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Title

Developing the Inclusive Course Design Tool: a tool to support staff reflection on their inclusive practice

Abstract

Inclusivity is fundamental to higher education, its course design, its assessment and its delivery. The principles of inclusivity offer all students the opportunities to achieve to the best of their ability. The purpose of this case-study based paper is to outline the context, process and development and initial evaluation of a newly generated tool designed for academic colleagues. The Inclusive Course Design Tool (ICDT) offers a series of reflective questions and supporting guidance rooted in theory and research on inclusion, pedagogy, multiculturalism, universal design for learning and implicit and unconscious bias. This first version of the Tool encourages course teams to reflect on and interrogate the nature of inclusive academic practice in their courses, in their course curricula, their classrooms (virtual or physical) and their approaches to student learning and support. The contextualised rationale for the Tool, its design, the consultation process, its early evaluation and future considerations as an institutional tool are explored. Its use to try to reduce the Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) student attainment gap and enhance success and graduate outcomes, and enhance academic practice and reflection are specifically explored.

Introduction

The Inclusive Course Design Tool was generated as part of our institutional Access and Participation Plan (APP) activity to initially contribute to specifically addressing our BAME student attainment gap and support the Office for Students' (2019) drive for wider excellent inclusive practice. It is one strand of a range of initiatives to catalyse our University to fulfil its key performance indicators for student continuation, satisfaction and success and to generate impetus in improving our inclusive practice specifically at course level to support all our diverse student groups and to improve the equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed and progress in higher education.

The inclusive design and delivery of teaching, learning and assessment methods that allow all students to engage meaningfully with the curriculum and achieve their full potential is fundamental to good course design (Thomas & May, 2010) and it was felt that "the course", its curriculum, syllabus and design was the place to concentrate colleagues' energies. The Tool was borne from many institutional and sector contextual and practical pressures and a strong feeling we needed a simple "one stop device" which allowed staff to dig deep into the design and nuances of their courses whilst viewed through a diversity and inclusion lens.

The aim of the Tool was for it to act as a catalyst for the course teams to reflect and interrogate their course level inclusive design and practice. The Tool was to be used once for each individual course. We wanted the outcome of our collaborative work to promote ownership of subject- specific inclusive practice and catalyse actions for enhancement through deep reflection, not just a superficial "ticking off" of perceived activity. It has been shown that a pure "checklist" approach would not have fostered this deep reflection for

educators (De la Croix & Veen, 2018) and colleague feedback showed something better designed, reflective, interrogatory, but administratively "light" would encourage more ownership and colleague engagement.

Our different diverse student groups

There was a clear need to consider the inclusive learning experience and best practice for different student groups and their intersectionality had become a priority. In addition, there was a need to address a closing of our BAME student attainment gap whilst also respecting the specific needs of all our diverse student groupings. For example, our international students, those with mental health needs, disabled students, those from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, students who commute, estranged students or those who may be entering University from care.

For 2019-20, however, the reducing of the BAME student attainment gap needed close attention. In 2020, 19.2 % of our students are BAME (LBU, 2020) and our BAME attainment gap was slowly closing with a downward trend over the previous three years from 2016, reducing from 20.7% to 14.4%, but this was not regarded as a fast enough change. Our University had already made a range of clear, evidence based strategic actions to address this (for example, projects to research BAME students' lived experience (Smith, 2017), focussed activity around placement access, inclusive practice resources and webpages, enhanced practice guidance (Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT), 2018 & CLT, 2019), exploring and enhancing course entry routes and the decolonising of curricular content and reading lists) but cross- University results were patchy. The Tool was "invented" to combine a full consideration of the evidenced factors which impact on student achievement, with a nuanced understanding of course-specific pedagogy whilst, in addition, to allow staff to specifically consider the highlighting and enhancement of BAME students' experience.

Contextual Literature

The clear need for the questions in the Tool to be rooted in best practice research catalysed an extensive literature review to explore the key factors impacting on student satisfaction and attainment and to explore the broader elements of inclusive academic practice. Findings were synthesised and distilled into the early drafts of the questions. Extensive exploration of the key issues and questions arising from the educational literature and the factors which impact on students' sense of inclusion was undertaken. Literature relating to intercultural education (Salkind, 2008; HEA, 2014; Advance HE, 2013; Sian, 2017), ethnicity and attainment (Cotton et al, 2013; Stevenson, 2012; Smith, 2018; Miller, 2016 ;Hoffmann et al, 2002), student sense of belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2019; Hausmann et al, 2007; Woodyat and Brooker, 2019; Tovar, 2013), universal design for learning (Burgstahler, 2012), teaching excellence (Pickford, 2018; Palmer et al, 2014), co creation of curricula for a sense of inclusion (Bovill et al, 2016) effective inclusive feedback and assessment (Thomas and Jones, 2017;) placement access and practice (Jones et al, 2017) and institutional racism and microaggressions (Sue et al, 2007; Currant, 2015; Pilkington, 2013) were explored and then discussed at a half- day workshop. Our own institutional deep dive projects into our BAME student attainment gap and the needs of commuting students (disproportionately represented by BAME students) were also used as a springboard for discussion. (Smith, 2018; Smith 2017). Themes and ideas from the literature were discussed in terms of our own

local academic practice, our own emergent Student Union BAME student ambassadors and hopes for the future of the education of all our students

