



Episode 1: Embracing EDI and Pursuing Excellence – A Conversation with WorldSkills UK

In this episode, we dive into the heart of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) to explore why these aren't just policy buzzwords, but the lifeblood of a thriving Further Education sector. We examine the positive case for strengthening EDI initiatives and discuss why the FE and skills landscape is uniquely positioned to drive social mobility and life-changing results for learners and their communities.

Joining us for the conversation are Ben Blackledge and Tonicha Roberts. Ben is the Chief Executive of WorldSkills UK and has a wealth of experience in skills and careers policy. Tonicha is a Forensic Training Manager and Skills Champion who was the first person to represent the UK in the Chemical Laboratory Technology context at WorldSkills events.

Episode Guests

Ben Blackledge is the Chief Executive of WorldSkills UK.

A world-class skills network, WorldSkills UK is focussed on raising standards, championing future skills and empowering young people from all backgrounds.

Before taking up the role of Chief Executive, Ben was previously Deputy Chief Executive of WorldSkills UK, where he was responsible for leading on the UK's participation in the international WorldSkills and EuroSkills events.

Ben has previously worked in government policy positions focusing on both skills and careers policy. Ben works extensively across our international network and was recently made Chair of WorldSkills Europe, helping to ensure the UK is at the forefront of global developments in skills training.

Tonicha Roberts, Skills Champion, WorldSkills UK

In 2019, Tonicha became the first person to represent the UK in the Chemical Laboratory Technology skill at WorldSkills UK. Her WorldSkills UK journey started soon after completing a Laboratory Technician apprenticeship. Setbacks at college meant she couldn't follow the traditional university route into forensic science. Although apprenticeships carried a stigma, she was determined to prove herself and ultimately became the first Forensic Scientist in her field without a degree.

As part of Team UK, Tonicha placed fourth in the world, achieving a Medallion of Excellence at international competition, learning to apply her technical knowledge in completely new situations, and building invaluable life skills that have shaped her career. Now, as a Forensic Training Manager in her department,



she leads a complex training programme that supports every new forensic hire, tailoring it to a wide range of learning styles, and is being asked to and exploring expansion, an opportunity that stems from the skills WorldSkills UK helped her to develop.

Tonicha became as Skills Champion, WorldSkills UK past competitors who become advocates for skills excellence, as she knows firsthand how transformative these programmes can be. She says 'WorldSkills UK didn't just change my professional path - it showed me how powerful skills, mentorship and perseverance can be. I'm proud to share that message and help others realise what they are capable of achieving'.

Joe McLoughlin: Hello and welcome to series five of let's Go Further, a podcast from the Skills and Education group that challenges the way we think about skills and education. I'm your host, Joe McLoughlin. In this series we'll be exploring the range of ways that equity, diversity and inclusion in both policy and practice, shapes the sector and helps change lives for the better. Across this series, we'll be joined by key voices from under pressure and in-demand sectors to explore how employers and educators can best work together to deliver life changing results for learners, their families and their communities. From the challenges of turning good policies into practice, to broadening our understanding of what inclusive education looks like, our conversations will provide a platform for and celebration of the myriad opportunities that further education provides. In this episode we're asking what the positive case is for continuing and strengthening policies of equity, diversity and inclusion, and examining why the FE and skills sector is well placed to do this. Joining me is Ben Blacklidge and Tonicha Roberts. Ben is the Chief Executive of WorldSkills UK and has spent a career supporting the development of skills and career policy. Tonicha is a forensic training manager, a skills champion and a former WorldSkills UK Medallion winner. Welcome to you both.

Ben Blacklidge: Hi Joe, nice to be here.

Tonicha Roberts: Hi Joe. thank you for having me.

Joe McLoughlin: So, I'd like to begin kind of broadly and then hopefully as the episode goes on we'll, we'll kind of narrow down into a more educational way. but equity, diversity and inclusion is a label that's regularly in the news and it's bubbling away in the cultural background, but it feels like it's often thrown around without much thought or care for specifics. So to begin with, what do you both think about or what do you both mean when you talk about equity, diversity and inclusion?



