serve to obscure a more critical perspective—from scholars, who question the fundamental efficacy of EDI policies.

Such policies are formally designed to prevent discrimination and promote equality for all, including ethnic minorities and migrants. Yet their scope remains critically limited when the structural non-recognition of qualifications and professional experiences continues to deny migrants equal standing in the labour market. Do EDI policies actually deliver on their promise when forced migrants cannot access the jobs they are qualified for, precisely because their past diplomas and experiences are not recognised as equivalent to those of ‘native’ workers?

As part of my PhD thesis, I have conducted a comparative qualitative study between France (more specifically the city of Rennes) and Ireland (Cork city). Through a focus on young forced migrants’ transition into adulthood, I looked at the educational, professional, familial, and residential trajectories of young forced migrants. These individuals consisted primarily of asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants. Looking at their past and current trajectories, and the evolution of their aspirations before their migration and once in France or Ireland, what struck me was the major biographical turning point that involuntarily leaving their home countries represented.

Indeed, young forced migrants mainly left their home countries because of sudden war, political or economic crises. This means that although they had started to build educational, professional, or residential trajectories of their own, following specific aspirations for how they wished to conduct their lives, they had to give up on those to migrate elsewhere (Boccagni 2017; Borselli and Van Meijl 2021). The migratory experience itself is traumatic. Migrants go through long and difficult journeys, often marked by exploitation, physical, psychological, and sexual violences. Moreover, once they arrive in their new countries of residence, they have to reconstruct their lives and their identities in difficult contexts.

Young forced migrants face barriers to entry in education and labour that thwart their efforts at reconstruction. Indeed, both Ireland and France prevent asylum seekers from entering the

formal labour market during the first six months of their asylum request (Ferré 2023; McCormack-George 2019). After this delay, asylum seekers can apply for a work permit—a process that can take several months. While both countries have formally harmonised their rules in line with European directives—notably the six-month waiting period before asylum seekers can apply for a work permit—the practical outcomes diverge significantly. In Ireland, the lengthy processing of asylum applications (often several years) paradoxically creates more *de facto* time during which asylum seekers can be employed; in France, faster processing means that most migrants I encountered remained unable to access formal employment, as employers are reluctant to hire individuals whose right to remain is uncertain and potentially short-lived. This leads to precarious situations in both cases: when they cannot access formal work, they are pushed into informal—or illegal—working situations. When allowed to work legally, they are usually forced into dirty, dangerous, and demeaning positions: the infamous 3Ds usually filled by migrant workers (Lenko *et al.* 2024).

This situation can be explained by two main factors. Firstly, it is difficult for forced migrants to have their previous work and education experiences recognised in France or Ireland. The barriers to recognition of qualifications are not unique to forced migrants—non-forced migrants also frequently find their diplomas or professional experiences undervalued. However, forced migrants face these barriers in a compounded way. Unlike those who migrated voluntarily through student or work visas—whose credentials were, by definition, recognised prior to their arrival by a university or employer in the receiving country—forced migrants arrive without any prior institutional endorsement of their qualifications. This structural asymmetry is further aggravated by administrative obstacles, precarious legal status, and often insufficient linguistic resources (Darmody *et al.* 2014; Bolzman 2025).

Secondly, forced migrants—whether they are still in the asylum process or they are recognised as refugees—usually need to enter the labour market as fast as possible. Most of the individuals encountered in my research did not want to wait before earning a wage, however low it might be. Their reasons were many: some needed additional resources for basic needs, some had debts to smugglers, others supported family members in their home countries. Forced migrants would therefore look to be hired into jobs that required no prior training, or short training: security, healthcare assistant, building, gig economy delivery, etc. In general, undertaking longer training or going back to higher education was not an option for a majority of the young migrants I met: despite having the skills, or having had the aspiration for such a trajectory in the past, they felt their language skills were insufficient, or that longer training meant staying in a precarious situation for too long.

