Yes, I am aware of the irony of a middle aged, white Englishman talking about diversity and inclusion at an international conference, particularly in this year of Brexit.

Well I’m from Jisc, the UK NREN and I’d like to think we are a pretty diverse and inclusive organisation. We certainly aim to be. I got plenty of help from our diversity officer ***(YES WE HAVE ONE FORTUNATLY),*** for this talk, and when I look around the offices back home I see, know and work with a community of staff which represents what politicians like to call “modern Britain”. A diverse range of race, nationality, gender, sexuality, non neuro typical - and that same diversity is represented in the education sector I primarily engage with,Where 16% of known ethnicity of staff is Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)

However – it is said that ***If you are not having an uncomfortable discussion about diversity and inclusion, you are NOT having a discussion about diversity and inclusion***

So let’s get uncomfortable.

That’s Jisc’s executive leadership team,–That’s the runners and riders for the next UK Prime minister. When you’re lagging behind the UK Conservative party in terms of top level diversity I think it demonstrates you have work to do.

And here is the gender and ethnic breakdown of Jisc as a whole. So it’s a snap shot – the makeup of our Leadership team clearly doesn’t reflect our whole organisation workforce – but I don’t doubt everyone has those senior positions on merit and I don’t doubt our recruitment practices are fair but you have to ask yourself if some unconscious bias, present?

Somehow, is the Praetorian image of a white public school educated male, with the accent which passes the correct shibboleth, the one we select, promote, invite to a conference panel or indeed SEND to a conference to represent us, perhaps seen as “safe hands”?

UK universities have a commitment to increasing representation, progression and success of minority ethnic staff highlighted in the Race Equality Charter. but BME groups clearly under represented at top universities and private education in the UK, which still dominates the top jobs in both the private and government sectors. In 2017 UK Universities had **ONLY FIVE** Black senior staff in total, but plenty in support roles. Why? Well perhaps opportunities are being provided almost on a self-selecting basis. Promotion of the same by the same.

We know that organisations which have diverse workforces – particularly diverse decision making groups have better outcomes. It’s obvious, you’re drawing from a wider range of experience and knowledge.

And it’s why it’s important here. Conferences such as this are not just about staying awake as the CO2 level slowly rises. Standards are set here, such as on user experience -the unknown unknowns which can only be spotted if you have the right people in the room. I am /was the speaker with the loud voice who always refused the microphone, until a colleague informed me that the microphone isn’t for “Me” it’s for those with hearing difficulties who can actually hear sound through radio speakers better.

As a conference with the key aim of supporting Higher Education sectors we need to reflect diversity initiatives and stop promoting people and sending people to conferences JUST because they are similar to ourselves.

Unconscious bias is kind of evil trickle-down economics. The impact of its effects can grow throughout someone’s career exponentially. And even when we can negate bias, we need to remove the barriers to those who might put themselves forward from BME groups but do not because of all the factors which can undermine their confidence and willingness to do so.

BUT this isn’t plea to answer those questions, it’s a plea to start ASKING those questions. And the answers WILL be uncomfortable. When trying to get statistics on UK conference BME attendance, I found that organisers were sometimes unwilling to collect it because of fear they might perpetuate barriers that they actually want to remove. Other organisers want to “fix it internally” before going public. Understandable, but it doesn’t reflect transparency and it certainly doesn’t help us address the problem, if the information is siloed.

I really hope that you’ve been sitting here, slightly annoyed thinking – ***This just doesn’t apply to my organisation***. But if you haven’t been, – Then PLEASE become the THAT person who raises “diversity” –next time a staff opportunity comes up.

Thank you.