

# What enables effective EDI implementation, monitoring, and assessment?

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## **Lessons from the British Council**

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September 2025

## Executive Summary

In recent years, promoting equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the workplace has become an increasing priority for organisations, reflecting an improved understanding of the benefits of a diverse and inclusive workforce. However, despite many employers implementing initiatives, policies and strategies to improve organisational EDI, the effectiveness of such interventions in achieving their desired objective remains poorly understood, and sometimes they are even seen to offer poor value for money.<sup>1</sup> As such, a better understanding of ‘what works’ in the context of EDI implementation, monitoring and evaluation is necessary.

The British Council offers a good organisational case study of factors that support developing an effective EDI program of work, given its decades-long commitment to and successful implementation of several EDI activities. Not only have they achieved their target on gender balanced representation, but they have also successfully embedded EDI action plans into national and global business strategy. Using document analysis and interviews with a cross-section of senior British Council stakeholders, this research, undertaken by IES, teases out key organisational factors crucial for the effective implementation and evaluation of EDI initiatives.

These organisational enablers are necessary for effectively embedding and sustaining EDI actions - taking a systems-wide approach to embedding EDI; senior leadership support and commitment; access to high-quality workforce data; organisational infrastructure, processes, and resources; and an organisational culture that genuinely values EDI.

The case study begins by briefly introducing the EDI context within the British Council before delving into each of the five organisational enablers that can equip EDI leaders and HR champions with the necessary evidence and tools for creating an ecosystem that sustains and strengthens equality, diversity and inclusion.

## EDI context at the British Council

The British Council was established in 1934 by the UK government to address threats to British values, prosperity and security. The Royal Charter defines the three main aims of the British Council as promoting cultural relationships, expanding knowledge of the English language and encouraging educational cooperation between the UK and other countries. Initially operational in Egypt and Portugal, it now functions globally in over 100 countries, with the aim to build bridges and trust globally, enhancing the UK’s international standing, prosperity and security.

Over the last 20 years, the British Council has worked diligently to strategically embed EDI into its operational framework, underscoring its long-term commitment to diversity and inclusion across its global engagements. This approach aims to enhance the organisation's brand, foster global partnerships, and contribute to inclusive policy agendas

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<sup>1</sup> [Inclusion at work panel \(2024\)](#)

in the countries where it operates. The British Council has positioned itself as a leader in EDI by actively communicating its values to local societies and stakeholders. They have built partnerships and generated revenue by showcasing the good work done in the EDI space to external audiences like suppliers, vendors, programme participants, and stakeholders in the communities they operate in.

The EDI strategy at the British Council has three objectives:

- Fostering a more inclusive organisational culture.
- Developing capability and leadership in the area of EDI.
- Measuring performance, impact and legal compliance in the area of EDI.

Efforts to achieve these objectives span six priority areas: age, disability, ethnicity and race, sex and gender, religion and beliefs, sexual orientation, with socioeconomic status as a cross-cutting theme. The British Council has adopted an evidence-led approach to monitoring the progress of EDI plans and assessing their progress against key performance indicators to guide their actions. These actions are designed to address systemic barriers and promote inclusion. The strategy is reviewed every 3-4 years, most recently in 2023.

We highlight two notable processes that allow the British Council to go beyond basic EDI performance monitoring by developing a culture of continuous assessment and feedback:

