

HEA National Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Conference 2024

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Introduction

The HEA's Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality was established in 2019 to ensure sustainable acceleration towards gender equality in Irish HEIs. In 2020, this was transformed into the Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion to include all aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). The Centre focuses on a number of vital initiatives to further and protect equality, diversity and inclusion in the Irish Higher Education sector and provides centralised support for HEIs to help to embed an institutional culture of equality, diversity and inclusion. The Centre is pivotal in enabling the sharing of good practice, joint initiatives and co-operation between HEIs, and in developing a better understanding of the impact of interventions taken and determining the areas of future focus.

To support the sharing of national and international good practice, the HEA Centre of Excellence for EDI hosted the first HEA National Equality, Diversity and Inclusion conference on the 9th and 10th of April 2024 in the Radisson Blu Royal Hotel in Dublin.

Approximately 150 colleagues involved in equality, diversity and inclusion with colleagues in HEIs and agencies nationwide were in attendance to hear from national and international experts across the two days.

While there is still much work to be done to advance equality, diversity and inclusion in Irish higher education institutions, the conference was an opportunity to take stock of progress to date and to reflect on the challenges ahead. The conference also showcased some of the recently completed projects funded by the HEA under the Gender Equality Enhancement Fund. These projects encouraged innovative approaches and cross-sectoral collaboration to address gender inequality across HEIs, to achieve national transformation. The advancements achieved through these projects also point to opportunities for intersectional approaches to equality work, which will be one of the priority areas under the expanded Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Enhancement Fund in 2024.

This report aims to capture some of the key points of discussion and emerging themes from the conference. The HEA Centre of Excellence for EDI are very grateful to HEI colleagues for moderating the discussions during each session, and to the staff and students in the audience for their thought-provoking questions.

Conference Report

Sheena Duffy, Head of International, Communications and EDI at the HEA, opened the conference, noting the breadth of equality work that had taken place in higher education institutions prior to the HEA's dedicated policy focus in this area, which began with the first Report of the Expert Group: Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions in 2016.

Day 1

Advancing Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions

The first session focused on advancing gender equality in Higher Education Institutions and included speakers Professor Anne Scott (*HEA Board Member*), Dr Marcela Linková (*Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences*), and Dr Katriona O'Sullivan (*Maynooth University*).



Dr. Marcela Linková speaks during the Advancing Gender Equality session

Professor Anne Scott opened the first session with a focus on the work achieved towards gender equality by the sector to date and noted the importance of the recommendations set out in the key reports on gender equality in the higher education sector. These included the first and second HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish HEIs, the Gender Action Plan 2018 – 2020 and the ESVH Framework. Professor Scott also highlighted some of the impacts of gender inequality on

staff and institutions across the sector and identified future gender equality goals toward which the sector can advance. Professor Scott noted the importance of ensuring intersectional approaches to gender equality are centralised while also recognising that precarity acts as a potential barrier to career progression.

Dr Marcela Linková focused on the gap between policy and practice. Dr Linková highlighted significant advances and developments in gender equality policy at EU level which have been informed by the European Research Area (ERA) Policy Agenda and the inclusion of gender equality plans (GEPs) as a Horizon Europe eligibility criterion. The work of the GENDERACTIONplus project, highlights the necessity of taking an intersectional approach in gender equality work. Dr Linková noted that it is currently difficult to assess the long-term impact of GEPs and ensure their sustainability due to inconsistent monitoring and evaluation. Dr Linková stressed the importance of giving voice and ear to marginalised groups in policy development as well as the importance of collective and participatory action in reinforcing the importance of GEPs in the forthcoming policy cycle. Dr Linková ended by underlining the need for resources and continued policy coordination for gender equality work.



(L-R) Dr Katriona O'Sullivan and Professor Anne Scott during the Advancing Gender Equality panel discussion

Dr Katriona O'Sullivan discussed the importance of addressing social class and other equality dimensions in inclusive gender equality work. Discussing the leaky pipeline in women's career paths, it was noted that the sector needs to understand why these leaks are happening and to begin tackling it at all levels rather than only focusing on the professor level. The PROMOTE programme is examining where women are "leaking" out of the HE system by focusing on the individual challenges faced by women in academia and aims to empower women to apply for promotion. Dr

O'Sullivan highlighted the impact of social class and the intersectional challenges that affect women in academia. In acknowledging the work that has been done to date, Dr O'Sullivan underlined that further progress is needed for gender equality work to be truly inclusive.

