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Podcast transcript:

Kyra: Thank you for tuning in to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast, brought to you by a student-staff partnership at the University of Westminster. This is a platform for students and educators to exchange knowledge and encourage discussion about the current challenges facing higher education. I'm your host, Kyra, and, for this episode, I'll be in conversation with Samir Pandya, an architect and Assistant Head of the School of Architecture at our University. Samir's research largely focuses on the relationships between architecture and identity to examine questions relating to design, representation and power. In this interview, we delve into Samir's academic journey, his role as Director of International and Strategic Lead for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, and how we can begin to decolonise Architecture curricula.

Kyra: So, we usually start things off with our guests telling us just a little bit about themselves. So, first things first, where are you from?

Samir: So, I was born in India actually and I came to the country as a child and grew up in Lewisham, South-East London, and so I'm actually still in South-East London today.

Kyra: And how would you describe your upbringing in terms of how race was kind of seen and felt in your household?

Samir: It's kind of an interesting one. I mean, kind of race, culture, ethnicity, religion, all kind of were interwoven in terms of my experience growing up. My parents, my inherited religion is Hinduism. I'm a Hindu. So, at home, with my parents, it was very kind of conservative, you know, very kind of, em...adherent to our inherited culture, but of course I was in London, so outside the home, it was very mixed. I went to a school that was quite multicultural, a primary school, which was a fantastic way to start one's education, but Lewisham at the time was interesting, in the '70s and early '80s, because it was a place where the National Front used to march a lot and were really, really active, and there were loads of demonstrations on the streets, marches by the National Front, but also counter demonstrations and clashes, and things were quite tense, so kind of anti-racist groups clashing on the streets. So, my memories were really kind of marked by racial tension, on one hand, and, personally, a really [mild] cultural experience on the other.

Kyra: So, when did you kind of start to develop an interest in architecture, like what inspired that?



Samir: That's quite interesting, Kyra. I don't think there was anything that inspired it. You know, growing up, as a child, as a son of Indian parents who came to the country in the '60s to build a better life for their children, as lots of parents did of that generation from kind of the Asian Subcontinent, the former Commonwealth countries as well – they came to build what they thought was a better life for us, and so one of the big things, two big targets Indian parents had: one, get your children married off at a decent age, yeah, not too early, but definitely not too late; and, two, ensure that they get educated and end up in a good profession, and the perfect thing that parents of my generation wanted their kids to become was either a doctor or a dentist or perhaps a lawyer or, funnily enough, an engineer. So, all those things were classed as respectable, were respectable professions. Now, I wasn't clever enough to be any of those things, but I think they had their eye on Medicine for me, but I [definitely was not going to become a doctor, wasn't clever enough], and in the end, I thought, actually, what can I do? There was no passion or interest in architecture, but, at the time that I had to make my decision in terms of kind of, you know, GCSEs, A Levels, I thought, jeez, what can I do that kind of satisfies that kind of respectable thing, you know? I was clearly scientific, I was kind of interested in art, and Architecture seemed to bring both of those things together, so Science and Art. And so, for me, it was a pragmatic choice. It was like, actually, nothing else to do, I'm going to go for it, but it ended up being a good choice for me, really.

Kyra: Yeah, absolutely, and now you're the Assistant Head of the School of Architecture at Westminster, which is amazing. Is there anything interesting that you can tell us about the architectural history of Westminster, perhaps in relation to like colonialism, or any like British university?

Samir: Yeah. Yeah, and that's kind of an interesting question. I mean, there's two things I guess, one a personal – just to take a step back, it might be relevant here, a kind of personal reflection really on architectural education when I started it. I mean, I did my undergraduate degree at Dundee University, up in Scotland, and I went, again, from Lewisham, which was very multicultural, to Dundee, which wasn't. I remember arriving on my first day in the studios, and the way the Architecture studios in Dundee are arranged is that, you know, every year, five years of student groups are all in one massive space, one big space, so you start in first year and you can look all the way to fifth year in this one kind of mega-space, and when I was there, it wasn't broken down or divided – it was just a huge space. I remember, on my first day there, I walked in and I stood at my first year desk and looked out across the five years and it was just this sea of kind of monoculturalism – I mean, it was all white, and I thought this is really odd, there are no people like me here. Eventually, I think there was one other Indian person in the five years that I found, no Black students. There were a few Chinese and few Korean exchange students in the upper years, but that was it. So, for me, it was a bit of a culture shock, but what I didn't realise at the time is that that was probably a sign of how accessible, or inaccessible, not only Architecture education is but higher education, which is quite interesting.