1. **Using Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** to closely monitor progress on the achievement of diversity and representation within their workforce. The British Council have specific KPIs related to different protected characteristics (for example, 7% of all staff globally self-identify as disabled and 16% of UK-contracted minority ethnic staff hold senior management positions). These KPIs are incorporated into country and business EDI plans, ensuring alignment with broader organisational objectives. Senior leadership is actively involved in determining and monitoring these KPIs, supported by agreed actions such as stopping single-person shortlisting and increasing ethnic diversity in panels. Monitoring and reporting these KPIs occur quarterly, ensuring that the British Council remains on track to meet its diversity goals and can make necessary adjustments if not. Not only do they successfully leverage their people data for real-time tracking, but they also check whether this progress signals real change for target groups. For example, after achieving the gender KPI of 50% women in global leadership roles, they asked whether this had genuinely translated into women in leadership roles feeling more included and engaged within the organisation.
2. **The Diversity Assessment Framework (DAF)** tracks the implementation of EDI action plans across regions and within individual countries, identifying evidence of the impact of these initiatives on furthering diversity and inclusion. The DAF was developed by the British Council in 2010 as a tool to systematically integrate EDI principles into its operations and assess the impact of its strategy. The DAF has five indicators, which help measure the extent to which EDI is being embedded within the British Council's work and workforce. Countries and departments set locally relevant actions based on each indicator and track progress against these quarterly in their EDI action plan. Self-assessed progress is supplemented by central review or moderation, which provides

feedback and brings a degree of consistency. This review allows countries to reflect on what success looks like and whether their actions are effective.

- DAF 1: Leadership – three specific and meaningful EDI actions should be planned and undertaken by the most senior leader (at least two of which must be internally focused).
- DAF 2: EDI Planning tools - should be used routinely and appropriately.
- DAF 3: Outcomes from a planned EDI Learning and Development approach – a rationale and expected outcomes should be set out.
- DAF 4: Acting on EDI data to promote a more inclusive internal culture – an evidence-informed approach supporting a more inclusive culture should be indicated.
- DAF 5: Specific anti-racism objectives – actions to address racism specific to the local context should be set out.

Both the DAF and KPIs have supported the British Council to shift towards a more evidence-based, strategic approach to addressing organisational inclusion challenges, specifically through the increased use of evidence of impact and people analytics, to understand how EDI activities shape and influence the workforce. This also highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of the British Council's efforts to assess EDI initiatives as it seeks to integrate these processes more deeply into its internal and external activities.

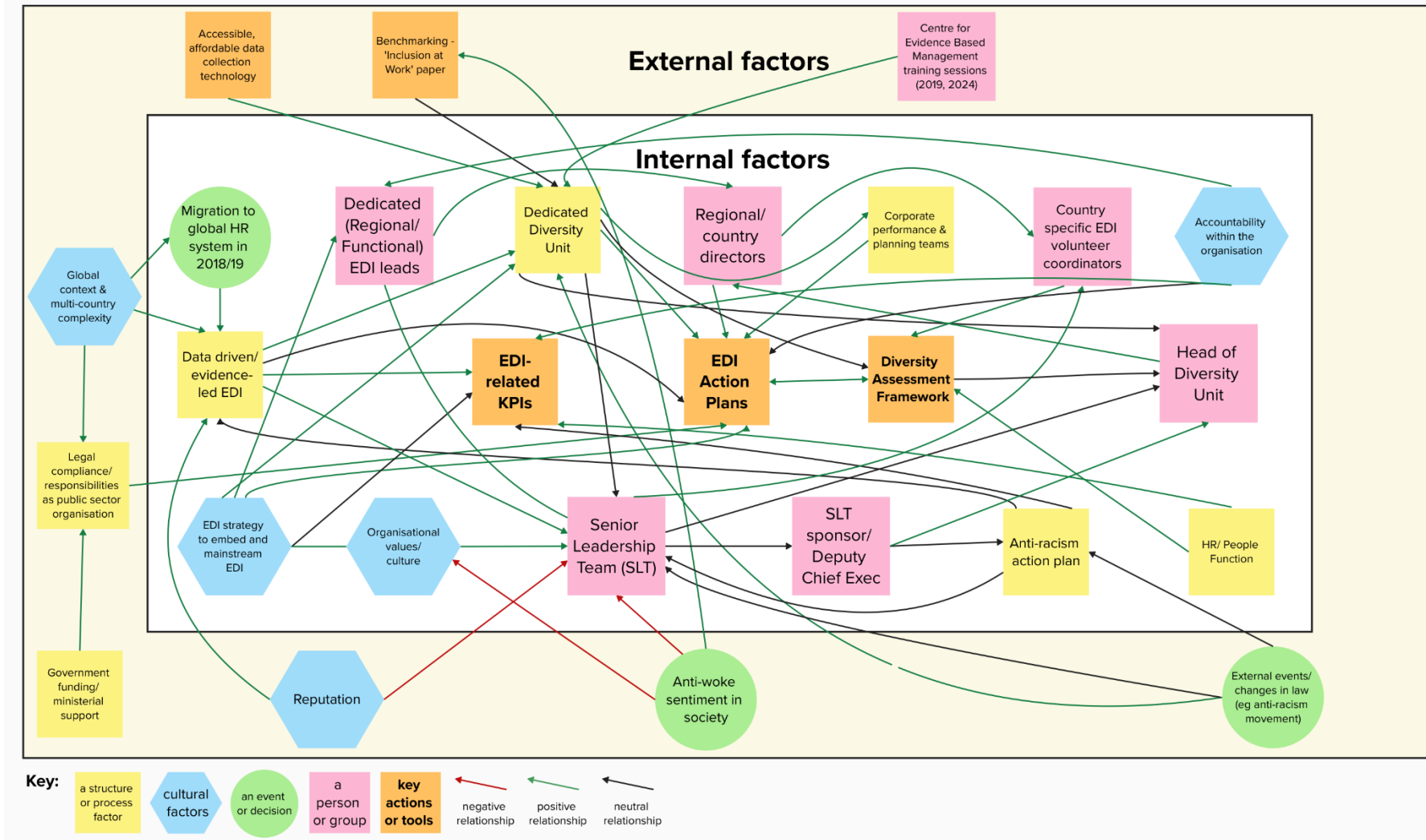
## Organisational enablers for EDI and lessons for employers from the British Council