The speakers joined a panel discussion moderated by Dr Jennie Rothwell, Senior Manager of the HEA Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

Some key takeaways from the discussion were:

- Strong progress has been made by Irish higher education institutions and we are now in a situation where our colleagues in Europe are asking us how this progress was achieved and how they can learn from us. We know we have not solved everything and there is still a lot of work to do, but we can reflect on what has worked well including the clear recommendations made by the HEA Reviews of Gender Equality in 2016 and 2022.
- The HEA's Second Review of Gender Equality was very clear in its recommendation that the sector must look at gender equality from an intersectional perspective, and that initiatives should aim to create a more equitable environment for all, not just senior academics. As issues relating to inequality rarely occur in isolation, we need to consider how experiences of gender inequality intersect with other equality areas. HEIs must ensure that a broad range of perspectives and experiences are considered in gender equality work.
- We need to sustain the momentum achieved and build a culture of inclusive gender equality for everyone in higher education.

Advancing an Intersectional Approach to EDI in Higher Education Institutions

The second session focused on advancing an intersectional approach to EDI in higher education institutions and included speakers Professor Jörg Müller (*Universitat Oberta de Catalunya*) and Cliona Doherty (*National Disability Authority*).

Professor Jörg Müller opened by focusing on data collection and analysis from an intersectional perspective and highlighted how intersectional factors can impact a person's comfort level in public, institutional, private and home spaces depending on race, gender, sexual orientation, age or disability. It was noted that taking lived experience of intersectional factors into account is important in constructing a data collection policy and identifying the purpose and use of data collection.

Professor Müller finished by recommending that intersectionality should be a critical lens in understanding oppression and power and that intersectional data collection should have a purpose and be properly resourced to account for complex nature of intersectionality.



Professor Jörg Müller sitting next to Dr Allison Kenneally as she speaks during the Advancing an Intersectional Approach to EDI session

Cliona Doherty highlighted the importance of intersectionality through her presentation on the experiences of disabled students relating to sexual harassment and sexual violence in Irish higher education institutions. Findings were presented from a secondary analysis of national surveys carried out by the HEA in 2021. Specifically, Cliona highlighted that 1 in 5 of the students that responded to the surveys said they had a disability. Of these students, 10% had experienced sexual violence, while 15% had experienced sexual harassment. Cliona discussed the need to consider disability in any ESVH campaigns and to incorporate universal design in supports and services. Cliona ended by emphasising that disability needs to be included in future data collection to ensure that the experiences of disabled students can be analysed.



Cliona Doherty speaks during the Advancing an Intersectional Approach to EDI session

The speakers were joined by Dr Marcela Linková (*Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences*) and Dr Allison Kenneally (*Southeast Technological University*) for a panel discussion moderated by Dr Carol Wrenn (*Technological University of the Shannon*) that addressed how to go from talking about intersectionality as a concept to centralising this approach in EDI work.

Some key takeaways were:

- While we now have national demographic data on the gender of staff in Irish HEIs, we do not have published-datasets on other equality areas. However, a lack of data should not be a barrier to progress where issues are known.
- The student population is generally more diverse than the staff population and students can use their experience to push for action.
- GDPR is frequently cited as a challenge to data collection, so it is critical to underline that the purpose for collecting data is legitimate and clearly stated.
- Privilege and power can be barriers but it is clear that gender equality and intersectionality work needs be properly resourced and properly integrated into the interests of those in power to have an impact on change.
- Clarity of concepts can be an issue, especially at wider EU level. Without a common understanding of intersectionality, it can be difficult to progress. Solving EDI challenges is not the responsibility of those most affected by inequality. How can we ensure and reinforce the multi-level approach that is emerging from Irish institutions?

Advancing Race Equality in Higher Education Institutions

The third session focused on advancing race equality in Higher Education Institutions and included speakers Suzana Hardy (*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*), Professor Kalpana Shankar (*University College Dublin*) and Dr Philip Owende (*Technological University Dublin*).