But, really, fast-forwarding to today – incidentally, I got appointed as an external examiner at Dundee now, so [to go] back to the place where I had that kind of experience at first is going to be interesting just to see how things have changed, you know. [You know], is it more diverse, has Architecture become more accessible in that school? So, that's going to be interesting.

But, you know, fast-forwarding to today and Architecture education, Kyra, you were asking about Westminster in particular?

Kyra: Yeah, or like London universities in general, but, yeah, Westminster...

Samir: London universities, I think, are...generally fantastic. Most of them are really quite diverse. I think, you know, Westminster is no exception. I think, as a school, we're probably one of the most diverse schools in the country, and I think, I suspect, you know, if you look at the data, probably globally, we're one of the most diverse, and I think that, nationally, across schools of Architecture over the whole country, you know, if you look at the statistics, the average percent of BAME students in undergraduate Architecture courses is about 5% or 6%, nationally. For us, it's about 16%, and so we're keen to be diverse and I think that's a fantastic thing. One of the reasons for that is that we're in London, and a lot of our students commute, you know, they're commuter students. So, on that side of things, it's really positive, you know. We are really very much a London school, you know, multicultural, quite cosmopolitan, there's also an international dimension - some of our students are from overseas. So, that's all good, but what I can see is that actually what we need to work on is how we respond to those students. Many of the things that we still teach in terms of the curriculum is not as diverse as the students that we are teaching, so that leads to a number of things, you know. Students quite often feel disengaged with what they're being taught. They don't necessarily see themselves in what they're being taught – you know, they don't see themselves reflected in the environment, which leads to feeling a bit disenfranchised, a bit disconnected from what is being taught as the legitimate or, you know, authorised version of architectural history or theory. So, we've got to work harder on diversifying the curriculum, but I think we're doing that. I think we're doing [some good work but] there's a long way to go.

I mean, my personal...my personal time at Westminster began because I co-wrote the Master's course in Architecture that specialised in race and ethnicity and globalisation, and Westminster welcomed it, they supported it, the school, and it's been running now for nearly a decade and a half, and has produced some really good work and thinking on those kind of themes. Students from all over the world have engaged with the course over the years. So, my own personal experience is actually anything to do with race, identity and architecture has been supported in the school, but a lot of the issues are deeper, Kyra – they're structural, they're systemic, it takes time.



Kyra: Yeah, no, that's amazing to hear that it's been running for so long and you've got such a positive response to it as well – it's amazing. But just talking about kind of your recent work as well, you touched upon how you're kind of concerned with the relationship between architecture and identity and how you're kind of heavily influenced by I guess like postcolonial theory, critical race theory. What made you want to explore architecture nationalism and like why is that important for us to understand?

Samir: Yeah. I think, broadly, the things that links all of the...those themes that you just mentioned, Kyra, is the question of identity. For me, I guess it's a really...it's a personal thing, but it's also a political thing. So, personally, you know, the brief experience that I mapped out earlier in terms of not recognising others like myself within architectural education sparked a bit of the interest in that question of, you know, who's represented in the built environment, who designs the build environment, who has decision making powers in the construction and shaping of our cities. All those big questions really begins with these kind of cultural ones and these kind of questions about education and access and all that sort of stuff. So, that's what really sparked, em, sparked my interest, really. So, again, I co-wrote that course and got it off the ground, and also, at the time, you know, I was active in groups like the Society of Black Architects who were campaigning in the '90s, chairing a group called Architects for Change at the Royal Institute of British Architects which were looking to increase awareness and access into education for non-represented groups, under-represented groups. But for me, what I realised, after years of running that course and doing this campaigning stuff, is that...and this really was brought into sharp relief after the murder of George Floyd, was that nothing much has changed, you know, after nearly two decades of campaigning and activism, with others of course, across the profession, right? In my own head, Kyra, I was thinking that progress was being made – I thought this is fantastic that the profession is sitting up, doing stuff, you know, have got all these programmes in various universities running, really interrogating this stuff, so I kind of thought that progress was being made, but then, after the murder of George Floyd, as usually happens, society or the profession or the higher education sector suddenly started, you know, being interested, conscience was provoked, and then all these statistics and data was brought out that showed us that actually progress is not as...is not as kind of...you know, as...as much as we'd like to think it was, you know, and at that point, so after the last kind of year and a half, my thinking is that, actually, we've got to really interrogate the structures, the systems, the content of what's being taught, and we've got to change it at a more profound level. So, you've got all these terms like "decolonising the curriculum". Actually, what we need to do is decolonise universities. We need to decolonise higher education, and we need to decolonise society. It can't just be one course, yeah.