Ben Blackledge: For me and for us at WorldSkills UK, it's something that we have had on our agenda ever since I joined. So I've been at WorldSkills UK for about 11 years and it's something that is something we've talked about for a long time and something that our Exec and our board are really engaged in. And I think that's partly because we're a very visible representation of the skills and education sector. We get to be on national tv, we get to go to international competitions, we get to really celebrate what is great about, skills and education in the UK. And so for us as an organisation and for me as a Chief Exec, thinking about how do we make sure that both the I guess perception of EDI within, skills and the reality kind of match up. and so it's something that we are both committed to from a, ah, what's the kind of visual of it and how do we see people from different backgrounds with different experiences at different levels and different skills. But also how do we make sure that the opportunity that is there for young people to really thrive through skills and education, that any barriers that we see, as much as possible can be removed? And not just barriers, but that we are able to, meet people kind of where they are and provide support and resource that helps them to overcome their own circumstances so they can really thrive and move forward. And so it's both a kind of a flash and a substance thing for me. It's about showing what's possible from any background and then also making sure that our programmes are giving young people opportunity, and doing that in a different way depending on their particular circumstances.

Joe McLoughlin: Great. And yourself, Tonicha?

Tonicha Roberts: Yeah, I'm very much in agreement with Ben there. I think for myself, I got to my role today through a very different route than I think most people would take. and having gone through that different sort of pathway, it was quite difficult to navigate at the time. So I think a big part of equity and diversity and inclusion for myself is really looking at environments that are supportive. So all individuals can thrive from different backgrounds and different sort of starting positions, but they can all have the same opportunities. So that's the biggest kind of focus for me when it comes to something like this.

Joe McLoughlin: So just to pick you up there, there's a different phrases you both use, but I think discuss the same sort of thing, which is where, Ben, you use the phrase meeting people where they are. And Tonicha, you use the phrase, helping people thrive from different backgrounds. And so I just want to using those as a starting point, then what does meaningful kind of equitable, inclusive policy look like in the real world in FE and skills? Like how can FE and skills providers help meet people where they are or how can they help people thrive from different backgrounds?



Ben Blacklidge: So, I think from our point of view, and I guess you said in your introduction about, I quite like the under pressure and in demand sector and I think we know that training providers and colleges and anyone who's involved in this sector is in it for the right reasons. Well, majority of it for the reasons in terms of helping to their students, their apprentices and those that they're learners to get the best outcome. but that is done in a kind of, in a quite a difficult environment in terms of resources and making sure you can both get the breadth of offer and also the kind of depth of offer to young people. So, I don't think it's possible to say we're going to do a completely tailored delivery all the time. However, I think there is the ability to not assume, I guess, you know, someone's background or know someone's particular need and to then look at whether there is a way of creating just small amounts of intervention that help people overcome some of their circumstances. So, for example, for us we have done lots of work looking at what are the barriers to entry into particularly our competition work and seeing why is it that we have less representation from women in STEM subjects, why is it that actually we have a smaller proportion of those from ethnic backgrounds. And what we've I guess found is if we can provide just a small amount of financial assistance with a quite a broad definition of how that can be used, we've started to see people be able to kind of overcome those, those barriers themselves. So I don't think it's about doing everything for someone. It's about looking at what can you do as a, as an organisation to meet someone kind of halfway and how can you kind of, kind of put trust in that process that they're able to then kind of use that support to overcome their particular issues. Because if you tried to set up a programme that takes account of every single different approach to this then I think you just do yourselves in knots and the bureaucracy would be unbearable. But if there's an element of kind of giving a breadth in that support, I think it can be really impactful. And we've seen that through our Learner Support Fund, which helps those that are entering into our competitions to look at things like how do they overcome barriers around travel, childcare, kind of looking at covering lost wages, all those kind of things because it's a long term investment in their future. But there are real short term barriers to that. So I think there is a, it's got to be kind of co-created with the people you're trying to, to work with and give opportunity to I think.

Joe McLoughlin: And how does that resonate with you Tonicha, kind of that, that ah, support or that way of working with people. Is that something you've experienced?

