

# Colleges must do more than pay lip service to diversity

FE leaders are recognising the need to stop talking and start taking action over their staff make-up – especially at higher levels – to ensure it accurately reflects the student population, as well as adopting a more inclusive curriculum, finds **Kate Parker**

**J**eff Greenidge has a question for you: if you are really going to be servicing your communities, do your staff and your board reflect those communities? The new director of diversity for the Association of Colleges and the Education and Training Foundation is not expecting a rush of positive answers. His appointment, in early 2021, has been seen by many as a signal that the sector seems to be admitting that securing equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is a problem for many colleges.

"If you are really going to ensure that each learner gets the qualification and gets the achievement that they deserve, is your curriculum inclusive? If you're really going to be inclusive as an organisation, do staff see representation of black and minority-ethnic people at a higher level?" Greenidge continues. "If not, it's all words. You're making these commitments, you're making these statements, but now it's time for the action."

According to the data, the need for action couldn't be clearer. An exclusive investigation by *Tes* in 2020 found that 84.1 per cent of senior leaders in English colleges are white British and just 8.7 per cent are black, Asian or minority ethnic – despite BAME people making up 13.8 per cent of England's population (see box, opposite).

When it comes to students, data shows that the attainment of most black and ethnically

diverse students drops at the age of 16, despite high participation rates. Participation in apprenticeships is low, too – just 11.8 per cent of apprentices are from Asian, black, biracial and other backgrounds.

But there is good news: across the country, colleges seem determined to do something about FE's diversity problem. The will is certainly there. But what about the action? Where should college leaders start if they want to do more around EDI?

## Objective view

Corrienne Peasgood, chief executive and principal at City College Norwich, says that a great first step is to conduct an audit of your existing provision and practices. Her college invited an external auditor in to provide an objective view of what could be done better.

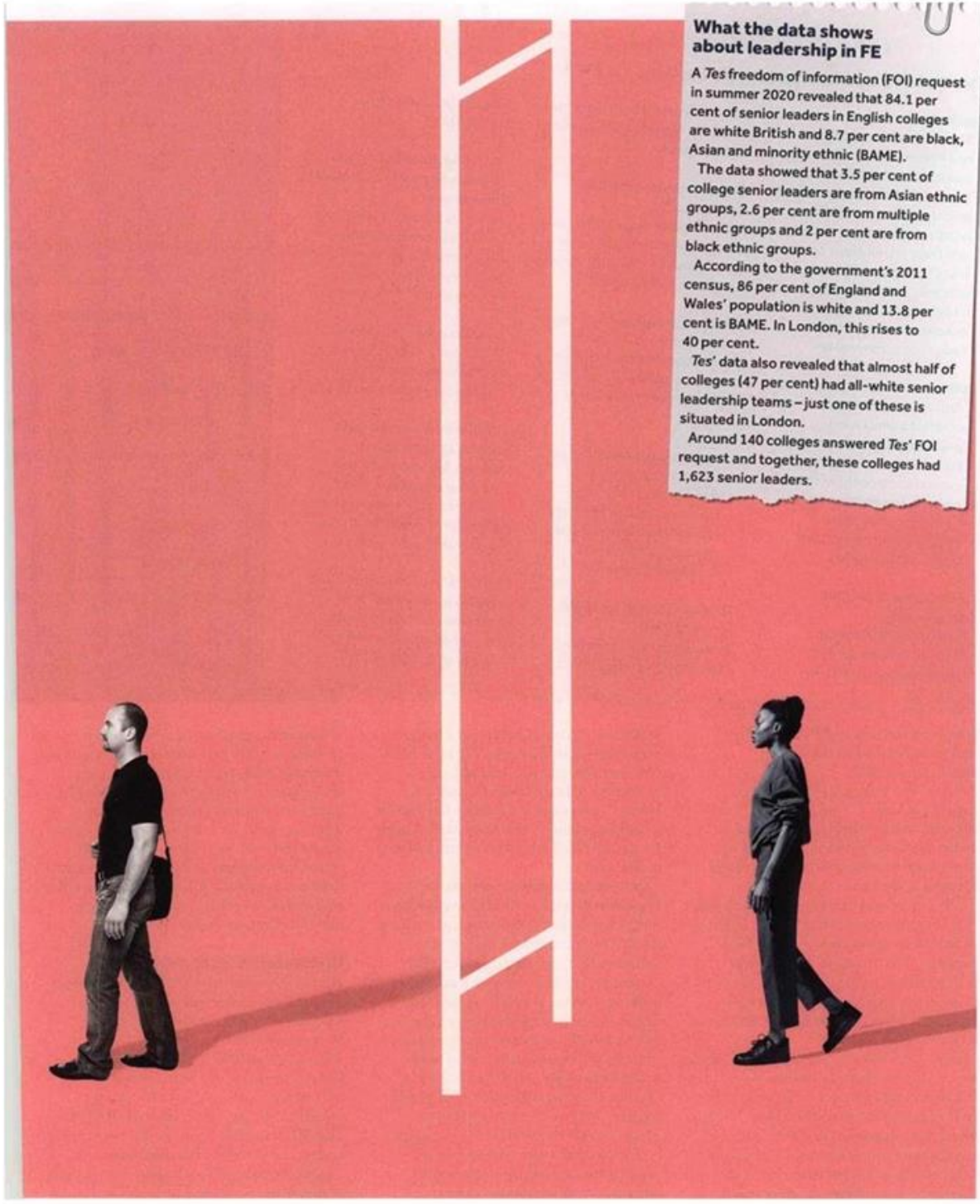
"This process was useful, she says, because the results of the audit were not what she and the rest of her leadership team had been expecting.