Kyra: Absolutely. I mean, it's one thing to kind of like decolonise Architecture as a discipline, which we'll talk about later, but do you think it's possible to actually decolonise the built environment that we live in?



Samir: Yeah, that's a really, really good question, and it's a really complex one because the... the forces that shape the production of the built environment are multi-directional and they're so complex. You know, it's not just about architects designing buildings. It's to do with government policy. It's to do with cultural understanding and awareness. It's to do with how and to what extent communities are engaged in the decision making process. It's also to do with the conceptual vocabulary that architects use, the language that they use, the way in which they think. You know, architects, by definition, have to remain optimistic. You know, we construct, we build things, and so it has to be forward-looking, it has to be, in a sense – and I don't mean it to sound grand, but it has to be visionary. We have to think about new possibilities and how the world would be. So, on that sense, we have to remain optimistic, but it does need massive buy-in from all the sectors, a coordinated approach to solving that problem, which is why I think our schools are in an interesting position to do that because, you know, we are a school that's interdisciplinary. It's not just about architecture. You know, it's about planning, it's about interiors, it's about transport infrastructure, it's even about tourism. We deal with research that looks not only into design but also policy, as well as theory. So, I think the future, the answer will come from a future that's much more interdisciplinary and collaborative, speaking to each other, collectively, about what the answers are.

I mean, one of the biggest struggles, I think, at the moment, is to deal with the terms of engagement. So, for example, EDI, you know, what does that...what do these terms really even mean? "Equality" for example, just to take the word "equality", if you look at the way that's defined, legally, in terms of providing equality of opportunity, equality of treatment, and equality of outcome, that's all about giving everybody the same thing, you know, treating everyone equally, and on the surface, that's quite an honourable endeavour, but, really, it goes against the idea of diversity. You know, I'm much more interested in equity, which is about giving people what they want and responding to the needs of individuals or individual student groups, which are really quite different. So, that's much more nuanced, you know. And likewise the other terms, you know, "diversity" and "inclusion", we should be interrogating these terms. Are they the right terms in the way that they frame the way we think about the problem or are they terms that were dreamed up by the government or the higher education sector to, em, frame the problem in a particular way, yeah? And if we aren't critical in academia, then I don't know where the criticality is going to come from. We have to really be interrogating these terms and saying, "Actually, they're not right" or "They could work better, in a number of different ways".

Kyra: Yeah. No, absolutely, I completely agree. And just going back to what you said about kind of cultural understanding of architecture and things like that, I'm aware that UCL has recently tried to kind of confront their problematic history with eugenics by creating like a committee dedicated towards like building names and renaming them. What do you think of that? Like do you think changing a building's name can erase like the distant past associated with it?



Samir: Yeah, I mean, I have, Kyra, you know, obviously, heard of the UCL, em, issue, and it's worth talking about that. I mean, it has a past that it needs to overcome, and, as you said, you know, as we know, it deals with eugenics, which was obviously a kind of, em, a dangerous and kind of insidious ideology and we all know what it led to. I do know UCL are taking steps to deal with that, as you said, and there are a number of individuals who are doing a lot of good work, good, positive work in that area. On the issue of names, they do obviously carry meaning, and can symbolise and reinforce particular values, so I think it's a good thing, you know, to remove a name that recalls a period, let's say, of white supremacy or a racist past. I mean, removing those names is definitely a start. Replacing questionable names of buildings with names which express anti-racist values would be even better. There's also, I guess, the question of who is involved in the renaming or who has the right to rename. So, those are all questions we need to think about, but, obviously, renaming the building doesn't rewrite history and it's certainly not a solution to the problems that we face in academia. As I think I mentioned earlier, I mean, we need to rethink more fundamentally our structures, systems and frameworks. The legacy of structural inequity has led to kind of deeply embedded assumptions, biases, systems of privilege, so in addition to creating a new culture, we also need to, at the same time, unlearn an old one, and that's challenging to many people, and even threatening to some. So I guess renaming buildings is positive, but it's only one quite symbolic part of the solution and it doesn't really, on its own, deal with the complexities that we face.

Kyra: And, lastly, for people who want to start looking into the colonial history of the built environment, specifically their university, where can they begin to kind of find information on that, like who else is talking about this?

