

## **Transcript**

Hello, my name is Monder Ram, I'm the Director for the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship and a Professor of Small Business at Aston University.

### **Please can you tell us a little bit about your background in higher education?**

I've been an academic for over 30 years, and my entry into higher education wasn't a traditional one. I was the first in my family to go for a degree, I was the only member of my family not to work in the family business, but there was something in higher education that attracted me, and so when I eventually became an academic in the early 1990s, it was a whole new world for me. In my 30-year career I have to say I found it massively rewarding, massively energizing, massively stimulating.

I think for me, it's been, I've been able to combine my interest in entrepreneurship, that's my area of study, I'm a professor of Small Business, with the more theoretical, my more theoretical interest in inequality, inclusion and diversity, and in each institution I've worked at I've had an opportunity to pursue those interests and it's been a wonderful uh experience being able to think about serious subjects and utilise that, that period of reflection, to apply insights to the real world, so I've found it a massively rewarding experience.

### **Please can you tell us about your journey into Academia and any role models who may have encouraged you to pursue an academic career?**

I think the question of role models is a very interesting and very important one. When I was starting out there weren't many academics of colour in senior positions. There were plenty at the more junior levels, and there were some in the professional services, but in terms of occupying senior roles there weren't many who I would say were role models.

Having said that, I've been very fortunate that at key points in my academic journey I felt incredibly supported by individuals I worked with, senior individuals I worked with, so, for example my academic supervisor when I was actually doing a PhD at Warwick University, Professor Paul Edwards, was one I would call a role model and actually, I still work with him, he's someone who engaged in my work, saw the potential in my work, and encouraged me to pursue my ideas and gave me licence to do that and I think that was hugely, hugely, important to my development it sort of legitimised the embryonic ideas I was developing at the time but I think that the substantive point about role models is interesting. I think there is a lack of figures in senior positions who younger academics of colour can look to for guidance and I think that is an issue that deserves a much more systemic response from the university sector.

### **What are the challenges facing universities in terms of diversity, equality and inclusion, and what are they doing about it?**

The role of diversity and inclusion in the university sector is, of course, a very pressing one at the moment because there's massive societal challenges at the

moment that have thrown this issue right to the forefront of the agenda, and universities do need to respond to this, it's not an issue that's going away, the track record hasn't been brilliant, there's lots of evidence of under-representation in the most senior positions within the university sector and I think the response to this agenda has to be serious, and it needs to be systemic, looking at the way resources are allocated, looking at career structures, incentivising a good inclusive practice, those are issues that need to be addressed right from the centre, right to the top of an organization and filter down. I don't think that's happened to the degree one would like, but I think there are examples and encouraging signs that the university sector now is becoming much more attuned to the importance of this and are beginning to move in the right direction. I think initiatives like the race equality charter are to be welcomed, and even strengthened, I think that gives hope that this agenda is here to stay and hopefully there'll be some progress which will enable university to become a much more welcoming place for academics and individuals of colour.

### **As an academic, how do you see the changing environment and the future of academia?**

Well, I think one of the things that needs to be changed if we can advance the agenda and diversity inclusion is the need to change the narrative, universities quite rightly emphasise the importance of excellence whether it's in research or teaching. I think this provides us with an opportunity, because I think the narrative needs now to incorporate diversity inclusion in the story of excellence, so what would an excellent university look like in terms of diversity and inclusion? In my own university Aston University, you know we pride ourselves on the fact that three-quarters of our students are from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Our record in terms of graduate outcomes is a very impressive one, and it shows, and our research track records particularly in the area the business school where I work, is a very good one. And I think what that shows is that the twin preoccupations of, the twin objectives of being excellent at research and also excellent at inclusion are inextricably or can be linked very closely, so I think it really depends on how seriously a university takes this agenda. I think very easily and very comfortably, a commitment to excellence in inclusion can sit alongside the customary preoccupation with excellence in research and teaching.

### **How do universities support their local communities, and are there any barriers to community engagement?**

I do think barriers exist. I think many communities simply are unaware of what a university actually does, what I mean by that is, of course, most people know that universities conduct research and provide teaching, but they do so much more. So, for example in my university we do an excellent job in providing support for small businesses, for example, I'm not sure how many people in the community know about that, and I think the university sector could do a much better job in explaining what it does to the outside world, highlighting the value that it contributes to the locality, highlight the critical role it can play in facilitating social inclusion and social

mobility, so I think there is a really important job here for the university sector to explain what it does and explain its role in communities, cities and regions.

**Do you have any tips or advice for people from ethnic minority groups or disadvantaged backgrounds who might be considering a career in academia?**

Well I strongly recommend those individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds to get involved, universities are a brilliant place to realize one's potential, by definition, university should be about the exchange of ideas, and the valuing of difference, and they should be really congenial territory for individuals from an ethnic minority background, so do get involved, find out the different kinds of networks, different departments, different points of contact, universities have got of multiple points of contacts, there's always a pathway to get into a university, to either do a course a long-term course or a short-term course, there's opportunities for professional development, it can be a brilliant career and there are real opportunities for everyone, but particularly for individuals of ethnic minority backgrounds.