



+1 Podcast
Season 1: Episode 4
Keke Song

Medo Pournader:

Hello and welcome to the +1 Podcast where we discuss diversity and inclusion in our workplaces at the University of Melbourne. I'm your host, Medo Pournader, Senior Lecturer in Management and Marketing at the Faculty of Business of Economics, University of Melbourne. In this episode we host Keke Song, Associate Professor of Finance at Melbourne Business School. I talk to Keke about diversity and inclusion in classroom and the role lecturers play in fostering an inclusive environment in the classroom.

This episode was recorded on the land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Medo Pournader:

Hello, Keke. How are you?

Keke Song:

I'm good. Thank you, Medo, for having me here.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, of course. How has your week been so far?

Keke Song:

Well, as I just finished my two final exams in finance in mergers and acquisitions, and I have some final exams to grade.

Medo Pournader:

Was it a hard final exam? Are the students going to pass?

Keke Song:

Well, yeah, it depends on how well they prepare for the finals, as ever, right?

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, we all say that, right?

Keke Song:

Yeah. Yeah, it should be reasonable. Yeah.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, that's cool. And yeah, I noticed today is rainy and cold. It has been cold for how many days now, 10 days?

Keke Song:

More than that. Yeah.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah. It has been cold the whole year. We didn't even have a really warm summer.

Keke Song:

Yeah. So actually, my hometown is really cold, I don't mind the weather here. And I lived in Canada for more than 10 years, I got used to cold weather.

Medo Pournader:

And your hometown is?

Keke Song:

It's in northeast of China. Yeah, so it's quite close to Mongolia, North Korea, and Russia, so it's kind of the cold area of China.

Medo Pournader:

I could imagine, right? So you are quite used to it.

Keke Song:

Yeah.

Medo Pournader:

That's cool. I mean, living in Tehran, we had all the four seasons, and when I talk to people about it, sometimes they're fascinated by it that we had literally snow in Tehran, right? You had-

Keke Song:

How surprising is that?

Medo Pournader:

Right? And we had snow, we had ski resorts, really good ones as well. Yeah, and then we had proper spring and summer and so on and so forth, but yet the Melbourne weather with the wind, it just gets really, really cold. But anyway, welcome to the podcast.

Keke Song:

Thank you.

Medo Pournader:

I'm really excited to have you on board. By the way, before we start our chat about your activities, there was in the news that we had Sam Altman attending Melbourne Business School last week.

Keke Song:

Oh, what is that?

Medo Pournader:

Sam Altman, the OpenAI CEO.

Keke Song:

Oh, yeah. So you were there?

Medo Pournader:

No, I wasn't invited.

Keke Song:

Okay. Let me know next time.

Medo Pournader:

Did you attend?

Keke Song:

No. I'm quite sure I was teaching at the moment.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah. But yeah, that was the exciting news last week. But anyway, please let us know about your background, what you do, and specifically moving toward diversity and inclusion, your activities in that environment, and how you got interested into diversity and inclusion.

Keke Song:

As I mentioned before, I was born in China, and I moved to Canada when I was 22, and I did my graduate study and PhD there in Canada. About six years ago, I moved to Melbourne because of my new job at Melbourne Business School, and my teaching and research are in the field of corporate finance, banking, and mergers and acquisitions. Last year in 2022, I got the invitation to join the D and I Committee at Melbourne Business School.

Medo Pournader:

D and I is diversity and inclusion.

Keke Song:

Yeah, D and I is diversity and inclusion. And I felt quite excited. You know, I think this is important, like actually fits the core value of the school, of the university, so I joined there. And ever since I joined the diversity and inclusion committee, we had a couple of initiatives, and the very first one is about creating a guideline for faculty members to foster inclusive classroom. This is the very first initiative, and we are also working on a couple of other things, for example, how to create institutional pathways for our faculty members, like if we are dealing with some kind of complex D and I issues in the classroom, what's the right procedure to follow. And we are also gathering some resources and support for our faculty members to deal with some complex D and I issues in the classroom. For example, maybe it comes from a kind of heated conversation in class discussion, okay? So this is what we have been working on, and we still have a lot of things to do.