Policy-makers, and stakeholders of the educational and professional sectors are aware of such difficulties regarding first-generation ethnic minorities. Some efforts have been made in Ireland and in France, but at different scales and with insufficient results. In Ireland, employers can put in place programmes targeted specifically at ethnic minorities or refugees, such as Ernst & Young’s Refugee Access Programme (Ernest and Young 2025), or Deloitte’s Development Internship Programme (Deloitte 2024). The Irish government supports some initiatives and programmes, while NGOs also support migrants to access the labour market, and advocate towards employers for the hiring of refugees and migrants. On the other hand, France’s equality policies hinder the possibility to put in place EDI programmes and policies that go beyond ensuring equal access for all to the labour market. These divergent approaches reflect deeply rooted political philosophies: Ireland’s multicultural framework allows for targeted community support, whereas France’s universalist republicanism prioritises policies that apply equally to all individuals, regardless of origin. As such, France’s universalist republican framework prevents the State from

implementing targeted EDI programmes for specific communities. Under this model, all individuals are formally equal before the law, regardless of origin—which means that direct State support specifically directed at refugees or migrants in general is legally and politically untenable. In practice, this leaves a vacuum filled by private employers and NGOs. In Rennes, for instance, the NGO Kodiko works to connect companies with refugees seeking professional integration (Kodiko n.d.), acting as a broker that the State itself cannot be. While this arrangement reflects civil society’s responsiveness, it also reveals the limits of a framework that ensures uniform access on paper while obscuring the structural disadvantages that forced migrants actually face.

The gap between EDI policies and their practical implementation is equally visible in the field of higher education. In Ireland, several universities and Higher Education Institutes have established Sanctuary Scholarships, making fee waivers and bursaries available to refugees and asylum seekers. While this represents a meaningful initiative, its reach remains limited: many of the migrants I met in Cork had never heard of this support, despite having been in the country for several years and expressing a genuine interest in continuing their education. The variation between institutions is also notable—University College Cork offers both a fee waiver and a bursary, whereas Munster Technical University provides only the former. In France, like with labour market policies, Universities do not have specific EDI policies that would consist of a ‘positive discrimination’ towards migrants. Refugees and asylum seekers can access a specific diploma, ‘*Diplôme Universitaire Passerelle*’, aimed at teaching French and building a professional and educational project (Comité de la Démarche Accessible 2024). Other than that, unless they are undocumented, migrants can avail of the same rights and supports as French nationals—a study grant, available until the age of 28.

Overall, current policies or efforts aimed at EDI for ethnic minorities are clearly inefficient when it comes to forced migrants. Their success in allowing these individuals reach their aspirations is quite marginal. With only two exceptions, most of the 50 migrants I met in Cork and Rennes were not in a job or a training that matched what they wanted to do. In Ireland, positive discrimination-type EDI policies cannot reach this goal because the resources allocated to them are too limited. In France, equal chances-type EDI policies are also inefficient because they aim at integrating migrants on the labour market as fast as possible. While both cases are different, and rooted in different visions of society and the labour market, they are not able to counteract the larger, structural inequalities and disadvantages forced migrants face.

A main issue here is around the perception of the place of migrants in our modern, western, neoliberal societies. The welcoming of migrants is perceived as a favour made to them, which they need to repay by an accelerated entry on the labour market. In neoliberal societies, migrants –especially forced migrants– are perceived as commodities: their labour is exploited for its value (Rosewarne 2010), but the value itself of their identities is tied to this labour. They become ‘objects of utility and depositories of value’ (Vogt 2013, p. 765). Furthermore, neocolonialism in our western societies heightens this process. Indeed, the push for migrants’ entry on the labour market takes for granted that migrants are not adapted to the market and the general socioeconomic system: policymakers and decisionmakers apply policies targeted at migrants so they can adapt to the system and enter it. This is put forward as a seemingly desirable goal, ‘integration’. However, this goal hides its neocolonial roots of a society consisting of *us*, in which *they* (migrants) are only allowed in as objects of exploitation (Schinkel 2018). Given France’s experience of colonisation, this might seem only as a form of path-dependency (Gastaut 1994), but it might be more difficult to consider the same grasp of neocolonialism in Ireland. While literature tends to show Ireland

as a target of a neocolonial agenda from Great Britain, migration and asylum policies in Ireland point towards the incorporation of neocolonial practices observed in white western states (Fernando 2016).

I argue that the fundamental issue lies not with EDI policies as such, but with the broader integrationist paradigm that frames all policies towards migrants. This paradigm presupposes a normative ‘us’ into which migrants must be absorbed, and evaluates them solely on their capacity to contribute economically to the receiving society. The injunction to enter the labour market as quickly as possible—however precarious the conditions—is the most visible expression of this logic. Moreover, this analysis suggests that current initiatives, such as Sanctuary Scholarships, often function as well-intentioned ‘band-aids’ rather than structural solutions. Institutions could learn to lead the way in adapting the system itself to recognise the diverse knowledge, skills, and international qualifications that migrants already possess. Higher education should challenge the neoliberal and neocolonial perception that views migrants primarily as commodities whose value is tied solely to their immediate labour market utility. Overall, as long as integration remains the central normative horizon—the measure by which migrants are evaluated and supported—any policy instrument, including EDI, will function only as a band-aid: patching over individual trajectories while leaving untouched the structural conditions that produce disadvantage in the first place. What is needed is a shift in the migratory regime’s own logic, one that moves from asking how migrants can be made to fit existing educational and labour market structures, to asking how these structures must themselves change to recognise the knowledge, qualifications, and aspirations that migrants already bring with them.