Samir: Yeah. I mean, there are loads, loads of books, loads of articles, written about colonial history and the relationship between colonialism and higher education, particularly in this country, for obvious reasons. I think it's quite interesting to look at our own – having mentioned UCL, it's quite interesting to look at our own university. I mean, there is...for anyone that's interested in finding out about our own past, as an institution, there is a 'History of University of Westminster' book series which is quite interesting, and I think there are four or five – actually, I can't remember exactly, but I think it's four or five books in the series. There's one in particular that's quite interesting for me. It's called 'Educating for Professional Life', and it's kind of interesting for two reasons. I mean, firstly, it deals with a period of history where the university changed...well, the first 25 years of its history as a university, so when it switched from being a polytechnic to a university, and it's a history of that first 25 years, and it's kind of interesting for me for two reasons. The first reason is completely superficial: it's because, as you flick through the book, you see images of the various buildings of our site, and the city, London, is constantly in the background, so it's almost like architecture and the city in that book are key characters and a key part of the narrative. It's always there, so I really quite like that. The second reason, probably a bit more significant for this chat, is that, in that 25 years, higher education in the UK transformed really radically. It was a period of radical transformation. And what was interesting is that the



book shows the way in which Westminster adapted to that transformation, adapted and responded to changes in society over that 25 years. So, it responded really well, and what that tells me is that the university can, if it has to, adapt and transform in response to changing external social contexts and needs. So for me here today, that gives at least some hope that, you know, that we can...well, some hope for the period we're entering now in terms of the aspiration to create a kind of truly anti-racist institution.

And there are other books I should mention in terms of architecture, again, loads and loads out there in terms of the history of colonial architecture, but what people will find when they dig around is that many of the history books are really looking at colonial and post-colonial architecture focusing mainly on questions of style and forms of expression, and not so much in terms of relations of power or the political forces that shape the production of the built environment. There are three books I should quickly mention.

One is really one that's really well known to architects and architectural students for generations upon generation. It's a book that was first written in 1880-somethin, 1886, I think, and it's called 'A History of Architecture' by Banister Fletcher, and it's been updated over the years ever since then but it's, over time, become really notorious for having a really...I guess distorted colonial world view, so it promoted a really Western bias in how it considered...or what it considered to be architecture. But the latest edition, which was published a couple of years ago and was edited by somebody called Murray Fraser, who is a former colleague of mine, has done a lot of really good work to get rid of that bias. So, it was retitled and now it's called 'A Global History of Architecture'. It's been entirely re-written and it's now much more of a kind of objective overview of architecture, and what's interesting about it is that it consciously distances itself from, em, colonial kind of notions of otherness and the way in which sometimes history writing is discriminatory or exclusionary. So, in a sense, it's a really symbolic moment in architectural discourse, you know, for that book that's been so long part of the academe and the establishment suddenly to actually say, hands up, now, we've got to get rid of this bias and be much more inclusive.

There are a couple of other quick ones which are, I think, for me personally, touchstones for me, and I think anyone interested in race and architecture should look at these. The first one is called 'White Papers, Black Marks' and the subtitle is 'Architecture, Race, Culture'. It's written by a friend and collaborator of mine called Lesley Lokko, and it quite simply explores the way in which race is manifested in the built environment, and it also look or kind of interrogates the way in which that shapes people's understanding of place and space and where they belong and where they don't belong. And then the second one is a book called... less well known than the other two, I have to say, but it's I think really valuable, is called 'Postcolonial Space(s)'. Now, the word 'Space(s)' in the title, the last "s" of "Space(s)" has brackets around it in the title – not to be confused with another book called 'Postcolonial Spaces' without brackets at the end, which is not the one I'm talking about. So, 'Postcolonial Space(s)' and the authors are...they're two editors actually, Gulsum Nalbantoglu and Wong Chong Thai, and that really is a book about looking at new languages, you know, conceptual



languages or design languages, for rethinking architecture in a post-colonial context. So, [it] really deals with the complexity of thinking through questions of race, identity, through design. I think that's it.

There is actually one more that was really recently published, haven't read it at all, but I should flag it up, it's called 'Race and Modern Architecture', I think published last year. I have a copy. I haven't read it yet, but reading descriptions, it sounds pretty comprehensive, so if students are really interested in a relationship with race and architecture, get hold of a copy. It sounds like it...it writes about how race permeates absolutely everything, the entire history of architecture and our entire experience. So, I'm looking forward to reading that.