Tonicha Roberts: So I got to my position, I'd originally wanted to take just kind of a little bit background. I'd originally wanted to take the traditional route of college, university and then get into forensic science following that. but when I actually went through college, I tried to take on five A levels and it very quickly



spiralled and I realised that unfortunately didn't go to plan and that traditional route was no longer available to me, so I could no longer go to university and get into forensic science that way. I was, however, researching afterwards and, I managed to find the apprenticeship. And that, obviously, being. This was back in 2016, so at the time it was a little bit unheard of. there was a little bit of a stigma around the apprenticeship, but taking that route meant that obviously it gave me another route into forensics. It gave me a foot in the door that I wouldn't have had previously. The issue I found at the time, and this is where I think it's insightful with where I am today now, at the time, because it wasn't really heard of, particularly having a forensic scientist working their way through an apprenticeship. There was limited representation of that in sort of the science roles. Not having any visibility of someone from my background being in that position, it had a huge impact on my confidence and the ambition and things like that. So I think having that representation is really important because it normalises that ambition, especially for young people, and giving them a role model to kind of guide them and look for, look to, is really important for a young person developing their career, particularly when they're looking at something like science and STEM as something that could be accessible to them, but again, not having that foresight of someone who's led the way for it. So for me, that was where it had a huge impact for myself.

Joe McLoughlin: Yeah. And I think it comes back to that phrase you just used of researching your role. Right. So, I suppose in an ideal world you wouldn't need to research your route because somebody would say to you, oh, that's fine, it didn't work out this way. But there's still, you know, option B, option C, option D, which, yeah, that makes. That makes perfect sense.

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Joe McLoughlin: Thinking about that, then, what is it about the FE sector that you think is so well positioned to drive that kind of more positive agenda, that more positive example? like, what does the FE and skills sector do well that say other parts of the education system don't do so well? And what advantages do you think we have that others might learn from.

Ben Blacklidge: So, just coming from a particular perspective with WorldSkills UK, we have for a long-time kind of fought this, kind of reputation about the work that we're doing being just the, just kind of elite elitist. And so, for some people



there was a sense of does, EDI and kind of an elite excellence programme, do they go together? And I think for me that, that's a really dangerous kind of deficit model when you look at EDI. And so there is a sense of, is this about kind of watering things down so that more people can access it? And I guess for me, in terms of the organisation that it's got to look at, and Tonicha can talk to this much better than me. You've got to look at how do you get every percentage point out of someone's performance for us to compete in any way on the international stage? And that for us is something that we try and bring back into all of our programme at a national level. But what I think we've, really found, and the reason I'm talking about this is because, because we really want to be a representation of the sector, is that there isn't actually a contradiction between striving for excellence and making sure that there is a sense of diversity and inclusion in what you do. and actually, what we've found is that colleges and training providers are kind of uniquely placed to both meet people where they are and have a really diverse set of young people, with diverse needs. Not just young people, but learners with diverse needs. But then to have a really clear sight on this is about kind, of education with a purpose. And I'm not saying that all education needs to have a kind of an employment outcome, but it is thinking about how do we give people the skills they need to then succeed in the world of work. and so I think there is a kind of unique combination of those two. Things which specifically speaks to our philosophy around EDI is that actually we should be striving for excellence for all our students, regardless of ability, regardless of level that they're coming in, or skill or sector or their kind of background. And looking at how do we go from, so our thing is about competence to excellence. and so looking at that as an overlay of EDI rather than a kind of, a one or the other. And I think the sector is particularly good at looking at being really, really recognising that people come with a real complex context, but then also going, okay, but also we can Give you. And it is about empowering the people in their, in their classes to then look at their own situation, look at what they want to achieve. and if we can give people a whole range of different options about how to do that, not just WorldSkills and competitions, although I would be a big advocate for that, but those things that give them stretch and challenge, that enrich their kind of learning experience, I think that again, there's nowhere else from my perspective does it as well. Yes, schools have got elements of that. Yes, HE's got elements of that. But I think FE and skills particularly sits in that meeting point between kind of those coming out of school who sometimes schools failed them and sometimes they've done really well in school and there's a whole range of that. but then looking at the really clear line of sight to where are you going to go and what you're going to care you're going to be and how you're going to really excel in those things. And so, I think the variety of that in terms of the sector, is kind of really powerful.