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Guillaume Negri

Guillaume Negri is a 3rd year PhD student in sociology, at the Université Rennes 2, in France. His research focuses on the transitions into adulthood for young forced migrants, examining both the public policy framing this population and the consequences these actions have on individual trajectories. His work is situated within an international academic path, incorporating a comparison between France and Ireland.

11. The Limits of the Western EDI Model - African Migrant Exclusions in Contemporary India

Pooja Priya

Introduction

In much of the Western world, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) have become a standard framework for addressing structural inequalities, intervening to correct systemic imbalances based on race, gender, sexuality, and other identities through targeted policies and accountability mechanisms (Dobbin and Kalev 2018). However, applying the EDI lens to India shifts the conversation significantly.

In India, while the term EDI is not commonly used, its principles are embedded within laws such as Articles 14-18 of the Constitution, which ensure equality and non-discrimination, and the POSH Act, 2013, which provides safe workplaces for women (Government of India 1950; Government of India 1979). India has concentrated on gender diversity and LGBTQ+ inclusion, reflecting Western models. Yet these efforts overlook intersectional factors such as caste, religion, ethnicity, and regional backgrounds. Ethnic minorities and internal migrants from Northeast India, for instance, face discrimination and are derogatorily referred to as 'Chinkies' (McDuie-Ra 2012, p.175).

The caste system, though constitutionally abolished, continues to influence socio-economic dynamics, with upper castes benefiting from EDI principles while Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes remain marginalised.

However, international migrants, and in particular African migrants, in India reveal an even more significant oversight. Their immigration status is rendered chronically precarious by a system that charges exorbitant visa renewal fees while failing to process them, pushing migrants into a state of 'illegality' and deportation camps (Gill 2022, p.1962). In the labour market, African migrants are excluded from formal employment, forced into informal economies where they face racial profiling, police surveillance, and denial of housing and basic services (Gill 2024). This reflects the limitations of India's EDI initiatives, which claim racial inclusion in theory but leave African migrants at the cultural, social, and economic margins. This gap between theoretical promise and lived reality underscores the need to better understand how EDI principles are applied in practice.

African Migration to India

In contemporary India, African migrants began arriving in significant numbers from the 1990s onwards, drawn by the promise of educational opportunities, particularly in the fields of medicine, engineering, and business management, as well as by the perception of India as an affordable destination for higher education compared to Western countries. Many entered on student visas, enrolling in universities and colleges across Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Pune. Over time, a smaller number arrived as professionals, entrepreneurs, and asylum seekers fleeing conflict and instability in their home countries, particularly from nations such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Today, African migrants constitute a growing yet highly vulnerable population

in Indian cities, with Nigerians and Congolese forming two of the largest African communities in Delhi (Gill 2022).

The Promise and Limitations of Inclusion: Immigration Policies in Practice

In theory, India's constitutional and legal frameworks should extend protection to all persons within its territory, including international migrants (Constitution of India 1950, Arts. 14-21). Yet Nigerian and Congolese migrants are systematically kept outside the social protection of Indian bureaucracy and immigration systems (Gill 2022). Most arrive on student visas, entering the host country with the expectation that Indian immigration policies will be inclusive. However, their immigration status shifts from legal to pathological illegal migrants not due to inability to produce documentation, but due to an immigration system that economically exploits them, charging USD 500 for visa renewals that frequently go unprocessed (Gill 2022). Once papers lapse, migrants are pushed into deportation camps.

This reveals a paradox: while the government rhetorically invokes EDI principles, its operational logic is shaped by colourism and racial bias. Other migrants from Afghanistan and Bangladesh secure legal protection to a greater extent than African migrants, who are pushed to the margins due to race and class positionalities (McDuie-Ra 2012). The Indian state claims the law is blind to race and nationality, yet this has limitations in practice. For instance, the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 (FCRA) requires non-citizens to obtain a license to run churches affiliated with foreign congregations, impacting Nigerian and Congolese migrants who require spatial rights to operate their African churches (Lefebvre 1991; Gill 2024). The lack of legal protections leads to illegality, challenges in securing rental accommodation, and increased surveillance, reproducing these migrants' state of illegality (Gill 2024). Thus, these fractures

in their lived experiences raise the question: is the Indian state and its policies regarding social inclusion truly inclusive?