I mean, what I would say, finally, to students who...I mean, advice I guess to students because I'm hoping that some of them might listen to these amazing podcasts that you're putting together, the advice I would give is to question everything that they read regarding history, architectural history or any history, and to remain critical. I would say, yeah, question everything, and don't just passively accept a history that's presented to you, so look for things like hidden assumptions, inflating claims, bias, how particular perspectives are being foregrounded, and look really at the stories being told to support them. So, quite often, you realise that storytelling in these history books is a really clever tactic that's used by writers to foreground certain histories, but then to leave others out, yeah? So, that's the advice I would give really.

Kyra: Just going back to our discussion about EDI work in higher education, you are the Director of International Strategic Lead for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. What does that job involve, like how does it differ to like a typical kind of director of EDI?

Samir: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, the EDI thing is an interesting one. I mean, I, you know, I took on this role, I'm a year into it now, so it's all quite...quite new – well, a year old, it's not so new. So, the question, so, Kyra, you're asking about how it...what we do, what I do. Okay. So, when I took it on, it was wide open. I think, again, as part of the response to, em, the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement and the kind of uncomfortable questions that those events provoked, I think the...the University created an EDI Committee and they created these roles, so it was a proactive response, but the roles weren't very clearly defined when I started. They are now, just, and they're described quite clearly. So, it's very...open, so I thought, hey, we can do what we want, you know, what's going on? So, I spent last year doing a number of things.

Firstly, I thought, actually, how are we going to respond, how are we going to diversify further, the school, how are we going to address things like diversifying and decolonising the curriculum, what does that mean to us as a discipline, and what I realised is that there's been so much work done on this, you know, real activity that I need to fully understand. So, basically, I talked to loads of people, early on, across the school, across the college, across the university, students included as critical in that consultation, also to vice-chancellors, and



that gave me a real insight into what the key issues were, what the challenges were, and some of the really innovative stuff people were thinking about on how to respond to the challenges. So, that was one of the first things I engaged with.

And then I thought, actually, in my discussions with colleagues, generally, awareness varied of the problem and the challenge. EDI literacy varied, and understanding of the context kind of varied, levels of understanding. So, I began the year also with arranging some workshops on diversity, the awarding gap, which is the big focus at the moment, quite rightly, and that was really well attended. The...colleagues in the school really engaged fully with the workshops that we organised to interrogate those things and discuss them. So, that was the second thing, in addition to the consultation, really raising awareness.

And then we got a lot of resources together, you know, the various toolkits that the university had provided, but also reading lists, case studies of other universities that are doing more good work, so I thought that's the kind of natural next step, is to disseminate all of that stuff across the school. So, not only have we raised awareness but we are now giving colleagues the tools to help them respond at a course level.

So, that was really kind of scene-setting groundwork that we did, and then the final thing was to develop a longer-term strategy. So, I developed an equity plan and the idea of launching an observatory in the school, EDI related, that essentially is outward-looking and inward-looking, you know, identifying what's happening out there in the sector, in society, in relation to EDI, but also, you know, looking at data, making sure that we're closing awarding gaps, not letting other gaps emerge, and devising projects, you know, big projects. We've got projects we're applying for funding for that will launch this year. One of them is an online resource which will be accommodating all of the material, case studies, past student work, work from practice, that students and staff can access really easily to inform their own work, and we are launching also an equity forum which will oversee the work of that observatory, and, really, it's a kind of longer term plan that we have in mind that is about cultural change and structural change. So, no short-term quick-fixes. It's not going to happen overnight. It has to be kind of looking at five-year plans for this stuff.

Kyra: Yeah. No, that's amazing. It makes me happy to hear like just all the work that's going on, and we also kind of have our own reading list, and we have...they're kind of discipline-focused, and I think we've probably had some – we have an architectural one as well. So, I think it's nice to hear that different kind of projects and different kind of communities in the university are also kind of coming together to work on this, going back to your kind of point on having like an interdisciplinary kind of approach, which is, yeah, is really great to hear.

Samir: Absolutely.

Kyra: During my time in this role, actually, like I think I've learnt...I've come across some criticisms of EDI work, and they often argue that, you know, it's more about diversifying



than, I guess, equality or equity and inclusion. What do you think of this, and do you kind of see that yourself in some kind of EDI programmes?

Samir: In terms of the limitations of...?

Kyra: Mm.

Samir: Yeah. So, yeah, that's interesting. I think that goes back to what I was saying earlier about the difference between equality and equity and what an effective way to frame what we're doing would be, and for me, it's equity, not equality. Diversity is a term that people can hide behind, you know? It's a kind of term that you can just say, "Okay, well, we've got a diverse student body, so actually that's progress and the job's done – isn't it great?" But actually, no, that's where the job often just begins, you know. You know, you have a diverse student body – you know, how are they progressing? What do they achieve? Are we failing them, having got them in, or is it a cynical thing about recruitment and presentational issues, you know – "Look how diverse we are"? We've got to be serving those students in the right way. So, in that sense, yeah, I do think there's a huge amount of work to do to rethink what we mean by these terms, for sure. I don't know if that answers your question?