Tonicha Roberts: Yeah, I completely agree with Ben actually as well. And just to, build on that. When I obviously sort of, after I left college and took my apprenticeship, when I started there, I started as a blank canvas and that was kind of the expectation as well. Obviously I had my prior studies that had done and everything I had learned from that, but I was again sort of came into the company as a blank canvas. They could sort of teach me everything that they need me to do according to their processes. So I wasn't having to sort of, you know, change any theory or anything that I knew. I was learning my theory at the same time as I was getting practically hands on experience. So I was getting much more thorough understanding than I think potentially some of, colleagues sort of when they'd started because they had their theory and they'd had to piece together the practical afterwards. So I think that was a huge advantage of the apprenticeship. And after that I decided to become a STEM ambassador and to speak to a lot of young people about the benefits and the strengths that come with apprenticeships. and following that was when I then heard about WorldSkills UK competitions, and decided that would be m my next challenge because my apprenticeship had gone so well and I was looking for the next thing to keep building on this momentum and this ambition and enthusiasm that I had. And when I started to compete in the competitions, one of the things that I then built on was obviously the technical skills. I was still learning and building that understanding. But I was also then developing softer skills that I'd never been taught in education before. So that would have been things like time management and sort of, you know, working under pressure and things like that. And those are really transferable skills and really useful in your everyday life as well as obviously industry. so those are the skills that I then learned and brought back with me, bring those skills back with me to the workplace afterwards. It then gave me a whole other range of skills and opened a lot more doors that I didn't have previously. So from that I was able to use the skills that I then learned, teach them all the new trainings that came in. And my employer actually saw how valuable that was and decided that actually we could maybe do with you in this sort of training route. So it's. Having gone through the competitions, this is why I'm a skills champion now as well. To try and again, sort of help bring these opportunities to the forefront for young people is to say that these opportunities are available and help develop you as a fully rounded individual. And it opens a lot more doors that might not have previously been there. So I think there's a lot more levels to it than just the technical and the theoretical side to it.

Joe McLoughlin: Yeah. and I suppose now it also means that you're modelling that role model behaviour that you were talking about earlier. Right. The idea that you've now become the thing that people can look to and be like, oh, that's a, that's a pathway, that's a real-life example. That's not, you know, something off in the distance.



Tonicha Roberts: Yeah, exactly. Because it's, it's really difficult to aspire to something that you can't see. So I think having those role models and that representation of people from old backgrounds and all sort of different education routes and things is, is so important for a young person when they're developing their own pathways and their own routes of where they want to go in their careers.

Ben Blackledge: Well, I do think the sector is really good at what you're saying there in terms of how do we amplify the storeys of past students and past apprentices? And I mean, I think these things could always be done more and kind of louder. But the fact is that there are a number of different associations and bodies which are about looking at, giving kind of real voice and access from role models into, into those kind of places. And I do think we are starting to see, I guess, a change because Tonicha talked about, when she kind of started the apprentices, that there being kind of more stigma than there is now. I do think we are seeing a shift in that, which I think can only be a good thing. But, I don't think that then you want the sector to lose its sense of being a real anchor institution and being a community. I mean, lots of colleges particularly, I talk, to, talk with real pride about the catchment area that they serve, and a lot of them will talk about it in terms of areas of deprivation, but then talk, go on to talk about them, what happens in terms of when they're really able to engage with their communities in a really meaningful way and how that kind of moves, helps the social mobility and helps that kind of growth and inclusion piece as well. And so I think that for me, more than in any other the education sectors, there's a real ecosystem of organisations like yourselves. Then you've got providers, you've got, kind of sector bodies, but then also kind of apprentice, bodies that are really looking at, kind of driving that. And so you do get a real mix of, kind of voices on that, which I think is really important. I think the one thing maybe we haven't quite figured out is that kind of crossover into schools, and that kind of, and transition from a potentially a school education into a skill and FE education, which I think we could still do more on, but I do think it is moving in the right direction.