(L-R) Suzana Hardy and Dr Philip Owende speaking during the Advancing Race Equality panel

Suzana Hardy discussed the data collected by the OECD on discrimination and how Ireland compares with Europe, noting that Ireland has scored highly across all measures of acceptance, and higher than in other EU countries. However, it was noted that in terms of self-reported discrimination, racial discrimination is the most frequently cited discrimination in Ireland and is higher than the EU average. The survey showed that the acceptance of Roma and Traveller and people is lower than that of other minority groups such as ethnic and skin colour minorities, persons with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ communities. Ms Hardy highlighted the challenges in efforts to fight discrimination around collection and use of equality data, including the potential for negative stereotypes to be perpetuated. In the absence of equality data, discrimination surveys may be a useful tool to gain information on respondents' identities, experiences and well-being. Suzana noted that the survey data shows that Ireland is relatively supportive of actions to fight discrimination, especially in relation to racial discrimination and in a good position compared to many other European countries in terms of official data collection and the development of anti-racism plans.



Professor Kalpana Shankar speaks during the Advancing Race Equality session

Professor Kalpana Shankar spoke about continued challenges facing staff in Irish higher education institutions and the race equality work carried out since the launch of the implementation plan and of the Anti-Racism Principles. Professor Shankar highlighted sectoral issues such as precarious contracts, systemic biases in recruitment and promotion, racist, sexist, ableist representations, lack of minoritised leadership, box-ticking exercises vs. commitment to real change, a lack of intersectionality in policy and practice, and insufficient supports for minoritised staff. She underlined the sector level invisibility of racialised staff across a number of areas, including in senior higher education leadership. Professor Shankar closed by noting that the sector must scrutinise policies and practices in every area of higher education including student recruitment, hiring, promotion, procurement, accessibility, dignity and respect.

Dr Philip Owende discussed findings on race equality by design, incorporating learnings from quality assurance framework and design and implementation and highlighted the importance of operating from the same understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion. Dr Owende highlighted how EDI strengthens the quality of HE in promoting a sense of belonging, better innovation through diverse perspectives, fostering a cohesive and tolerant society and enabling compliance with necessary statutory and regulatory requirements. He noted that if you ingrain what you want to do in strategies, processes and procedures that gives you a baseline ensuring that HEIs consistently must enhance what they have done before. Dr Owende finished by providing guidance for HEIs including establishing clear policies, the promotion of diversity, fostering an inclusive workplace culture and measuring the progress of inclusive policies.



(L-R) Race Equality panel members Thomas McCann, Suzana Hardy, Helen Hahner , Dr Philip Owende, Professor Kalpana Shankar, and John Benedict Ocampo Divinagracia

The speakers were joined by Thomas McCann (*Traveller Counselling Service*) and John Benedict Ocampo Divinagracia (*Union of Students in Ireland*) for a panel discussion moderated by Dr Helen Maher (*University of Galway*).

Some key takeaways from the discussion were:

- Power, privilege, resistance to change and identity ideology all factor into any resistance against progressing positive actions to address racism.
- Institutions are currently required to meet certain equality actions and if they adhered to these requirements properly many issues would be resolved e.g. recruitment.
- The increase in racist mobilisation against ethnic minority communities in Ireland, particularly against refugees, asylum seekers and migrants from different backgrounds shows Ireland is not immune from hate speech rhetoric. The Traveller community has experienced this for decades. This demonstrates the importance of accelerating anti-racism work.
- HEIs need to provide stronger supports for minoritised students.

Day 2

Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions

The first session of Day 2 focused on Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions and opened with a presentation from Professor Fredrik Bondestam (*Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research, University of Gothenburg*).

Professor Bondestam shared key findings of the UniSAFE survey, which found that nearly 2 in 3 of the 42,000 respondents across Europe had experienced some form of gender-based violence since starting at their institution, and about 1 in 3 had experienced sexual harassment. Professor Bondestam highlighted the consequences of gender-based violence (GBV) on individuals and on higher education, ranging from stress, anxiety, depression and even suicide, and encompassing negative impacts on performance and quality of education and research. He noted that greater understanding of the consequences of GBV will serve as a motivating factor to address this issue in HEIs.

Professor Bondestam discussed EU developments including the need to deliver a strategy to counteract gender-based violence in the European R&I system and address gender-based violence in the European Research Area. He ended by noting the need for a systematic approach that targets academic cultures, and accountability measures including academic sanctions and withdrawing research funding. He also highlighted the importance and effectiveness of prevention initiatives, such as bystander interventions.

Professor Bondestam was joined by Dr Susan Lagdon (*Ulster University*), Gemma MacNally (*Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education Ireland and University of Galway*) and Tony McMahon (*Irish Universities Association*), in a discussion moderated by Dr Siobán O'Brien Green (*Trinity College Dublin*).