Main aims of the Inclusive Course Design Tool

The Tool was primarily developed to:

a) encourage colleagues, though their active reflection stemming from using the Tool, to be more focussed in their appreciation of their inclusive practice as core to the design of new courses and integral to the content and approach of existing courses;

b) underpin the "signing- off" (by senior School leadership teams) of the Tool action plans for quality purposes;

c) specifically focus attention through our course practices on narrowing the attainment gap for BAME students; increased visibility of the questions for the first year of use (from March 2020) which specifically focus on BAME attainment;

d) embed basic standards of inclusive practice for all, thereby enabling a review of the current Reasonable Adjustment Plan process;

e) increase the visibility of specific groups of students through the wording of the questions and the language and terms used.

f) ensure accessibility. Under the Equality Act (2010), we are required to ensure that all our services and materials are accessible to disabled students. As such, it is necessary to ensure that all teaching and learning environments can be accessed and used by any disabled student, not only those students who choose to tell us they have a disability. Accessibility became a key principal underpinning the design of the new Tool. All features used in the tool were testing using the JAWS Accessibility Test and also tested using Android and ios mobile devices.

g) be suitable for teams of course staff to use online or face to face or blended courses especially in the light of the focus on changing ways of practice during and after the coronavirus pandemic. Equally, the language used in the Tool needed to relate to the diverse ways we deliver courses (i.e. wholly online, blended and face to face.)

Alongside the literature review of current contextual research, a scoping of other course focussed inclusive practice resources in the sector was undertaken, reviewing their accessibility, quality, breadth, practicality, supporting guidance (MMU, 2020; SOAS, 2018; UCL, 2018).

Most of these resources, though valuable, adopt a checklist approach or one that focuses on specifics and less on the coherence drawn from utilising the multiple lenses which can contribute to good course design, delivery and pedagogy. Our approach acknowledges the philosophy of the Connected Curriculum (Fung, 2017) which advocates that students should learn actively through research and critical enquiry, rather than by passively receiving accepted knowledge. It also reflects Croucher and Roman's (2007) work that inclusive course design acknowledges all students' entitlement to access and participate and that this

is considered through all elements of a course life cycle. We also acknowledge that students are different, learn in different ways and that a non- fragmented, coherent, inclusive course design lends itself to simpler teaching, is easier to plan, is easier and more meaningful for all students to understand and generates better student outcomes (HEA,2011; Hockings, 2010). Although Moore et al (2017) have devised a reflective Tool for US universities which considers inclusion, this primarily addresses broader social issues (e.g. unconscious bias) and has less emphasis on the specific reflection on the practical and pedagogic course-related issues. Our Inclusive Course Design Tool uniquely focuses on six elements (Pickford, 2018) which, when synthesised, enhances the coherence of the design but also offers the opportunity for colleagues to reflect on the specific needs and style of their course and how to practically improve its pedagogy and delivery.

Key features of the Inclusive Course Design Tool

The key features and approach to implementation are:

a) Our APP requirements were mapped and considered as part of conceptualisation and design of the Tool. The Tool itself (and its reflective questions) is designed around a philosophy that student success is dependent upon individual student engagement and that engagement is an individually-owned and personal concept (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006; Trowler, 2010). Our methodology builds on the philosophy by explicitly specifying the requirements for maximising student engagement in a course (Table 1, Pickford, 2016). The Tool specifically focuses course team reflection on curriculum design, the learning environment and different learning activities.

Table 1: Inclusive course-level design:

Requires opportunities for each student to engage with their course:	*Can only be provided through design of a course's:*	*Is achieved through course-level:*
Behaviourally	Curriculum	Planning
	Learning environment	Management
Emotionally		Student support
	Learning activities	Community
Conceptually		Student development
	Curriculum	Student challenge

These six best practice core sections which structure the format of the Tool (see Figures-a-f below) are consequently i) planning your course, ii) managing your course, iii) supporting all students on the course, iv) building the course community, v) providing appropriate development opportunities for all students and vi) challenging all students on the course. Institutional priorities (for satisfaction, continuation and student outcomes) and requirements for the UK Quality Code for HE and FHEQ requirements and outcomes are encapsulated in its content (Pickford, 2018a). It has underpinned approaches to course development at Leeds Beckett University since 2016 and has been evaluated and tested in use at an institutional level as well as informing practice across the sector and quality indicated in requests from other HEIs and HE pedagogic organisations. (Pickford, 2017; Pickford, R., Smith, S.V. and Thomson, S., 2018; Pickford, 2018b; Pickford, 2019).