Joe McLoughlin: Great, that all makes perfect sense, and definitely resonates with a lot of the experiences we've had, I suppose. And not to do too big of a lane change, or undermine all of those positives, but it's still important to recognise that developing inclusive learning and working environments is an ongoing process. Right. and so to split the questions between you, Ben, in a second I'd like you to talk about how we might design more inclusive curriculums or how we might have curriculums that better reflect the range of learner experiences. but to begin with, Tonicha, just going back to your apprenticeship and kind of how that helped with your employer in the longer term, how do you think employers or more diverse talent from getting into the workforce, Is it about reaching backwards and partnering with colleges and schools more, or is it about looking



from different areas amongst kind of, you know, adult post-education population? What do you think?

Tonicha Roberts: I think, I think there's probably a range of things that employers could do to kind of build on that. So, I think increasing the visibility of diverse role models is a really good place to start. From, so, for example, obviously I know myself, I'm now in a training position. so, every individual that comes in, every new trainee that joins us, I train them from the start, of their career, which is obviously amazing. It's something that I really love to do and it's nice to be able to say something. Actually, you know what, I don't have a degree, but here's the range of skills that I now have and the things I can now teach you that, you know, my colleagues can teach you other things. but it gives them obviously a pathway where they can see that actually regardless of what degree they've got, what their background is or that there are opportunities to progress. And I think on the back of that, creating structured sort of progression pathways that people can see quite openly. So, they know that when they start again, all these opportunities are available to them, all these doors are open. I do also think creating that sort of peer network so between, again, sort of within the company, within the industry, between themselves and colleges and universities, where they can have people from all different sort of backgrounds, supporting each other and kind of having those mentorship sort of opportunities as well. So I don't have a degree, and I train a lot of individuals that do have degrees. but then again, following that, my colleagues, they might do further training with them later on, they do have degrees. So there's having those opportunities where we can all sort of network between different peers from different backgrounds I think is really important as well. It really highlights that there isn't a distinct sort of person that is distinctly different from the rest, if that makes sense. I do think as well, encouraging individuals from, different backgrounds to also partake in extracurricular opportunities. So promoting people that have, say they've undertaken a level four apprenticeship and promoting that as an achievement rather than previously. When I did my apprenticeship, it was a bit of a stigma. It was almost like at the time I didn't really want to tell people I was doing an apprenticeship because it almost felt like, oh, this is seen as lesser than University. University people are going to judge me for this. whereas now it's really celebrated and I think sector wide, we've come a long way in really highlighting it as an achievement, and the extra skill sets that come with it. So I think continuing to sort of nurture those pathways and really have that open communication and highlighting it as an achievement will really help with.

Joe McLoughlin: Perfect, thank you. And then Ben, from the, from the kind of more educational side, how can we design curriculums or design courses and kind



of facilitate courses that speak to a wider variety learners and support a wider variety of learners.

Ben Blacklidge: Yeah, so I mean I think there's a few things here and I think your last point about how to facilitate kind of courses and programmes for me is the, is the key point. So we've kind of been working with the sector for the last six years particularly on what we call the Centre of Excellence which is around looking at what is the kind of pedagogy that we've learned from 70 years of competition at training young people to compete against the best in the world. and it looks at a lot of the things that Tonicha would have kind of experienced in terms of things that are in marginal gains in terms of mindset, looking at how you develop resilience, how you use kind of simulated pressure tests as a way of advancing and developing learning. and again this was developed for ah, really intense training with a small group of. Small group, 100 young people over an 18-month period. with really kind of high ratios in terms of kind of one to five. So, something that you really couldn't replicate in the same way in a normal classroom, workshop, whatever setting. But what we found is if you can think about how do you take the principles of that and apply it to further education more broadly. It's been incredibly successful And I guess what that's been about is looking at how do you go beyond curriculum. So how do you use curriculum and kind of course ah, as a base but then look at both, how do you go beyond speed or accuracy or tolerances or those kind of things. But also, how do you have a bigger focus on some of the soft, the transversal skills that Tonicha was talking about. And the reason I guess I referenced that in response to your question is that we found that has been used in almost every different category of group of young person you could, or student you could think of. So that's been used at kind of entry level and access courses, that's been used at level six and seven courses, it's been used in technical courses, it's been used in maths and English as an approach to looking at how do you bring learning to life, how do you create a much more motivated and engaged set of students and also how do you create a more motivated and engaged set of teachers. and so for us that has been a really kind of impactful way of taking curriculums which can obviously take time to change and therefore can be quite static and to be able to give both the licence and the skill set to educators, to breathe new life into it and to think about it differently, not as an additionality but as a way of, kind of thinking about that and where we've seen that really, and there's loads of examples of where a whole college or a whole training provider has taken that on, ah, this whole kind of coaching approach to it and seen kind of real impact, on a whole range of different students and different cohorts. So my view is that there is. We are going to have to look very differently about how do we design and implement curriculum over the next five, 10 years because of the rate of change and the pace of change. but we as an organisation, that's not what we are about. And so for us it's thinking about