Kyra: No, absolutely, yeah, it does. Thank you. And my next one, it's a bit of like a two-part question. So, do you think involvement in EDI should be compulsory for all lecturers and teaching staff, and how do we ensure that that involvement is done effectively, so, for example, without losing touch of why this work is important and who it's important to, and without being kind of tokenistic and about ticking boxes, like you said? It's a bit of a long question so I can repeat it if you like [laughing]!

Samir: No, I think the answer to the first part is "yes". We've got engage everybody in EDI-related questions, you know. For example, there was a staff module, online module, on unconscious bias that was a kind of optional module for colleagues to take, you know, and we...we said, for our school, everybody has to do it, everybody has to do that module on unconscious bias because it's just so important, you know. And if we...we can kid ourselves, and often we do kid ourselves, to think actually, no, we can't be biased, you know, unconsciously or not, we're not biased, we're good people, we're ethical, we're academics, for god's sake, you know, we're...you know, ethics is very much part of what we're interested in, but actually, we're all biased in some way, unconsciously. I did the module myself and it was really revealing. You know, it really made me sit up and pay attention to the ways I think about others, the kind of...the way in which society conditions us to think about others in particular ways, and I think everybody has to do it.

And likewise, you know, with curriculum design, what we teach, does it reflect contemporary society, as diverse as it is? Does it reflect the fact that we live in a globalised world and we are constantly coming into touch with others? I don't...I'm not sure if it does. So, I think that, actually, everything, from individual staff training all the way to course design, in addition to



other things like, you know, how diverse our staff body is, how many role models we have in the environment, how we're mentoring students who might be having difficulties, it's complex and it's layered, but everybody has to get involved. It's not like – I mean, one of the things about the EDI role, Kyra, that you asked about earlier is the thing I experienced in the earlier months of taking it on is, as soon as it appeared, that EDI role, somehow people thought that, em, responsibility for dealing with EDI issues became atomised in that one role, i.e. me. "Oh, if it's an EDI issue, Samir will deal with it." "If it's an EDI-related question, he'll be able to answer it." But, actually, it's got to be the opposite of that, you know. I think a key part of my role is ensuring that there's collective responsibility, knowing that colleagues need support in order to fulfil that responsibility because this stuff is complicated, it's not easy, and the reason why progress hasn't been made, I think, in the past, you know, because, you know, people have been championing these causes for many, many, many decades, is because...we don't understand fully that...the complexity of the issues and the challenges are there and will take time to engage, and we have to support each other in order to do that, not just campaign and say that this is wrong. We have to really...we have to be supportive as well, help others to rise to the challenge.

Kyra: Yeah. No, I completely agree, and I'm happy you've said that as well because I think, with EDI work and even sometimes decolonial work in higher education, like the burden often gets put on kind of, you know, the academics of colour, students of colour, and things like that, but this is very much a job for everybody, like it's...we should all hold ourselves accountable, we should all kind of be responsible for kind of wanting to encourage change.

Samir: 100%. You're 100% right. It's that question of, you know, you put the burden on, you know, BAME staff members to do this. It's the emotional...I think the term is "emotional labour" that it takes to...

Kyra: Yeah.

Samir: You know, my...going back to my – I don't want to keep turning it around back to me, but, you know, in the 1970s and early 1980s in Lewisham growing up as a kid, I used to get beaten up quite regularly as a...you know, by people who were racist and experienced that kind of sense of discrimination and attack and isolation. In the end, you have to get on with it. But, you know... And then, to then be told, you know, when you take on roles like this, that, actually, your job is to solve the problem, you know, actually, there's just something really profoundly wrong with that. And that's not – we, as a school, that's not how we're seeing it at all. I mean, the Head of School, colleagues that are really active in this as well, whether it's to do with gender, whether it's to do with LGBTQ+, whether it's to do with disability, sexuality, whatever the...you know, under-represented group that we're talking about is, they're all interconnected, intersectionality runs through it all. Nobody's thinking that it's, you know, it's up to one person or one group to solve it. It must be collective, a collective endeavour. And in that sense, that's the exciting thing about it for me, and in many senses, I think we do need to – as well as looking back and untangling the history of all of



