

Cruel Temporalities? Time, ‘snap’, and resistance within university EDI work

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (‘EDI’) remains a contested project within the UK academy, often critiqued for ‘performative’ relationships to social justice and activism. Critical scholarship recognises Ahmed’s ‘diversity workers’ as a source of insight for the inner workings of institutional power; yet these workers’ locations, identities, and values have become more complex within the 2020s EDI context.

This paper draws on a recent qualitative study (n=24) with different EDI workers across UK HEIs to ask how a ‘temporal lens’ might enhance our understandings of contemporary equity work. Using ‘critical diversity studies’ literature, together with Berlant’s concept of ‘Cruel Optimism’ (2011), Ahmed’s ‘feminist snap’ (2017), and Salmon’s (2021) stages of ‘undoing’ I argue that these ‘EDI timescapes’ offer unique insights into both institutional change efforts, and how individuals – from across professional services, academia, and ‘third space’ – experience resistance and persistence through their equity labours.

Full paper

Introduction

This paper draws on a recent qualitative study (n=24) exploring the knowledges, care ethics, and experiences of individuals undertaking different forms of ‘diversity work’ (Ahmed, 2006, 2012, 2018) or ‘equity labour’ (Lerma et al., 2020) within the changing contexts and approaches of the 2020s UK academy in relation to equity and social justice.

I explore how a ‘temporal lens’ might benefit our understandings of contemporary equity work, by applying three critical framings of equity ‘time’ to a qualitative dataset of interviews with EDI workers. I conclude that an attention to temporality offers insights into the relationships between institutional change, and personal experiences of resistance and persistence.

Methods

A literature review was followed by online qualitative interviews (n=24) and focus group(s) during Spring-Summer 2024, with participants currently undertaking some form of “EDI work” with various UK HEIs. These forms included both ‘named’ EDI roles, as well as paid or voluntary equity labour additional to – or embedded within – other roles (e.g. teaching, research, administration). The pool contained a range of racialised and gendered identities, with ages ranging from early-20s to 60s. Interviews were transcribed, and explored through a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Analytical framework

This paper offers a novel analytic approach, bringing a ‘critical diversity studies’ literature of equity work in HE (Ahmed, 2012; Anderson, 2021; Bhopal, 2023; Doharty et al., 2021; Thomas, 2018), together with discussion of university ‘temporalities’ (Bennett & Burke, 2018). Analysis considers the temporal dimensions of three key concepts within feminist and critical race theorists: Berlant’s “cruel optimism” (2011), Ahmed’s “feminist snap” (2017), and Salmon’s autoethnographic stages of “undoing” the ‘non-white EDI worker’ (2021, p. 5).

Early findings and Discussion

Participants across different roles, backgrounds, and institutions shared some commonalities around the benefits and risks of the work (particularly racialised/gendered harms). However, there was wide variation in when, and how, differently positioned actors decided to ‘persist’ or ‘resist’ in their labour. This paper offers an analysis of these experiences through a critical ‘temporal’ lens, using a focus on three areas: ‘cruel optimisms’ of slow work; moments of ‘snap’; and a focus on internal ‘un/doings’ amidst external ‘project times’.

(i) Cruel optimisms and slow work:

Many participants cited “patience/resilience” as useful skills: with senior managers alluding to acceptance of long-term framings (i.e. “diplomacy” over the urgency of “activism”) as being more ‘professional’. Conversely many younger participants – and older but dissatisfied ‘killjoys’ – felt frustrated with repetitions and inefficiencies. While the promise of ‘long-term change’ persists, participants mentioned the urgent risks to EDI workers’ mental health and career progressions. Mindful of university ‘diversity regimes’ (Thomas, 2018) perpetuating the ‘status quo’ and the ‘tempering’ of ‘radicals’ (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) we consider how the recruitment of workers relies on maintaining “cruel optimisms” about what EDI work can and should be.

(ii) ‘snaps’: moments of knowing

Many participants articulated “aha!” moments of clarity: usually specific encounters with EDI/social justice inequities which prompted increased EDI engagement and individual ‘sense-making’. However, not all moments led individuals towards institutional EDI: for some, moments were ‘final straws’ prompting renegotiation – or even departure – from EDI work. These ‘crises of faith’ were present across a range of ages and years of engagement. Collectively these incidents will be considered through the lens of Ahmed’s “feminist snap”, and ask what these mean for institutional care and retention of EDI workers.

(iii) Individual ‘undoings’ within EDI timescapes:

Finally, this paper applies a critical focus to the individual ‘stages’ of un/becoming within EDI: considering the possibilities offered by Salmon (2021)’s “undoing” of the “non-white diversity worker” as a contrast to timescapes (Adam, 1998) of EDI set out within institutional “project times” (Ylijoki, 2015). We argue that a focus on individual ‘progressions’ of different EDI workers deepens understanding to the wide variety of engagement choices – including departure – amongst differently positioned institutional actors. The implications for institutional longevity of EDI labour and the ‘costs’ of different paces of change are explored.

Implications and relevance

This study seeks firstly, to add to the growing critical literature into EDI practices within UK HE, by considering a diverse range of diversity work/ers (‘beyond’ core practitioners) within the mid-2020s context. Secondly, the application of a ‘temporal lens’ prompts questioning not only about the longevity of institutional EDI work, but for the institutional care, recruitment, and retention of workers within different expectations of ‘pace of change’. Thirdly, the paper posits that the ‘equity and activism’ space offers also offers unique insights into understandings of time and temporalities within institutional lives.

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