

The Royal Observatory Edinburgh Institute for Astronomy's experience building an Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion team

The Institute for Astronomy at the Royal Observatory Edinburgh (University of Edinburgh) convened a grassroots Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) team in early 2020, and has since enacted a range of initiatives aimed at increasing DEI literacy as well as enacting real change, with an eye toward improving the graduate school experience. I discuss progress and challenges in building the group outside of formal institutional support, hoping to provide insight to other institutes looking to build their groups, and also hoping to gain insight from other institutes that have had longer experiences to draw from. In particular, I review the roles that different academic levels (graduate students, postdocs, faculty) have found in our setup.

SLIDE 1

I'm Mike Petersen, from the University of Edinburgh.

I'm very thankful to the organisers of the conference for putting together this special session. I'm here to present some aspects of our experience building an Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion team at the Institute for Astronomy, the University of Edinburgh's outpost at the Royal Observatory Edinburgh. The ROE is shown here on the typically green hill, with equally typical overcast skies.

Throughout the talk, I'll be using the slightly British acronym EDI (equality, diversity, and inclusion), and referring to the IfA (Institute for Astronomy).

I was a little bit apprehensive presenting on behalf of the whole group, but it's worth highlighting some of the efforts taking place. While I'm going to talk about what we're doing, I'm very hopeful that we can discuss best practices that I can bring back to the Institute for Astronomy.

The EDI team at the IfA is only about a year old, which is why I'm emphasising the 'experience building' aspect of the talk. I'm also really interested in accountability -- we're very much learning on the job, so we thrive on feedback.

SLIDE 2

Very briefly, I want to orient us and point out that this is not a talk about justifying why improving EDI is great. There are myriad reasons that I am happy to discuss in other venues if you aren't yet convinced, but I'm starting this talk knowing that improving EDI is helpful for everyone.

I'm also not addressing the differences between the United Kingdom and the United States; I'm starting with an assumption that the UK and US are more similar than different with respect to building inclusive programs in an inherently global field.

This talk is also not exhaustive or complete, and I hope that not only will there be questions in this session, but that there will also be ample opportunities for additional discussion.

The talk IS an introduction to our contribution to improving EDI at the IfA through the grassroots team we have assembled. It is also an invitation to give us recommendations of what has worked at other institutes.

SLIDE 3

The Institute for Astronomy is a piece of a larger School of Physics and Astronomy, which has its own equality, diversity, and inclusion group. We wanted to set our own goals as a group of 100 people who nominally see each other every day, and want to build an inclusive community. The IfA is responsible for its own graduate admissions, postdoc hiring, and largely faculty hiring as well.

I mentioned on the last slide that we're a grassroots organisation, and I think that's key: given that we operate outside of the typical IfA power structures, we're free to define our own purpose.

So with input from postgraduate students, postdocs, and faculty, we spent some time crafting this statement last summer when the group was brand new, and I think it still stands as a pretty good set of core principles. Yes, it's words and not inherently actions, but the exercise of intentionally writing our goals was a good motivator to start the group. I like to try and map our activities and goals onto this.

SLIDE 4

It's hard to get something like this going, so I'm really proud of the team members for sticking with it, and for the bunches of people that have dropped in for a session or two. We're all here to improve EDI together.

We successfully mapped the University EDI bureaucracy – no mean feat. This directly led to an ability to lobby the University to join UK-based advocacy and mentoring groups, such as Black British Professionals in STEM (or BBSTEM). We've also given talks at open events highlighting the contributions of a diverse set of scientists to the IfA.

SLIDE 5

And then to highlight two that I'm really proud of our effort on...

The IfA engaged in our first anonymized graduate school recruitment this year, which was designed by two of our faculty. After unblinding, the IfA selection panel was able to show evidence of a more representative recruitment process from the admissions to interview to acceptance phases. We identified some improvements for next year – such as upgrading University forms to not include only binary gender options -- and are looking forward to continuing to grow.

We've also been very successful building out a framework to send out a newsletter for improving equality, diversity and inclusion literacy, which is a contribution that we've really noticed returns from. I'd encourage people looking for a place to start to consider doing something like a newsletter. I'll walk through one on the next slide.

SLIDE 6

Anyone can write a newsletter based on what they are interested in! We've had postgrads, postdocs, and faculty write contributions across a variety of topics.

Try to improve awareness and bring top-line equality, diversity, and inclusion studies or practices to the forefront. The primary goal is to remove any excuse of ignorance, but in a less boilerplate way than HR-type trainings and often focused on academic and astronomy-specific topics.

The newsletter follows a set format, and is broadly sent out to the entire institute. There is implicit support from the IfA leadership, but I want to emphasise that this is a grassroots effort that anyone can take part in. We pair newsletters with discussion sessions.

SLIDE 7

The informal coffee sessions are a way for people to broaden their knowledge about EDI issues and discuss these with others.

The more "formal" meetings are for discussing actions, which everyone (including PhD students) are welcome to join, even if they don't feel they have anything to contribute.

We act transparently and productively: agenda and minutes are public to the whole institute. We will not waste your time! Interestingly, people who don't attend meetings will also engage with minutes, so this is a really worthwhile strategy if you are thinking about trying to build your own EDI team.

SLIDE 8

If you're thinking about starting a group, you can take heart in this data: we conducted a survey and found plenty of support. In particular, the educational aspect of the newsletter has been very well-received.

If you already have an EDI group at your institute, we're still finding our footing and would welcome any advice. In particular, we're working to make the group itself more accessible and inclusive, trying to meet institute members at their level.

SLIDE 9

We've set some clear and ambitious goals for Spring 2021, that I think can have wide impact across the IfA. We've identified these through various discussions. I'm happy to take questions on any and talk further!

SLIDE 10

Thanks again for engaging with this talk, I look forward to the meeting and hearing about other institute's experiences.