We now discuss the enabling factors that have allowed the British Council to successfully embed and review EDI activities within the organisation.

### Organisational enabler 1: taking a system-wide view

The most important lesson from the case study was the need to recognise successful EDI implementation and monitoring as a result of many interconnected factors. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the systems mapping exercise that IES carried out for this case study. A highly complex process that encompasses all areas of the organisation, including individuals or groups and processes or practices, whilst also needing to consider wider external influences, was found to exist at the British Council. This complexity further reinforces how difficult it can be for organisations to assess their current EDI practices and to embed new activities or make any changes to organisational culture. Developing a systems map, such as below, could support employers to reflect on how elements within their own organisation interact and what consequences this may have for embedding and reviewing EDI activities.

Figure 1 A complex systems map showing the internal and external factors, and their connections, influencing EDI at the British Council



As shown in the systems map, several internal and external factors interact to shape and influence EDI priorities and actions. These include the Diversity Unit's global oversight, sponsorship by the Deputy Chief Executive, championing by the senior leadership team, investments in a technology platform for the DAF, and availability of good-quality people data. The importance of continuous monitoring, assessment and feedback loops percolates across the organisation, as evident in the importance of EDI Plans and DAF measurement at country and regional levels.

*“The contribution and involvement in the process of other colleagues from around the network meant that even though it was a global tool, it was relevant to the various contexts.”*  
- Deputy Global Head, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

The link between the data-driven and evidence-led nature of the work and EDI strategy, tools and assessment processes is key to successful implementation. Improving organisational (infra)structure regarding people and IT systems is another interconnected factor for reporting in a complex, global organisation. Enhancing the focus and quality of HR information systems helps with tracking data and making comparisons at a global and regional level. This not only aids overall EDI progress but also supports assessment of whether interventions are creating their intended consequences.

Lastly, the systems mapping exercise highlighted the role of external factors like external events and changes in law, in shaping organisational restructuring efforts and driving a climate of greater accountability. Establishing accountability and links to corporate planning and performance emerged as factors influencing efforts to review and assess the alignment between EDI actions and their outcomes.