Medo Pournader:

That's fascinating. So for example, what kind of heated discussion, if it's okay to ask?

Keke Song:

Yeah, of course. Let me just give you some example, okay? It can be a case when, for example, if I invited a guest speaker and the guest speaker says something that could be potentially offensive to some students or some visitors from certain background, in that case, because it comes from the mouth of the guest speaker, it's kind of unexpected, and as the faculty member, as the instructor, how we can handle this kind of situation, and this is one of the initiative we're working on at the moment.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah. I mean, how do you handle it? I mean, is there a solution for it, or is there...

Keke Song:

First of all, I don't think this is kind of like a scientific or mathematical problem, we have like a correct solution, right? But we are thinking of several ways how we can help our faculty members to deal with such kind of situation. For example, if we can compile some case studies, of course we are going to hide the names, we can just compile some stories or our experience from the past and we can provide to our faculty members, especially new faculty members, during orientation. And this can be helpful. We can have a group discussion, like we can use our collective intelligence to provide solutions for such kind of a situation. So this is one way, okay?

Keke Song:

And another possible solution, we are still working on it, is try to look for the right people to talk with, okay? Suppose I'm a junior faculty member, if I find a situation that is quite challenging for me to deal with, who should I talk with? Maybe it's the program directors or it can be my mentor, and we are trying to establish this kind of procedure and the faculty members can follow.

Keke Song:

So this is what in our mind at the moment. We are still assessing these solutions and trying to come up with more solutions. And another important source, like resource for us, is like there are some useful books and some useful articles, for example, something called the Faculty Lounge we received from Harvard Business Group Publishing, and they will share their really helpful, useful, and interesting views how they deal with such kind of situation, and we just collect these articles and probably we're going to share with our faculty members to give them support.

Medo Pournader:

Oh, that's fascinating. I mean, to better understand it, for example, if I have got a guest lecturer in my class, and it happens a lot in MBA classes, right? Because of the close collaboration with industry and the dynamic of MBA classrooms. If I have a guest speaker who unintentionally just says something against a minority group, as a lecturer, I would think that probably they didn't mean it, obviously, it was unintentional, it was just something that just was said, but also, I would personally, as a lecturer, would address it during the presence of the person, I am not sure, or after they leave. For example, "I have noticed that. I would like to apologise if anyone was offended." It's one of those delicate situations, right? Because you want to be genuine about it, you don't want to upset anyone, neither the guest lecturer nor the students, and it really needs to be handled with caution, right?

Keke Song:

Exactly. And I think your input is very well, and I like it.

Medo Pournader:

To me, for these types of stuff, as long as one is genuine about it, like taking it seriously and being authentic about it.

Keke Song:

Exactly.

Medo Pournader:

Because humans are humans. From any group, minority group, any background, any ethnicity, we all have similar emotions. Our brains, more or less, our thought process, our decision-making process, our feelings, our emotions are the same.

Keke Song:

That's right.

Medo Pournader:

With minor, minor differences.

Keke Song:

Yeah.

Medo Pournader:

So as long as we acknowledge that, no matter how the packaging looks like, no matter what background, or no matter what religion, we're all the same, and that should be the basic for everything,

every human interaction. I'm glad that we are moving toward that, and it would be fascinating to see such a document. Is it going to be only the document? Is it going to be only for Melbourne Business School?

Keke Song:

Well, so first of all, there are several parts, right? So the first part is about the guideline for our faculty members, like what to do, suggestions and recommendations on what to do when we are teaching and preparing for our course material and how to create syndicated groups that is more inclusive, how to encourage more students to participate in discussion. For this sort of guideline, it's for the MBS faculty members, and I don't see any reason why this cannot be shared with my colleagues at FBE.

Medo Pournader:

Faculty of Business.

Keke Song:

Yeah, Faculty of Business and Economics. And we are happy to share these documents, okay?