Unseen Race: The Structural Roots of Exclusion

The exclusion of African migrants from EDI principles is structural. The racially charged nature of immigration policies has deep roots in the Hindu caste system, which continues to inform social hierarchies and colourism, privileging lighter skin (Kumar 2009; Jha and Adelman 2009). The Indian administrative structure is not neutral but a product of a social order organised around purity, pollution, and hierarchy (Kumar 2009). When African migrants, racialised through dark skin seek state protection, they encounter a system whose understanding of disadvantage is reserved for internally defined caste groups. The state's EDI framework is not designed to see them.

Unlike internal migrants, African migrants fall entirely outside the state's inclusion architecture (McDuie-Ra 2012). They are not beneficiaries of affirmative action, not covered by labour protections, and not considered in workplace diversity initiatives, which has focused on gender and LGBTQ+ inclusion. The categories through which EDI operates, caste, class, gender, sexuality, assume Indian citizenship. African migrants, as non-citizens, are rendered invisible before they can even be considered (Gill 2022).

Placemaking and Solidarity: Migrant Strategies of Inclusion and Belonging

As a result of these unjust policies, African migrant communities are forced to take control of their social realities and adopt strategies to create belonging (Massey 2005). Within the gap between the state's rhetoric of inclusion and its exclusionary practice, migrants from Nigeria and the DRC develop their own belonging, turning inward to build infrastructures of

placemaking. These are necessary adaptations to a state apparatus that renders Black bodies invisible (Gill 2024).

Based on my doctoral fieldwork with Nigerian and Congolese migrants in Delhi, I learned that their reactions to racialised inclusion policies take the form of community-based strategies. These include creating migrant agencies that provide economic opportunities and developing migrant businesses in the import-export of African food and Indian human hair. These strategies extend to creating religious spaces such as Pentecostal churches, which become sanctuaries for worship and linguistic, cultural, and social focal points where migrants find belonging through English, French, Pidgin English, and Lingala (Gill 2024). These strategies allow migrants to develop a collective identity as Nigerians, Congolese, or more generally as Africans, establishing a sense of inclusion within a complex migrant community divided by gender, class, and other categories.

These placemaking practices respond directly to a state whose EDI framework is theoretically claimed but practically withheld. Dense networks of solidarity function as an alternative governance system, providing emotional, economic, and practical security that the government fails to deliver. Research has shown that social cohesion and trust within a community are critical determinants of well-being where formal support is absent (Sharan et al. 2021).

Conclusion

Researching the experience of African migrants in Delhi begins to lay bare the limitations of an inclusion model that is subservient to an internal caste logic. The Indian state's theoretical incorporation of EDI principles is revealed to be a hollow promise for those who fall outside the caste-based imagination of disadvantage. The resulting institutional colourism of the bureaucracy creates a reality where belonging is not a right granted by the state, but a resource that must be built

from below. The vibrant communities forged by Nigerian and Congolese migrants stand as a powerful testament to human resilience, but they also serve as a stark indictment of a system that officially preaches equality while practising a form of exclusion rooted in its own ancient hierarchies.

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Pooja Priya

Pooja Priya is a PhD researcher in Sociology at University College Cork, Ireland. Her research interest lies in exploring South-South migration and placemaking, focusing on African migrants in India. Her doctoral dissertation examines Nigerian and Congolese students in Delhi, analysing how intersecting identities shape their experiences of placemaking and how they undertake subjective strategies to make home. Born in India, she earned her Bachelor's and Master's in Sociology from the University of Delhi. She worked closely as a research assistant at the Centre for Africa, Latin America and the UN at the MP-IDSA, a think-tank affiliated with the Ministry of External Affairs in India. She assisted research associates in writing policy papers focused on India-Ethiopia and India-Senegal lines of credit that had been exchanged between these countries. She has worked as a lecturing staff in Indian universities in the modules of sociology of India, sociological theories and social stratification with a student audience comprising African students. In Ireland, she collaborates regularly with two migrant advocacy groups, *Recruit Refugees Ireland* and the *Congolese Association of Ireland*, supporting refugee and migrant communities. Broadly, her interdisciplinary background spanning academia, policy, and activism informs her commitment to decolonising migration studies, amplifying African marginalised voices.