### **Lessons for organisations: take a system-wide approach to embed EDI**

- Embedding EDI into the organisation is a complex, multi-faceted endeavour requiring a systems perspective with close attention to the interaction between internal and external factors within the organisation.
- It allows leaders to connect and communicate how the external and internal organisational context connects to the broader EDI strategy to enable engagement across the organisation.
- It demonstrates a holistic understanding of the EDI-relevant links within an organisation to see how people, teams and departments are connected and could work together to achieve EDI goals.
- A systems lens ensures the EDI strategy is embedded into all areas and across levels of the organisation.

## **Organisational enabler 2: leadership support**

The British Council emphasises the importance of having EDI ‘champions’ or allies at all levels of the organisation, especially in senior leadership. Senior leaders at the British Council have a good understanding of how EDI benefits the organisation and take accountability for the agenda. In their journey of advancing EDI activities, senior leadership commitment has been essential to the development of the strategy and the DAF. The DAF actively supports decision-making and draws attention to diversity and

inclusion principles among leaders across countries, and helps leaders understand the effects and impact of their activities. DAF data is available to leaders through an online dashboard, making the measurement and assessment of EDI performance accessible, comparable and visual at both national and global levels.

The importance of senior leader support is also linked to the ability to secure funding and sufficient resourcing for EDI activities, encouraging engagement and participation from employees and setting the overall strategic direction for EDI activities. This enables employee participation and voice, for example, promoting the importance of disclosing personal data.

*“When there is a buy-in from senior leadership to have this or to take this forward, this means that the organisation will thrive and will make progress.” - Regional Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion MENA*

Buy-in and support from senior leaders are necessary but insufficient stand-alone enablers for EDI integration. They are critical for unlocking other factors, such as securing and investing in the necessary resources to ensure effective implementation and embedding inclusion into the organisational culture. Active exposure to EDI activities and gaining a better understanding of the business case for monitoring EDI activities enables senior leaders to develop an inclusive mindset and take ownership of the EDI agenda. However, it is important to bear in mind that even when leaders buy into and engage with EDI initiatives, their ability to prioritise these activities is sometimes limited due to a lack of time, for example.

It is also important that there is diversity among senior leadership at the British Council, including lived experience from a marginalised or under-represented group. This prevents issues of groupthink and ensures that a variety of experiences and perspectives are brought to conversations. This diversity and lived experience often translate into greater engagement and visibility of senior leaders in organisational EDI activities, underlining the value of these activities to the organisation, which helps embed them into organisational culture.

### **Lessons for organisations: Foster senior leadership support, buy-in and engagement in EDI activities**

- Ensure that leaders understand that EDI activities and evidencing change take time.
- Encourage diversity and lived experience of EDI issues among senior leadership.
- Build forums and platforms where EDI findings and learning from reviews can be shared with senior leaders.
- Create avenues for peer learning and sharing among senior leaders and line managers to improve understanding of EDI issues and challenges.
- Engage EDI champions across the organisation to help articulate the EDI business case.
- Secure resources for EDI activities and initiatives through leadership involvement.

### Organisational enabler 3: access to high-quality data

Access to robust and comprehensive data is a critical enabler for the implementation and continuous monitoring of EDI activities at the British Council. This includes using existing HR system data and gathering new data and evidence to understand the effects of interventions. Their global HR system ensures the timeliness and consistency of data collection for use within EDI action plans, the DAF, and in monitoring KPIs. A particular benefit of this people system is that it presents data in real-time in an accessible and practical format. Utilising the data collected through the DAF and other HR systems to develop and measure against specific EDI KPIs creates a continuous feedback loop to assess whether current interventions are relevant and effective.

Data is critical for the DAF, where indicators assess the quantity, quality and relevance of evidence from country teams. This rigour maintains the integrity of the DAF but sometimes can raise ethical concerns about competition between countries, balancing performance with honesty. Issues with submission accuracy and relevance arise at times, as task achievement may be hastily claimed as complete or unhelpful actions taken that do not support meeting the EDI goal in practice. This necessitates guidance and cultural awareness in the feedback provided by the central Diversity Unit and DAF moderators.

*“Good data is massively important. As an organisation, we have become much more data-led; we more instinctively go to the data to look at things, and the Diversity Unit has enormously helped with that, because we’re much more strategic.” - Deputy Chief Executive*

Embedding the DAF into British Council operations has been challenging, yet reviewing people data has been encouraged to showcase the impact and alignment between leadership priorities and action plans.