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, I think it would be overall helpful across both faculties, and I'm not sure if we have such a thing in the university to raise awareness about diversity and inclusion issues in classroom that might arise. It is interesting to me that how did this idea come about and how did you come up with the idea that such a thing is needed. Was it based on your own personal experience in classroom?

Keke Song:

Part of it comes from my personal experience. This is my own experience. So what happened is, when I was teaching some international finance course and, for example, I find a YouTube video to explain, like very short, to explain the drivers of the exchange rate between two currencies, okay? This is well-explained. But what happened is, in the end of the video, there was an image that could be potentially offensive to my own ethnic group, but I didn't pay attention to that because when I selected the video, the first part is great. I just didn't watch the full part. And I incorporate this part of the video into my teaching and then I realised there is a problem that I deleted. You know, I no longer use this video.

Keke Song:

And I just realised we faculty members, we do need to be more careful. Like some of the potential issues, we can prevent and we can just create a more supportive and inclusive environment for our students to achieve more effective learning, and this is how. And I'm quite sure some other faculty members will probably have some similar experience. We will run into some issues, and we want a solution, like we want a way to be more inclusive and to foster diversity. So this is the key motivation, and of course, this fits the value of the school and the university.

Medo Pournader:

Absolutely. In MBA class discussions, for example, if there is a class that the discussions are about a mix of business and politics or a mix of business and social constructs and social issues, I understand that not only the lecture but also the students usually participate in those types of discussions in such an interactive classroom. What if a student or a group of students, for example, have got some ideologies,

some suggestions, or some comments that might be marginalising some groups in those discussions? On one hand, I would think we need to have some sort of freedom of speech, right? Everyone should be free to express what they think about and what they believe in. On the other hand, though, there might be a potential for a minority group to get harmed, offended, marginalised. If such a situation arises, and I understand it is also a debate in the wider society, right? About freedom of speech on social media. How do you think one can potentially, as a lecturer, for example, in this context, can intervene in such situations?

Keke Song:

Yeah. This is a challenging question. First of all, this is still like the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, this is something we are working on. As the part of the committee, I don't think we have a clear solution for that yet. In my personal opinion, what we instructors can do is, at the beginning of the class, if we can establish a norm or expectation for our students, if we can use more empathy at the beginning and we encourage mutual respects and if we say something, we can feel like the audience feeling at the beginning. This can be helpful. And another important aspect, in my opinion, is we should stress that we are all from... This is a fact, okay? Like most students, like in Melbourne Business School, if we look at their demographic or functional background, we are from very different backgrounds, and it's quite possible we have different opinions, but we need to express it in an ethical way, in a lawful way, and in a professional way. This is my two cents on this important issue. And I'm also curious, Medo, what's your opinion?

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, I believe in freedom of speech, so I think that people should be able to express their opinions. And by expressing their opinions and by respectfully debating those opinions is where one can amend those opinions if it is potentially harmful to groups of minorities. Having said that, it is not getting amended all the time, right? That's why we have these differences and that's why we have extremist groups. By the end of the day, we cannot silence people. I do not believe that it is possible. I mean, I'm coming from a context, I'm coming from a country where the normal practice was to silence people. I don't think it is sustainable. I think everyone should be able to express what they express. It has possible dangers as well, but the more you try to suppress something, the more it might come out the other way.

Medo Pournader:

So in a classroom context, if it happens to me... I mean, my MBA teaching days are way over. I used to teach MBAs a few years ago, not now, so the dynamic of my classrooms are not very much interactive these days. It's very quantitative kind of classroom. But if it happened, if I had an MBA classroom and if it happened, I would let the people who are expressing their opinions express their opinions, but also, I would have expressed my own opinion as well, because I think the collective society would then decide. In this context, a classroom can judge for themselves and can decide the right and wrong in what is being said. I wouldn't ask the student to be quiet. So that is my two cents.

Keke Song:

Yeah. Thank you, Medo. This is very useful inputs for our initiatives on this. Thank you very much.

Medo Pournader:

No, of course. And these things are always sensitive, right?