this stuff, in addition to decolonising and addressing questions of social justice and epistemic injustice, we also need to look forward, you know. We also need to be future-orientated. And a really exciting thing is, you know, the future is probably profoundly inter-cultural, you know. We don't need to pretend that we're all the same. We don't need to, on the other hand, force people to forget about who they are, or in a phoney way celebrate difference. It's much more complicated. It's profoundly cultural. It's messy, you know. I'm...you know, I'm brown, I'm Indian, but I'm also really very much a Londoner. I am from a working-class family, and I have many, many layers to my identity, you know, and a lot of those are in conflict. A lot of them don't sit alongside each other very well. It's very messy, identity. And actually, each individual cannot be reduced to a category, an ethnic category or any other category. We're all highly complex. So, I think we need to realise that and tease it out, and actually enjoy the messiness of all of that, and the enjoyment or the joy that we can get out of that is partly facilitated by increasing sensitivity and tolerance and a politics of respect, you know, and then, you know, instead of fear, you know, instead of fearing others, you know, it's about respect and, em, I think actually then the future of our school can be, again, profoundly inter-cultural, as opposed to divisive, you know.

Kyra: And I wanted to talk about decolonising Architecture curricula as well. Do you think decolonised and anti-racist courses can be created in our existing institutions or do we need new, separate institutions that create kind of diversified and inclusive courses from the start? I know you're a part of the academic advisory board for the African Futures Institute, but what do you think?

Samir: Yeah. Well, that's interesting because that institute is doing...really, [C-SET's] position is doing exactly as you described in terms of new institutions, with new values, new ways of doing things, and addressing very real and urgent problems and issues. I think you can do both. I think you can...you can deal with existing structures, existing systems, existing curriculum and content, as well. You can do both. You can start with new institutions or you can recalibrate existing systems. With the existing ones, of course there's a lot of untangling to do. There's a lot of knotted kind of embedded ways of thinking and doing things, and it's a huge challenge to untangle all of those, but some of the things that we're doing now, raising awareness, raising consciousness about the issues... I mean, for example, in our school, what we did intentionally is, you know, Kyra, you get individual courses and every now and again they have to go through a re-validation process, which, you know, could be every four to six years, courses have to go through some scrutiny to see how they've performed and whether or not what they're doing is still current, still appropriate, still checking lots of quality boxes to see if we're heading in the right direction, asking questions about what needs to change. So, we have a number of different courses in the school due for re-validation spread across the next few years and what we've done is we've deliberately delayed some and brought forward others to synchronise that re-validation process, and what that means is, now, we're in an amazing position to look across many of the courses in our school at the same time, intensively, so that we can share experiences, share reflection, share best practice, share forward planning and ideas. So, we get a lot of economy out of it, but we also get a chance



to talk about things like EDI, alongside other important things like climate change, sustainability. So, what we can do is effect change across the majority of courses in the school and use the time and space that the re-validation process allows us to reflect really rigorously about what we're doing, as opposed to in a patchy way, you know, here and there. So, it's a real opportunity. So, that's an example of how we've adjusted in order to maximise impact on the school, especially with things like EDI, you know. We had an away-day last... not last week, the week before last, where all of the course leaders, module leaders, and key people came together to talk. They all presented ideas about their courses, they were asked to respond to questions of EDI, and we're going to keep doing that through the re-validation process, so hopefully we'll come out the other end, at the end of this academic year, with a really re-invigorated set of courses which will be impactful on the school as a whole, and things like EDI will have been really interrogated and embedded into courses. So, that's a really big aim. So, again, you can do it with existing institutions, but I'm not pretending it's going to be a quick fix, you know? Yeah, you need attitude, you need attitudinal changes to go along with the content changes and the structural changes. You need people's attitudes to be aligned with the values of those.

Kyra: Definitely. So, that's kind of thinking, I guess, on the grand scheme of things, like in terms of like courses in general, but in the classroom itself, what do you feel like lecturers can do to kind of decolonise their pedagogy and kind of their practice?