*“It’s necessary for the whole organisation to think a lot more, and we are trying as a whole organisation to be more data-informed and evidence-based.” - Global Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*

An example of how the British Council successfully uses data to assess real progress on diversity and inclusion is by analysing the routes for women into global leadership roles. The Diversity Unit analysed the data and found that women applied for roles at the British Council, but inconsistently. They then examined how these roles were described to determine if they could be better advertised. This continuous review led to the introduction of diverse interview panels and the inclusion of ‘welcome statements’ emphasising that women were underrepresented in leadership roles and that they are encouraged to apply.

Another area of ongoing effort using people data is promoting diversity disclosure. The British Council has encouraged a culture of trust through line managers and country heads to promote the disclosure of personal data on diversity characteristics. However, gaps persist, and ongoing efforts to communicate and reassure staff are required. Challenges with disclosure rates underscore the importance of adhering to best practices in maintaining the credibility and objectivity of the EDI agenda and activities, as well as ensuring transparency in the use of data.

### Lessons for organisations: Ensure EDI-relevant data is accessible

- Establish and communicate the need for and value of robust data and evidence.
- Follow a 'data-driven approach' by collecting data at different stages of a process (e.g. application, interview, offer) when developing and implementing EDI activities.
- Recognise the value of both quantitative and qualitative data.
- Ensure staff have access to data concerning EDI practices and key concepts.
- Identify potential barriers to collecting EDI data and develop corresponding mitigations.
- Provide maximum safeguards for anonymity and confidentiality of data to encourage the participation of employees in EDI activities.

## Organisational enabler 4: dedicated organisational (infra)structure and processes

Organisational EDI activities require adequate structural and procedural setup, particularly if these are large-scale and involve various organisational stakeholders. Organisational design is an important consideration as it determines how empowered, resourced and connected different parts of the organisation responsible for EDI are.

The British Council has established processes for continuous assessment and feedback through support structures such as a dedicated Diversity Unit and EDI leads at a national or regional level. These colleagues provide ongoing assistance, guidance and feedback to country teams to help them make progress on their EDI action plans. This includes conducting planning sessions and providing feedback to ensure plans align with guidance.

Placing the Diversity Unit directly under the Chief Executive team rather than Corporate Affairs in 2022 has meant that the Unit is more integrated into strategy development and executive decision-making. The British Council also embedded EDI more firmly in their global infrastructure by integrating EDI into the organisation's operations and priorities, while ensuring relevant and sufficient resources were made available. This organisational change encouraged a wider, more diverse employee group to become involved in EDI initiatives and activities.

Combined with the leadership's continuous communication of its commitment to diversity and inclusion, this structure has enabled the British Council to establish the processes and systems necessary to implement the DAF and KPIs successfully. The focus and mandate given to the Diversity Unit signal the importance of senior leadership support for the business case for EDI, which helps further secure resources like time for these activities. Additionally, to facilitate the effective use of the DAF, the British Council provides comprehensive support, including online resources, workshops, and personalised guidance to EDI Leads working within countries. This support ensures that staff understand the framework and can address any concerns.

*"It is important to make sure that EDI is not the responsibility of a single person, but it's the responsibility of everyone. Everyone has to play a role." - Deputy Chief Executive*

EDI activities require resource allocation, particularly finances and staff skills, knowledge and time. It should be noted that not all EDI activities are equally resource-intensive; there is a spectrum of resource intensity and robustness, but the organisational structure should encourage and enable the availability of these resources across the organisation. A broad range of relevant skills, knowledge and expertise is also important to give organisations the flexibility and capability to design bespoke interventions since they are not ‘one size fits all’. For the British Council, this meant recognising the importance of adapting EDI activities and monitoring the different national contexts and cultures in which they operate.

Ensuring that the Diversity Unit is the central driver for EDI activities within the organisation signifies that information and data are not siloed off or inaccessible to those developing and implementing these activities. Absence of such a dedicated structure would make it difficult to prioritise EDI activities.