Keke Song:

Yeah.

Medo Pournader:

So you can only base it on your intuition and rationale. It's good, as you mentioned, to look at the benchmarks, what other people at other schools are doing and what is the usual practice to get inspired.

Keke Song:

And we should also give the faculty members, the instructors a lot of discretion on what's the best solution because, because as you mentioned, for example in my subject, finance is mostly quantitative, so we don't have much really sensitive topics in class discussion. We're talking about the capital market. We're talking about if a financial solution is good or bad, investment opportunity is good or bad. But in some other areas of business or economics or other subjects, it's quite possible we could have some heated debates or some sensitive topics, and the faculty members, the instructors should have a large degree of discretion on how to handle this. So our Diversity and Inclusion committee is trying to provide rather like recommendations and guidelines instead of like, "This is what must have been done." So this is our purpose.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah. I think that's a good approach. Great. And just moving back a bit, in your development as an academic, have you had any experiences in the classroom or personally that you would've thought it would've been addressed better if there was more awareness, for example in Canada or while growing up, that also inspired this line of work that you're doing?

Keke Song:

Probably, yes. Like we all learn from our own mistakes. Making mistakes is part of learning. If I can do something from the very beginning again, probably I will start to address some of the issues from the very beginning of class. For example, and this is part of our recommendation for the faculty members, so when we select some cases, for example, it's a good idea to make sure the names of the characters used in the cases are representative and inclusive enough, not just like male names, male CEOs, or fully, say, Anglo names. This is something we can do, something small but we can do from the very beginning. And when I create syndicate groups, for example, I need to balance. I want to make sure the syndicates are diverse, but I want to avoid tokenism. And this can be also very harmful. And these are just some small things. If I teach some new courses again in the coming term, this is what I'm going to do. But probably in the past, I didn't pay too much attention to it, and yeah, we can always improve.

Medo Pournader:

Oh, that's a great point, which got me thinking that for diversity and inclusion. To me, my understanding so far is that we have got some minority groups that we are increasingly paying attention to them, for example, LGBTQI+, disability groups, neurodiverse groups, to some extent women in workplace, but then again, there are some groups that kind of are part of diversity and inclusion but are a bit still not included in the discussion or I haven't seen that much of it.

Medo Pournader:

For example, we had a guest in the last episode, Professor Susan Ainsworth. She was working on... Sorry. She was working on age groups, senior people and their inclusion in the workplace. And we know that we have got some unconscious biases sometimes. For example, gender biases is definitely there. But also, we have got biases against different age groups, right? On one hand, if you're a senior person, you can be perceived as someone who has good experience and who has good insights, but on the other hand, you can be perceived as someone, for example, who is not very comfortable working with the new technology or who cannot keep up. But these are all just preconceptions, prejudgments. They are not necessarily true.

Medo Pournader:

I think that still in our workplaces, from experience... Or on the other hand, the chat that Susan and I had last fortnight was about I personally have sometimes in the meetings have noticed because I look younger, my voice is not being heard. So compared to my older male colleagues, specifically, so I'm younger, I'm a woman, I'm from international background, I've got colleagues... Rightfully so. I mean, they're more experienced, right? But they're male, they're older than me, and I have noticed the group dynamics sometimes, where we sit around in meetings, their thoughts and comments are being taken more seriously than mine. I'm not saying other people do it intentionally. I'm saying it is unconscious bias.

Medo Pournader:

Or even in an MBA classroom, for example, if a younger female MBA student expresses an opinion compared to an older person, male or female, or with a different status, for example, that older student might be a more senior person in industry, but that doesn't necessarily mean that their comments and opinions are more valid than the other person. But in reality, would all the students and the lecturer, are we really going to perceive both comments from these both people equally?