Samir: Yeah. One of the things I picked up – that's another excellent question. See, I need to take your questions and just ask others. They're really good questions. The thing that I picked up from that away-day was that there was a lot of thinking about curricula which is to do with course content, you know, what's being taught, and, in effect, that's the most straightforward and easy thing – you know, reading lists are really easy to diversify. You know, what we teach, one can adjust those really easily. What we need to talk more about is pedagogy, as you said, and in the classroom, or in the studio – so, Architecture's signature pedagogy is studio teaching, you know, it's at the centre of what we do, design studio – what I think we need to do is break down the hierarchies between teacher and student. I think we need to listen more – and when I say listen, I don't mean just kind of listening to presentations by students or, you know, having chats, I mean really seriously listen as a practice, you know. As a practice, we try to perfect – we do it again and again. Try to hear what our students want. Try to respond – leave space in the curriculum to respond to specific cohorts, and, through listening, try to facilitate students leading, at least in part, their own education, really understanding. Now, that's not easy because academics, colleagues, are under huge pressure, you know, lots of things to do, and it seems like more and more is piled on their shoulders, but through clever re-thinking of the way we use, you know, course timetables, how we spend contact time in the classroom, we can build in, in really intelligent ways, opportunities, early on in the academic year, to listen to students and to really understand how we can take on board their experiences, how we can harness their experiences, and how we can use that to adjust what we do in the academic year.



I started...when we started speaking, Kyra, I mentioned how diverse our student body is, generally speaking. That's an asset. You know, that's a snapshot of a cosmopolitan, multicultural, global society in a place like London, which is really, really unique, you know. I only have to go outside the M25, Kyra, to a small village, you know, north of the M25, and people start looking at me, you know, that I feel suddenly like I did when I was a kid – you know, it's very strange to see a person of colour outside the M25. But in the school, we are really...really, the make-up of our demographic is really global, really mixed. That's an asset, and what we need to do is understand the lived experiences of those students and somehow use that to inform what we teach, how we teach, who teaches it, and I see that as an absolutely unique feature of us as a school. We need to tap into it more and more and more. I think that's the intellectually ethical thing to do, that's the socially ethical thing to do, and I think that that just leads to a much more vibrant and dynamic environment, instead of just teaching the same old stuff to an audience, to a student group, that has changed radically over the past, you know, three or four decades. Why should we do that? Why can't we become a bit more fluid? Could we not become a bit more responsive? Why can't we become a bit more interdisciplinary, you know, so it's actually a true partnership with students, you know? Lived experience is the thing we need to understand more of.

Kyra: Yeah, thank you for that. As a student, honestly, that just makes my day to hear like educators and like other academics say like, you know, it's about working with students and understanding their lived experiences and kind of appreciating kind of the differences and, you know, where they come from and things like that, so, yeah, thank you for that.

Samir: Yeah. [You're welcome], yeah, absolutely.

Kyra: Yeah. And as a question I like to end on, what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Samir: Let me think... I mean, you know, practically, there are two...two aspects to the answer really. The first one is very easy: lots and lots and lots of funding for EDI-related work that is...equivalent to the task, equivalent to the challenge ahead. We can't underfund efforts to meet EDI objectives. We can't do it on the back of goodwill. Oh god, just to say again – sorry, I'm going on and on – but just in terms of the whole...you know, my personal background in campaigning for equality over the past 20 years, I've seen at least two cycles of interest in EDI stuff, almost like economic cycles, where something happens in society – the first was the murder of Stephen Lawrence when I was much younger, and then society became interested. You know, EDI and equality came on trend. But then, as soon as other things happened, you know, attention of society shifted, interest waned and it went down, so the whole cycle. And then, in the early 2000s, something related to Labour's, you know, New Labour's multiculturalism, it peaked then, and then it goes away. And I can see, you know, after George Floyd and Black Lives Matter, we've got an opportunity now to make change again, but the pattern always dictates that, at some point, interest will reduce, and what I don't want is for that to happen again, you know? Lots of funding, lots of investment



right now to sustain long-term engagement with this stuff. I guess I'd like to see higher education decolonised, and I think what that means is...what that would call for is a paradigm shift, culturally, politically, philosophically, but that's utopia, you know, that's something that will never happen. But I think as long as there's some sense of what that might look like and we can make that vivid, we can paint that picture and make it as vivid as we can be, we'll always have something to map our progress against.

Kyra: Thank you, Samir. I think that's a really nice way to just bring this interview to a close as well, and I just want to thank you again for joining me on this episode of the podcast. It's been nice just getting to know you a bit more and also kind of discuss an area that I think not a lot of people kind of take the time to really think about and unpack, and obviously everything that's going on in your EDI role as well. But, yeah, I've learnt so much from this conversation alone, so yeah, thank you!

Samir: [...]. It's good to meet you, and, actually, thanks for the fantastic questions really, and most of them, a lot of them, I just hadn't thought about, you know, before, have never been asked before, and I think, you know, your questions are a really good example of the way forward, is just ask the right questions and pursue the answers to them and that's part of the issue, so just to say thanks for those questions and the chance to talk about it. It's really, really nice to be able to do that.

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