### **Lessons for organisations: Build effective structures and processes for carrying out EDI activities**

- Create processes to allow more open and frequent sharing of EDI information and lessons across the organisation.
- Implement systems and processes that allow for different kinds and levels of data to be tracked and measured.
- Ensure that those implementing EDI activities have appropriate resources, including time, and are empowered to use them.
- Integrate EDI into organisational strategy development and decision-making.
- Ensure staff have access to EDI upskilling opportunities.
- Explore opportunities for cross-organisation EDI activities and interventions, where possible, to encourage collaboration or pooling resources.

## **Organisational enabler 5: organisational culture that values EDI**

Two factors that facilitated the implementation of EDI activities at the British Council are – a) the recognition that EDI is valued within the organisational culture, and b) an organisational commitment to evidence-based decision-making that informs choices and goal setting. If EDI is a key part of an organisation’s culture, this facilitates employee buy-in and participation. Embedding a diversity and inclusion mindset into the organisational culture reinforces a collective organisational commitment to pursuing these activities. Evidence-based decision-making is crucial, as it helps secure resources, gain senior leadership buy-in, and foster interest in implementing EDI activities. However, these behaviours are not quick or easy to implement and embed, as highlighted by the 20-year journey the British Council has been on to get to where it is today on EDI.

*“The overarching vision is for a more inclusive organisational culture, and the way to get to that is through mainstreaming EDI into everything we do.” - Global Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*

An overarching organisational strategy to demonstrate commitment to EDI issues is crucial. A clear link between EDI and the wider organisational strategy signals that EDI is

central to the organisation and is reflected in policies and practices alike. At the British Council, the DAF is seen as providing a framework for mainstreaming EDI in the organisation's operations. This has also increased opportunities for securing and allocating resources to assess whether current EDI initiatives have the desired effect.

*“The organisation doesn't consider EDI as a third wheel. It's central, it's integral, so it comes through in the policies, the communication, everything.” - Deputy Global Head, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.*

At the British Council, building a track record and optimising assessment processes has enabled reflection on progress made, ensuring that previous unsuccessful activities are not repeated. This evidence-based decision-making is ingrained within the culture, especially with senior organisational leaders. There is an organisational appetite for innovation and experimentation in EDI initiatives, allowing for learning and improvement. The DAF is a great example of how the British Council utilises an evidence-based feedback loop to review and improve its EDI actions. Since the DAF's launch, the framework has undergone biannual reviews, with a simplification of the submission process, transitioning from retrospective annual reviews to forward-looking quarterly reviews. Continuous use and shared ownership of the tool have been essential, evidencing the value of feedback loops.

### **Lessons for organisations: Cultivate an organisational culture that is supportive of EDI activities**

- Mainstream a focus on EDI within the organisational culture, e.g. via a dedicated framework that connects to all business goals.
- Articulate the business case for EDI with robust evidence on what works, as this helps build organisational commitment to EDI.
- Develop a track record of EDI activities to learn from and to embed an EDI culture.
- Integrate review points when developing new EDI initiatives to encourage a culture of continuous learning and evidence review.
- Review EDI policies and interventions in line with broader performance reporting on EDI strategy using formal assessment and evaluation techniques.

## **Conclusion**

The British Council provides an excellent example of taking an evidence-led and systems approach to enhancing EDI in a complex and culturally diverse organisation. There is much to learn from their experience of what works to embed and sustain EDI efforts within an organisation successfully. Our research has identified five key enabling factors that make a difference: adopting an interconnected systems perspective, having engaged senior leadership support, being data-driven and evidence-informed, allocating dedicated resources, time and skillsets to EDI implementation, monitoring and assessment, and cultivating an organisational culture that values and supports EDI as an integral factor of organisational success. Nurturing an ecosystem of these enabling factors can help organisations strengthen not only the diversity and representation within their workforce,

but genuinely foster a culture of respect, dignity and inclusion which reaps benefits both for individuals and for the business.

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