"With our audit in 2012, I was quite surprised that most of the feedback was around leadership and management. It wasn't necessarily negative but it wasn't a style that promoted inclusion. So for us, that straightaway became a priority."

In response to the feedback, the college introduced what it calls Ways of Working. The aim is to provide a more welcoming and positive experience for all students and staff by encouraging everyone to be open and informative, respectful and fair, creative and positive, collaborative and inclusive.



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**What the data shows about leadership in FE**

A Tes freedom of information (FOI) request in summer 2020 revealed that 84.1 per cent of senior leaders in English colleges are white British and 8.7 per cent are black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME).

The data showed that 3.5 per cent of college senior leaders are from Asian ethnic groups, 2.6 per cent are from multiple ethnic groups and 2 per cent are from black ethnic groups.

According to the government's 2011 census, 86 per cent of England and Wales' population is white and 13.8 per cent is BAME. In London, this rises to 40 per cent.

Tes' data also revealed that almost half of colleges (47 per cent) had all-white senior leadership teams – just one of these is situated in London.

Around 140 colleges answered Tes' FOI request and together, these colleges had 1,623 senior leaders.



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**The Black FE Leadership Group's toolkit**

**Curriculum**

- There should be a radical revision of further education curricula and qualifications.
- It should reflect contemporary British values, the influence of colonial history on society, and the contributions of black\* people to the arts, sciences and technology – historically and now – and consider the impact of racism on communities.

**Culture**

- Antiracism should be central to continuing professional development.
- Include race equality as a central component across training and development programmes, and for teaching training, include antiracist pedagogy.

**Institutions to publish data annually**

Publish college/training provider data on student performance, workforce,

leadership and governance by ethnicity, including actions to address gaps.

**Organisations to publish data annually**

Publish sector organisation data on workforce, leadership and governance by ethnicity, including actions to address gaps.

**Advisory groups led by experts**

Ensure leaders of advisory boards/committees focusing on race equality possess insight and expertise in antiracism.

**Climate**

- Redress the imbalances in recruitment processes.
- Implement recruitment processes that proactively address imbalances in the ethnicity profile of the workforce at all levels.

**Quality systems spotlight race equality**

Evaluate the effectiveness of pedagogy, provision and

leadership in relation to race equality.

**FE commissioner and statutory bodies incorporate race equality assessments**

Incorporate race equality data and impact assessments in all FE commissioner and other statutory bodies reviews, reports and recommendations.

**Best practice frameworks**

Collaborate to develop and cascade best practice antiracist frameworks across the FE sector.

**Communication, positive optics and messaging**

Ensure fair treatment and positive advocacy of black students, staff and communities through all internal and external communications.

*\*"Black" is used as an inclusive definition for people from ethnically diverse backgrounds who share a lived experience of the effects of racism*

consistent and responsible, exemplary and tenacious, and aspirational and entrepreneurial.

As well as a college ID badge, every member of staff now has a Ways of Working badge, which lists the seven characteristics and highlights one "way of working" that the college is particularly focusing on that week.

"We use them in recruitment; we appraise people against them before appraising them against their job description," Peasgood explains. "We talk about diversity and making better decisions. For us, it's not just about doing your job, it's about doing it within our Ways of Working and within that inclusive culture."

Janet Curtis-Broni, group chief people officer for London South East Colleges group, agrees that improving EDI has to start with taking an honest look at existing practices. She has found that analysing your college's data is an important part of any audit you conduct.

Her college group has interrogated its data set to identify gaps in achievement,

attainment and engagement, in a bid to understand how those gaps can be tackled. One gap, for example, is around the attainment of black boys of Caribbean heritage. In response, the group has put out a "call for action" to encourage staff to apply for external research grants to find solutions in this area.