how do you empower the teachers on the ground to, whether it's T levels, V levels, apprenticeships, other technical qualifications, how do we give them the skill set to then be able to adapt it in a way which is really exciting and different. And I think we're also going to have to think about the kind of role of teachers, in a more holistic way, because we are going to see both the additional need of more complex and diverse groups of young people with more complex and diverse needs and opportunities. But also we have got the kind of, the opportunity and I guess the challenge as well of things like automation and AI, which are going to hopefully make some of the things that take up a lot of time easier. And so if there is a way then of thinking about teaching in a different way, it does give more space than think about how do you deliver these things in a truly inclusive way. sorry, that's quite a long answer to your question, but I think there's quite a few things there which I think are quite exciting. I don't think we have to wait for government to implement fee levels or implement the kind of new approach to whatever. I think there's a way of using the appetite and the system and the people that are there in a really exciting way to give them licence, and freedom to think differently. Because that's always the most inspiring thing for me is when I go into a college or training provider and the people who are delivering that are so excited and so, passionate about being able to innovate, and innovate for their students. And so I think we just need to support them rather than spending all of our time thinking about new policies or new programmes. Like, how do we, how do we, whatever the programme, whatever the policy, how do we really deliver best for the students and for the teachers that are delivering it?

Tonicha Roberts: Yeah.

Joe McLoughlin: And so I think, well, first of all, there's no need to apologise for a big answer. There's clearly a lot of really, really interesting stuff going on there. I think, the way you phrased it around, it is an opportunity, but it's also a challenge, particularly with, you know, the rate of change, the role of teachers, just how society is shifting generally, kind of. It all feels very, relevant.

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The two questions I want to close with today, one a little more positive and one a little more, not necessarily negative, but kind of more wary, is what are we with these kind of policies, this kind of inclusive work? What do we get when we get it right? And, and who do both of you think are getting it right? and we'll answer that one first and then, what's at stake if we do nothing or if, if we get it wrong? And we'll, we'll come to that one in a little while.

Tonicha Roberts: Big questions. A lot to think about there. So. I know, I think having done, again, sort of going back to when I did my education, my apprenticeship back in 2016, things have changed quite a lot. And in my role now, obviously I can support my trainees when they come in. And it's been very different to when I was training compared to now. The training programmes we have in place, I think the things that we currently have in place, particularly for, say, like the training programme I've developed, it's very much inclusive of all different learning types. again, I've used a lot of the things that I learned through my competition with WorldSkills UK, all those skills that I've been able to give to my trainees, so that they are, they're sort of more prepared for working in real industry than the theory they've just taken from their education. So a lot of the things that I have developed that I've taught them, are things like, you know, how to respond to a situation rather than what's the expected answer, and then they can panic if that doesn't come out. For example, in the competitions, like some. Some of the things we were given were an experiment that would normally take 12 hours, but you're only given half the time. So, again, coming back to sort of real life industry, it's a, how do I achieve this? keep the high quality of work that's expected. You know, really thinking sort of strategically and logically how to do it. So these are the things that I've tried to build into our training programme. The things that obviously I've developed over the years, I didn't have necessarily at the start. but I think if that's the way that our education does change so that it prepares people so that they're ready for work in real industry, obviously in terms of. For the employer and the individual, it's. It's much better off and it makes. Mixing is much easier and improves the sort of. It helps build this excellence that we're trying to build in industry is probably the better way of phrasing it here. and if I sort of building on that and come to a discussion that I had recently with, when I've, When I've done some talks with, say, for example, like I had a meeting recently with the Skills England CEO, the talking with people like that in leadership and having that really positive engagement with them. She asked me a lot of questions, about my career and how I've got to this position now and what my experience was like, my thoughts on that and how that could have been improved or how it's improved now. And I think having really positive engagement like that with people in leadership, the decision makers that are informing policy, it's really encouraging because they're the people that are going to be helping to shape inclusive pathways. So sharing the real journeys that we do have and how either



