Brookes Briefing: Inclusive Learning

This Brookes Briefing addresses one of the elements of the IDEAS inclusive curriculum model

Inclusive learning can develop the following five core graduate attributes: academic literacy, research literacy, critical self-awareness and personal literacy, digital and information literacy, and active citizenship.

Inclusive Learning is the design and delivery of teaching, learning and assessment that celebrates diversity. It enables students to achieve their full potential by drawing on the strengths afforded by their individual backgrounds and experiences. Inclusive teaching and learning support all students to identify as valued members of the Oxford Brookes community.

Higher Education is more diverse than ever (Mathieson, 2015), and the success rates of different groups of students have come under scrutiny. We know that different groups of students have different rates of completion and attainment, with gender and ethnicity being cited as key factors predicting achievement of a 'good degree', e.g. 1st or 2:1 degree outcome (Cotton et al., 2016). Moreover, male and those identifying from Black, Asian, Roma, Gypsy and traveller and other global majority backgrounds tended to overestimate the chances of gaining a good degree outcome when compared to other student groups.

Nationally, there is a 13 percentage point gap in the attainment of 'good' degrees between those identifying from Black, Asian, Roma, Gypsy and traveller and other global majority backgrounds and White students that cannot be fully explained by factors such as prior attainment and age (UUK &; NUS, 2019). At Oxford Brookes, that gap was 20.4% in 2017/18 (Oxford Brookes, 2020). We must ensure that the learning, teaching and assessment at Oxford Brookes do not disadvantage any groups of students, allowing all students to reach their potential.

The ultimate aim of embedding inclusivity into what and how we teach is to create a learning environment that generates a sense of belonging in all students. Sense of belonging has been described as the feeling of being valued as an individual within a wider community (Goodenow, 1993). Yorke (2016) has operationalised the sense of belonging in higher education using survey statements such as "I feel at home in this university" and "I am shown respect by members of staff in this department" in evaluations.

In the literature, there is a well-established link between a sense of belonging and student success in HE. For example, a sense of belonging has been linked with student satisfaction (Douglas et al., 2015; Stevenson, 2018), academic attainment (Reay et al., 2010; Smith, 2017), and retention (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Thomas, 2002, 2012). In their examination of students' decisions

to withdraw from HE, Wilcox et al. (2005) found that a lack of belonging (specifically, difficulties with making friends) was the most commonly cited factor that contributed to the decision to leave university.

Specifically, there is growing evidence that the lack of belonging that those identifying from Black, Asian, Roma, Gypsy and traveller and other global majority backgrounds students disproportionately experience is one of the hitherto unidentified factors of the awarding gap (Currant et al., 2013; Stevenson, 2018; Thomas, 2002; UUK &; NUS, 2019).

We all have a **legal responsibility** to ensure that the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector equality duty are met. Thus, we all have a critical role to play in ensuring that students can learn in an environment that is inclusive and accessible and fosters and encourages good relations between people from diverse groups. It is important that academics recognise and systematically create space for a diverse range of perspectives rather than privileging a select few (Thomas, 2002). Students, especially those from groups that tend to be overlooked in HE, would have the best chance of success if they could feel a sense of belonging. Most universities make a commitment in policy or strategy documents such as an **Access and Participation Plan**, which can be met through a curriculum that is more attractive and relevant to a diverse range of students, ensuring progression and good outcomes for all and creating a positive social impact.

Principles and practices for evaluating teaching practice

Apply the principles of Universal Design to Learning, Teaching, and Assessment.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is the idea that programmes are designed with diversity in mind rather than the needs of the majority with adjustments for particular needs. Based on a concept originally associated with Architecture, it places flexibility into the learning design so all can benefit. This is achieved by applying the following principles (CAST, 2022).

Multiple means of engagement

- Provide a range of activities and resources that appeal to a diverse range of students' interests to motivate learning. Utilising a range of resources encourages students to select a preferred resource and can promote learner autonomy (CAST, 2022).

Multiple means of representation

- Provide a range of learning materials that enable students to interact with them using a combination of different senses and/or processes. For example, reading or listening to an audio-enabled journal article or watching a video recording.

Multiple means of action and expression

- Have a range of ways for students to demonstrate their progress and set their goals. This could be through written or oral methods.

- Ensure for a summative assessment, the alternative assessment is equivalent to the same marking criteria.

Multiple means of expression support students' right to privacy if they choose not to disclose their circumstances or through not spotlighting individual needs apparent to others. Furthermore, with multiple means of expression, it can reduce the academic workload by not having to create reactive adjustments.

Activities that support UDL principles can include:

- Provide choice in the level of academic challenge, resources, and assessment method.
- Provide materials that are all accessible (see XX Brookes BOOST) and adaptable for students to adjust to their particular learning needs.
- Involve learners in the learning process by setting their own goals and expectations.
- Encourage students to design their classroom activities to increase motivation and engagement.

(CAST, 2022)

Create a Sense of Belonging

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 127) express belonging as feeling at ease in the environment, much like how a 'fish in water... does not feel the weight of the water'. Often it is the feeling of feeling exclusion that is felt (Thomas, 2002). Thus, the aim is to create conditions for all students to feel included and avoid feeling excluded. The first semester or very early in semester two is critical (Bale and Seabrook, 2021) to ensure that all feel included, as this is when students who have not settled in may leave the university (Thomas, 2012). This is important for all students but particularly students from an international, working-class, or those identifying from Black, Asian, Roma, Gypsy and traveller and other global majority backgrounds students background who might be experiencing culture shock at university (Bale and Seabrook, 2021).

Adopt the following ideas to foster a sense of belonging in your teaching groups:

- Use materials and resources that reflect diversity. For example, including publications from the Global South on reading lists. Select a range of case studies and images in the learning material that promote diversity and foster a sense of belonging. A useful check is to consider if a student sees themselves represented in the images on your slide deck.
- Get to know your students. With large groups, this can be tricky but consider how you can make the large small. For example, encourage participation within sessions through digital platforms where students may feel more comfortable contributing.
- Consider activities that encourage students to adopt a differing mindset to consider an alternative perspective from their own.
- Encourage students to generate ground rules for the sessions.
- Use neutral language that does not project an emotive state to respect diverse opinions.
- As part of your duty to uphold the Equality Act (2010), you must challenge discrimination. This can be sensitively achieved by removing the comment from the person who espoused them. This encourages space for the comment to be explored and discussed.

References, resources and further reading

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