Last summer, the group also started Enough is Enough, a 10-year internal grant programme which grants staff and students funding from the group's budget for initiatives that seek to tackle inequality.

Currently, there are five such initiatives under way, three of which are staff led. These are: empowering students to be involved in EDI activities; encouraging students with special educational needs and disability (SEND) to be involved in extracurricular activities; and re-engaging students who are at risk of exclusion. There are also two student-led initiatives, both by students with SEND, one of whom wants to produce a play and the other who wants to produce a film.

"The grants programme is really about enabling our staff and students to engage and undertake EDI projects, which will bring about impact," says Curtis-Broni. "There has been a lot of discussion about EDI for a while now, and we can produce lots of policy papers and strategies, but the real impact comes from implementing action. We wanted to have an approach that all our members of staff and all our students can contribute to, using a bottom-up approach."

**Uncomfortable conversations**

Having conversations with staff and students about EDI is also important, Curtis-Broni adds, even if those conversations can be uncomfortable.

She says that after the death of George Floyd, "we had open conversations with all staff [about that], and we've had another one about the use of the acronym 'BAME'".

BAME stands for black, Asian and minority ethnic, and is now widely used. However, critics claim that such acronyms are unhelpful as they force everyone who is non-white





into a single category, glossing over nuances that exist in discussions around race – an issue that not all staff at the college were aware of.

“Those conversations are sometimes challenging and difficult to have but once you get the conversations going, there is good engagement and people will feed into it,” Curtis-Broni says. “Communication is absolutely key; you need to hear what staff have got to say and make sure you’re asking them about changes they want to see.”

Sally Dicketts, chief executive of Activate College Group and president of the Association of Colleges, says that whatever colleges do, it has to be substantial and be committed to, as much of the work that colleges have done around EDI has felt tokenistic.

“We’ve always been really good at having black history week and pride week, but [our] staff felt it was a tick-box exercise,” says Dicketts.

Now, Activate is taking more practical steps, such as working to “decolonise” its curriculum, with the support of social enterprise The Black Curriculum. The group didn’t want students to be taught through the lens of white European colonialism, so has set up a steering group to ensure it avoids the pitfalls of focusing on the negative aspects of black history, such as slavery.

“We’re looking at our history, our culture, and we want to be much more upfront about the great things that BAME and black people have done, so that you’re giving really thoughtful and positive role models.”

“For centuries, people of colour and people from ethnic minorities have done amazing things, but it hasn’t been written in history,” Dicketts says.

Drawing on the support of an external organisation that specialises in addressing issues around EDI has been really helpful, Dicketts adds, and there are plenty of organisations out there that provide resources to assist colleges in taking the kind of positive action that is needed.

For example, the Black FE Leadership Group (BFELG) launched a diversity toolkit in February, which, according to Amarjit Basi, former Cornwall College principal and member of BFELG, is the group’s “first contribution to enabling the sector to become truly antiracist in everything that it sets out to do”.

The toolkit provides a 10-point plan to embed diversity (see box, opposite). Organisations are required to pay an “affiliation” fee to access the toolkit and development training provided by BFELG. As of late February, around a third of colleges had signed up.

But simply signing up to the scheme is not enough, Basi points out. BFELG is keen for colleges to use the toolkit as a jumping off point to really think about structural and cultural changes that they might need to make.

“We’re not looking at commodifying a product – what we’re looking at is commodifying a relationship through which we can help [colleges] to implement the toolkit into a whole organisational change,” Basi says.

“The notion of just using these as a set of questions to generate a self-assessment checklist of action plans feels like box ticking.”

**No quick fixes**

Ultimately, he adds, this view applies to all the work that colleges are doing around EDI. Leaders must recognise that there are no quick fixes here. In order to address the issues that exist in the sector, colleges need to be willing to put in the legwork required for long-term change.

“Covid has a vaccine, racism doesn’t have a vaccine,” Basi says. “And therefore, it does require real, planned commitment over a period of time, which is going to change every corner and every part of the organisation, and every part of the sector. That is a medium- to long-term agenda. It’s not a quick fix, it’s not ticking a box, it’s not something that you will do in three, six, 12 months.”

Curtis-Broni agrees that the days of tokenistic nods towards EDI are long gone. The fact is, she says, colleges need to be doing more and they need to be doing it now.

“We’ve always worked on EDI as part of our public duty under the Equality Act, but the catalyst to take it to the next level was George Floyd and Black Lives Matter,” she says. “As a standard, you need to be doing more than what the legislature is telling you. It’s about action, action, action.”

*Kate Parker is an FE reporter at Tes*