(L-R) *ESVH panel members Tony McMahon, Dr Siobán O'Brien Green, Dr Susan Lagdon, Gemma MacNally, Professor Fredrik Bondestam*

Some key takeaways from the discussion were:

- There is a need for greater institutional and perpetrator accountability, the importance of a whole-of-institution approach, and the need for significant investment in culture change and prevention work, such as bystander programmes. Panellists noted that insufficient attention was being paid to perpetrator accountability, and the limitations of current formal reporting processes for holding perpetrators accountable were highlighted.
- It is crucially important to support practitioners, with several panellists noting the risks of vicarious trauma and burn out for staff working in these areas.
- It was emphasised that addressing SVH requires a systematic institutional response and the engagement of several stakeholders from across the institution. The importance of collaboration, self-care and support networks for practitioners.

Taking Stock and Looking Ahead

The final session of the conference was a lively panel discussion with Professor Karen McCloskey (*Queen's University Belfast*), Professor Lorraine Leeson (*Trinity College Dublin*), Professor Fredrik Bondestam (*Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research*), Colette Murphy (*Union of Students in Ireland*), Dr Ross Woods (*HEA, National Forum for Teaching and Learning*) and Dr Jennie Rothwell (*HEA, Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*), moderated by Claire McGing (*Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dún Laoghaire*).

- Co-creation and collaboration are key in sustaining EDI work, particularly when there is competition for research funding.
- Marginalised people need to be at the centre of equality policies and need to be included in policy work.
- It can take time and the work of many people, who experience inequality themselves, to succeed in implementing gender equality initiatives.
- Resources are key to ensure that work being done is strategic and not solely reactive. Time and space are needed to ensure success.
- Universal design is important to ensure safe and inclusive experiences for all. This can mean implementing physical and cultural structural changes that will be challenged.
- Many students do not follow career paths into jobs in higher education institutions and bring their experiences and values to other workplaces and sectors. As such the impact of EDI in higher education will be felt more widely than in the higher education sector.
- There is a continued need to have a person who sits at the top table whose sole responsibility is EDI.



(L-R) Taking stock session panellists Dr Jennie Rothwell, Colette Murphy, Dr Ross Woods, Professor Karen McCloskey, Professor Lorraine Leeson, Professor Fredrik Bondestam

Learnings and Feedback

The conference highlighted that while much progress has been made in the higher education sector, there are many challenges remaining to be addressed.

A feedback questionnaire was shared with the conference attendees. A total of 36 responses were received.

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 the extent that the conference brought a positive contribution to their knowledge and understanding of EDI in their current role. Below are the proportion of respondents that indicated 4 (high) or 5 (very high) in relation to the following areas:

In terms of your current role, to what extent did the conference bring a positive contribution to your knowledge and understanding of EDI?

- 83% selected high or very high that the conference enhanced their personal understanding of areas of EDI outside my current expertise and experience.
- 86% selected high or very high in learning from peers and sharing of good practices.
- 86% selected high or very high on having the opportunity to reflect and take stock of current challenges.
- 69% selected high or very high in empowering themselves to inspire others in my organisation.

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 the extent that the specific sessions brought a positive contribution to their knowledge and understanding of EDI. Below are the proportion of respondents that indicated 4 (high) or 5 (very high) in relation to the following areas:

In terms of your current role, to what extent did the specific sessions bring a positive contribution to your knowledge and understanding of EDI?

- 77% selected high or very high regarding the Advancing Gender Equality session.
- 84% selected high or very high in the Advancing Intersectional Approaches to EDI session.
- 77% selected high or very high in the Advancing Race Equality session.
- 88% selected high or very high in the Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment session.
- 88% selected high or very high in the Taking stock and Looking Ahead panel discussion.

Feedback from Attendees

“There is a lot to do, which can be overwhelming, but we have great colleagues to support us”.

“Culture change involves everyone in the organisation.”

“Equality goes so much further than just gender and sexuality.”

“The conference highlighted the importance of collaboration across institutions/organisations, and with as broad a range of stakeholders as possible...and the value of centring the most marginalised to help build inclusive communities.”

“[There is] more work to be done on Intersectionality.”

“We are all working from a very similar agenda and need to network more to gain from others' experiences of what works and what isn't and explore research opportunities as we all need to be grounding our work and insights in research.”