Principles into practice: the inclusive curriculum (0318)

Anne Hughes
Kingston University, UK

1. Introduction

The widening participation (WP) agenda has encouraged individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds but universities have been slower to reflect on how academic practices best serve this more diverse student body (Archer, 2007). More recently, the sector has recognised the need to focus equality of educational outcomes, not just access, motivated, in part, by persistent differentials in educational attainment between different groups of students (HEFCE, 2015). These 'attainment gaps' are complex in their composition and solutions will be multifaceted. However there is no doubt that the sector must begin to address these potential injustices in part through a critical reflection of their own academic practices (Archer, 2007).

Attainment gaps in higher education must be addressed not only from a social justice perspective, but because they also directly influence the trajectories of academic disciplines. The students who attain less well or who feel excluded do not progress to postgraduate study and as a result their multiple perspectives vanish from the discipline and potential avenues of research are overlooked.

Policies and practices have emerged to encourage institutions to be more 'inclusive'. For many this involves a critical reflection on learning and teaching praxis and becoming more attentive to possibilities of unwitting discrimination based on practices of normative traditional academic practice.

Kingston University has taken significant steps to address the BME attainment gap. As the previous paper has described, these have included creating a value-added score to measure differential attainment in a contextualised form and setting an institutional key performance indicator.

2. Excellence in the Inclusive curriculum

Kingston University has begun to address these issues through its initiative promoting excellence in the inclusive curriculum. Our approach is universal and institution wide. It is intended to improve the experience, skills and attainment of all students. However, it explicitly requires us to act proactively to address practices

which may disadvantage some of our students. We are focusing on delivering cultural change, shifting away from a student deficit model to one where the institution is proactive. In addition it helps to address the ethnicity attainment gap, our challenges around the continuation rates of first generation white males, and changes to the Disabled Students Allowance. Finally it will inform our strategic approach to the Teaching Excellence Framework which we know will "explicitly look at the extent to which….provider(s) achieve positive outcomes for disadvantaged groups" (BIS, 2016).

This initiative builds on our principle of 'concept to review', that is that the principles of inclusivity are embedded within all aspects of the academic cycle from the development and revitalisation of curricula, through the practice of teaching and learning, to the process of assessment and finally full circle to programme review, modification and revalidation. Inclusivity is treated as an on-going measure of quality assurance and quality enhancement. This work is underpinned by a framework which identifies the principles of inclusivity and is outlined in the remainder of the paper.

3. Inclusive Curriculum Framework

Central to the inclusive curriculum has been the development and implementation of three key principles which are fundamental to creating and delivering a comprehensively inclusive curriculum. These are to:

- create an accessible curriculum
- enable students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum
- equip students with the skills to positively contribute to and work in a global and diverse environment

The principles embedded in this framework are used to evaluate the inclusivity of our offer at several different scales - from the institutional level, through academic programmes to modules and finally to individual teaching sessions. At an institutional level the framework can direct departments to think about the inclusivity of, for example, their accommodation offer to students, the nature and timings of their co-curricular activities, their student support services, indeed more fundamentally to the

inclusivity of their mission statement and education strategy. The framework is also being used by teaching staff as a robust scaffold to help evaluate their current practice and act to progress the inclusivity of their curricula in a diverse range of discipline areas. It is being disseminated through workshops

A range of issues are introduced around the accessibility of the curriculum in both practical and conceptual terms. Amongst other issues the use of academic language is reconsidered and the ‘accessibility’ of academic delivery given variable levels of confidence and understanding of the role of the academic in the learning process. The framework also encourages teaching staff to regularly reconsider the conceptual accessibility of their academic offer, reflecting on both what’s included and what’s excluded from the curriculum’s content.

Furthermore and responding to several high profile student led campaigns such as ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ founded at UCL, our framework encourages staff to ensure that students see themselves in the curriculum by including multiple perspectives in their teaching and drawing on thought provoking work from scholars from around the world. These perspectives may be delivered by invited speakers who may better reflect the students’ backgrounds or speakers who can bring a different perspective to a concept or content.

The final principle of our Inclusive Framework is to equip our students to work in a globalised and diverse world. Clearly if our students are exposed to multiple perspectives and life-worlds and they are encouraged to respect diversity and difference then they will be better equipped to work collaboratively with others from a variety of cultures and positions. The framework encourages staff to use the different learning and teaching strategies to embolden students to interact.

Conclusion

The initiative will continue and progress its mission to support staff and to ensure that inclusive thinking is embedded in mainstream institutional policy and practice. Evaluation is on - going and staff are being encouraged not only to enact change in their own curricula, but also to use the differential attainment metrics that the University has provided (including percentage differences and value-added data) to assess the impact of their initiatives. Indeed, localised change in academic programmes across multiple disciplinary areas is already evident.

References

Archer, L. (2007) Diversity, equality and higher education: a critical reflection on the ab/uses of equity discourse within widening participation, Teaching in Higher Education, 17:5-6, pp 635-653.

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Hocking, C. (2010) Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education: a synthesis of research. York: Higher Education Academy