could have been better, or what's made it really good now, how we're changing things. I just think it's really important for policies that are being influenced. So that's probably as much as I can add to it with my experience and talking with people like that, that do have, that influence.

Ben Blackledge: Yeah, I mean, I completely agree with, with kind of what you're saying and just to build on that kind of point around, kind of how the EDI and the Excellence agenda for us kind of align. And I do think EDI, has been a bit under kind of attack, over the last few years in terms of ah, I mean not to get too geopolitical but being a kind of woke agenda which is just about not about sort of anything kind of meaningful but just people with their feelings hurt. and so I do think we've got to think about it with kind of renewed sense of purpose around it. And I think it reminds me, I guess of that, the kind of move in, if you look at kind of CSR policies to kind of a move to ethical business and, and I wonder whether there's something for us about not being on the defensive around EDI as a kind of not restorative but there's a kind of a remedial action for people and moving it towards a place where it. It's an absolute imperative both for businesses to have that diversity of thought and to be able to bring the skills they need in. Because we know in the UK particularly there are huge, there are going to be huge skills gaps in digital, in any kind of retrofit activity, looking at nuclear, looking at green energy, there is going to need to be a much increased workforce in those spaces. And so you are going to have to draw that from a bigger pool of people. And so there is an element of it which is if you don't get this right, it's not that education will feel a bit worse, it's that there is a broader societal issue in terms of economic growth for the UK. and then I guess the other side of that is if we don't figure out a way of giving people a sense of equity and make them feel included within these systems and these systems which are about opportunity and about helping people to get the kind of, the best start in their career, then you do risk that sense of people getting disillusioned and being isolated. And so I do think the skills sector particularly has a broader societal role in that. and so I think the. Not to, I guess the positive and the negative are just different sides of the same coin is that we've absolutely got to talk about this in a kind of an offensive, like let's get on the offensive rather than be defending why Adi is important. And I'm not saying that's a new idea, that's something that's been talked about for, for a while. But I do think it is under more threat if we aren't careful about how do we tie this in. As Tonicha said, with that kind of excellence agenda and looking at quality and, and you need to have that, that kind of that broadest range of kind of inputs into that to make sure that you. We get the kind of skill set and the, the kind of growth that we need as a country. So that you ask who's doing it. Well, I do think that there isn't any kind of decline in it within this sector. I think there is still a real focus on it and still a real drive for it. I was at a college last week, and they were talking in the construction sector really openly about kind of mental health and



lots of, the predominantly lads that come in and are part of that and actually having a really different approach to how they deal with mental health. And now that's a different kind of EDI agenda, but it's still very much a different conversation than I had with brickies and plasterers in the past in those settings. Not saying they weren't doing it, but there's a much more openness around how do we help these young people be the best they can be? And that has got to be more than just looking at can they lay brick? It's about who they are as a person for their benefit, but also for that kind of wider societal benefit as well.

Joe McLoughlin: Great. It's a really, really strong kind of answer to end on. So, thank you both and thank you to my guests Ben Blackledge and Tonicha Roberts, and to you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the conversation and that it's got you thinking about how you can put ideas of equity, diversity and inclusivity into practice with your colleagues and your learners. If you have a question for us or a comment on what you've heard, please join in the conversations on social media. And remember to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts to access earlier and, ah, forthcoming episodes of Let's Go Further.