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UKIED Comment

It's time to reclaim 'Woke'!

The term 'woke', which historically was a term that was predominantly used within the African American Civil Rights movement and Black popular culture, is losing its mojo as it has become globally mainstreamed. A word that was once regarded as a positive clarion call to action is now largely relegated to being used as a pejorative term of abuse. For example, 'woke' has gone from, 'Actively informing oneself about the history and experiences of a marginalized and disadvantaged group in society and using your platform or position to bring about some positive change,' to 'Invalidating and/or ridiculing progressive actions and thinking which seek to advance equity of opportunity and social & economic justice for historically disadvantaged groups and individuals'. For example, accusing an organisation of being overly sensitive, because it disinvites a speaker who has expressed hostile views towards the use of diversity targets and other measures intended to diversify a homogenous workforce. Those hostile to the speaker being disinvited argue that this is another example of 'woke' culture going too far.

Origins of 'woke'

In 1923, Marcus Garvey – a Jamaican philosopher and political activist – in a speech to 'Negro Mine Workers' seeking to rally them in response to discriminatory pay and conditions said, "Wake up Ethiopia! Wake up Africa. We were asleep. But we will stay woke from now on." The Oxford English Dictionary credits William Melvin Kelley – African American novelist & civil rights campaigner – and cites his reference in Kelley's 1962 New York Times Magazine article titled "If You're Woke You Dig It", "describing the appropriation of African American/Black slang by white beatniks" (young and artistic people who rejected the mores of conventional society). The musician, Erykah Badu, and the Black Lives Matters movement have amplified the original call to action to challenge historic and contemporary discrimination and injustice affecting Black and other people of colour.

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Wilkes Education Scholarship Trust (WEST)



We are excited to announce that applications are now open for our 5th cohort of scholarship grants! This will be for the 2024/25 academic year. Please contact us at info@wilkestrust.org for an application form, or for further information go to www.wilkestrust.org.

We will have more news in the next edition of Equality Matters!

Do you have EDI news, or an EDI event, which you would like to share in the next edition on 1st December? Please contact melissa@ukied.co.uk

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Why the demise of 'woke'?

There appears to be a modern trend with 'equity catch phrase' terms (equity symbolic term that garners rapid support amongst supporters) such as 'woke' being brought into disrepute by the mainstream media, who then redefines its popular use by references to the term being generally negative. A similar example is the demise of 'Political Correctness' (PC). The use of PC in the early 1990s and early 2000s became debased, resulting in it being used as a term of abuse, to the extent that the term has become so toxic that it is no longer used by advocates of equity, social and political justice.

Defence of 'woke'

Some may ask, 'Isn't this just a big fuss about nothing?' We would argue that it certainly is not, because 'woke' has increasingly become a 'cool' slur, to be applied to anything that is regarded as progressive or challenges the status quo. Those who believe that society has lost its way in wanting to create a more meritocratic society are increasingly able to shut down proposed progressive change or thinking and go unchallenged through the misuse of labelling things 'woke.' In order to stop this misuse and abuse of 'woke', champions of equity of opportunity and social & economic justice need to reclaim 'woke' and restore its true meaning and purpose. A great place to start is the next time someone misuses this historically venerated term – stay 'woke', challenge and enlighten!



The call to action is to
**"START THE
CONVERSATION"**

It is so important for us all to have open conversations about mental health. Take the time, but not just today, to check in on each other, especially those who may be quietly struggling. And remember, if you or someone you know is facing difficulties, professional help is just a phone call away with numerous free helplines, some 24 hours, 365 days a year: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/seeking-help-for-a-mental-health-problem/mental-health-helplines/>.

From a work perspective, employers can do better in supporting their employees. We can all make a difference, even if by making a simple change to the language which we use. A significant percentage of suicides could be work-related, and it has been recently suggested that there is a lack of knowledge around how to discuss the subject appropriately in the workplace. Many employees might not know that the best way to save the life of someone considering suicide is to ask them directly whether they have a plan to end their life.

Did you know that inappropriate language can not only be unhelpful, but even harmful? "Committed suicide" contributes to stigma around suicide as it signals blame, while "please don't do anything stupid" undermines people's experience.

Employers are responsible for ensuring that their workplace is suicide aware. Employers have a vital role to play in closing this gap in knowledge and embedding suicide awareness, prevention and support into their mental health and wellbeing strategies.

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