Keke Song:

Well, yeah. Medo, thank you very much for raising that point. You know, we work in the academia. We are aware of this problem. And actually, I just want to give you an example. When I try to invite some guest speakers into my classroom, I look at the industry, and the gender imbalance or the unconscious biases, I think, is even more severe, and sometime I have to request. I really want a diversified group of guest speakers. Even though maybe in the industry, in the finance industry, in the investment industry, like for example some female financial professionals, they do not move to a very senior level, but I still want them. I want my students to hear the voice. Especially, I want my students, regardless of their gender, they become interested in finance and investment, and I'm happy you just to speak it out.

Keke Song:

And another point I want to comment is, when we say diversity or inclusiveness, inclusion, it's a multidimensional issue. It's not just male versus female. We have some other dimensions of inclusion issues, and the more we realise the potential issues are, the greater the progress we're making, and I'm happy to see we're making progress in this part.

Medo Pournader:

The comparisons between different demographics are between males and females, whereas what about other ethnicities, LGBTQI groups, decision-makers on boards or in any specific context in my research in supply chains? In supply chain operations management, we are just starting to scratch that

surface and then see what is the difference in decision-making between different groups of people, different groups of demographics, ethnicities, and people who we would call in a certain context a minority, minority group. So yeah, absolutely. I mean, in my own research, I've found that consistently, consistently, which is interesting, that women are more sensitive to ethical issues compared to men. But also, a disclaimer is that there is also research out there that is inconclusive about females' and males' reaction to ethics, and I think there are other variables involved, like power dynamics, how much money is involved and on the line, what's the context of decision-making, how much pressure, internal extent there is in decision-making, and so on and so forth.

Keke Song:

I'm happy to hear that because this is our, we researchers, how we can contribute. We extend our knowledge on this, and this will help with the D and I, diversity and inclusion, issues, right?

Medo Pournader:

Absolutely. I just recently saw a paper in our field in a really good journal about the 'rainbow operations', as they call it, because my background is operations management and how the LGBTQI+ are actually involved in decision-making, supply chain logistics and operations, which was-

Keke Song:

I'm curious, what's the finding, if you don't mind?

Medo Pournader:

I didn't read it.

Keke Song:

Okay, okay. Nevermind.

Medo Pournader:

Hopefully they make it more fun.

Keke Song:

Yeah, okay.

Medo Pournader:

I'm hoping. But no, I haven't read it yet. But I think the discourse is slowly starting. Yet to be seen what's going to happen.

Medo Pournader:

Great. Any other activities that you'd like to share with us? Any other projects related to D and I or overall? And considering the current work that you're doing, if the broader community in the university can be involved or if anyone outside there who is listening to this podcast who is interested can be involved?

Keke Song:

Melbourne Business School and the Faculty of Business and Economics, we have a very good collaboration on the diversity and the inclusion issues. For example, Professor Flora Kuang has been one of the members, like not the all-time member, okay? But she has been sitting on most of our meetings and she shared a lot of efforts, like the webpages, the wonderful work done by the faculty. And if we, Melbourne Business School, the committee, we made any progress, we are happy to share it with the faculty like by the name of inclusion, like we collaborate on these issues, like this is part of a definition of inclusion.

Medo Pournader:

Absolutely. And I hope the work that you're doing would also be shared with the diversity and inclusion committee of the university, just in case, as a suggestion.

Keke Song:

Of course.

Medo Pournader:

Because I was looking at the diversity and inclusion initiative of the university. There were so many good action items on it. I'm not sure whether there was something on it about the classrooms, the actual classrooms, and diversity and inclusion considerations in a classroom, so it would be really interesting initiative for the whole university and hopefully beyond that. I mean, within the workplace and work dynamics, what are the implications for that? Any final remarks or anything that you would like to share?

Keke Song:

Of course. We still have a lot of things to work on. We're trying our very best to improve, to create a supportive and inclusive environment for all the faculty members, staff, visitors, contractors, students, of course. Yeah, let's continue our effort.

Medo Pournader:

Great. And good luck with that, and thank you for the great job, Keke.

Keke Song:

Thank you, Medo.

Medo Pournader:

Cheers. Take care.

Thank you for listening, and please don't forget to subscribe to the podcast series. Please also reach out, let us know what you think and whether you'd like to contribute to +1 Podcast series.