b) The Tool questions are all underpinned by research evidence and a full linked TALIS Aspire reading list is integrated into each section of the Tool. Each Tool segment has tailored resources and simple contextual guidance.

c) The development of contextual guidance was undertaken and reviewed by colleagues for relevance and understanding. Colleagues were also asked to offer their own discipline-specific literature on inclusive practice to inform the research base. This was integrated into the reading list.

d) The Tool and its guidance with supporting text for colleagues is hosted on our internal CLT Teach Learn page and will then be made available to the sector through open access and we will consider if it should be licenced to Creative Commons after it has been fully evaluated when one academic cycle is complete.

e) Face to face and online webinars for Staff development were set up across both campuses to support colleagues to use the Tool.

f) The Tool was used by all course teams from March 2020 (after its approval at the University Academic Board) to explore their inclusive practice over time in both the design and delivery of their courses.

g) Course Directors were expected to formulate an initial action plan by Summer 2020 which, in the first year will focus specifically on the 13 flagged BAME attainment/experience related questions. (see Figs a-f).

h) This action plan is being implemented and embedded into the undergraduate course monitoring annual review and enhancement processes and reported through our Academic Quality and Standards Committee.

i) The Tool will also be required to be used to inform all new course validations from 2020/21. Our University Deans will then need to sign off the use of the Tool and its new course design action plan prior to new course approval is granted.

j) Our LBU Teach Learn website is externally accessible at https://teachlearn.leedsbeckett.ac.uk. The aim is to make the Tool itself open access after the next stage of evaluation and consider if licencing it through Creative Commons is appropriate once it is further refined and tested in different course subject contexts.

The Development Process:

The Tool was gradually refined through four consultative phases from an initial booklet with 73 questions to a 42-question graphical form with 85 unique, supporting evidence-based resources. Wide consultation over several months was sought from academic and professional service staff, the Students' Union and their representatives prior to formal university approval.

The iterative development process revealed the need to consider inclusive practice at course level rather than module level. Colleagues felt a more holistic reflection would offer a more integrated, coherent view of activity, identify gaps, and reduce silo working. Many staff felt that there was then potential for an individual module review of inclusive practice could then follow after the gaps and concerns were identified and discussed collaboratively at course level first.

Colleague and student feedback mainly focussed on the need for plain English, more flagging and increased visibility of the questions which targeted BAME students' attainment specifically, more rigorous accessibility software checking, ease of use (hard printed copy or

online completion across all formats and platforms), and tighter, clearer, research -based guidance recommendations. A sign-off sheet for senior managers was integrated into the Tool.

The Tool questions:

The whole Tool can be seen below in Figure 1 (a-f)

Figure 1- Inclusive Course Design Tool

The Tool questions are detailed below in the shaded sections (sections a-f). The questions marked with a 🚩 highlight some important areas which based on the literature may help to address our BAME student attainment gap.

Some questions were piloted and rephrased many times during the consultation process to ensure clarity. Simple supplementary research-based explanations to explain the rationale of each question was inserted in the linked guidance. Academic colleagues do, as part of the nature of their role, take a critical and interrogatory approach to information. This was regarded as important during the writing of questions and the supporting Tool guidance. Ambiguities in wording which led to staff confusion were taken seriously. For example, during consultation, staff discussed their understanding of inclusive terminology and using inclusive images in relation to question 1.8 - "Do your course and module materials and handbooks use appropriate plain, inclusive terminology, language and images?"

The insertion of specific supporting references to enhance clarification, guidance from the Plain English campaign about inclusive language and a statement "Simple jargon free language allows more students to engage more easily with materials "helped clarify understanding about the question for colleagues. Each question was systematically explained and addressed in this way.

PLANNING YOUR COURSE

1.1 Have you included a clear course statement related to inclusive programme values within your student-facing course documents?

1.2 Do your course aims and the overarching course design consider your students' diverse prior learning experiences (especially those who may be from underrepresented groups)? 🔖

1.3 Does planning for the first term include taking active steps to understand the subject and broader academic/life experiences for all groups of incoming students?

1.4 Do you identify in advance, specific groups of students who may need additional support at pre–arrival, during induction or at course transition points?

1.5 Do you offer a choice of different assessment methods/tasks/topics to reduce the need for alternative assessments and is this choice clearly embedded in the module design and course assessment strategy?

1.6 Is there a clear course process for considering the clarity of assessment tasks and marking criteria?

1.7 Are your assessment submission dates planned using cultural calendars to ensure you are responsive to the religious and cultural needs of a diverse cohort? 🔖

1.8 Do your course and module materials and handbooks use appropriate plain, inclusive terminology, language and images?

1.9 Does the course team provide students with electronic copies of teaching materials developed and produced in accordance with UK accessibility guidance?

1.10 Do you specifically consider how to integrate commuting students into the course? (e.g. consideration of social space, careful timetabling, blended learning, assessment submission timing) 🔖

Figure a - Questions for Planning Your Course

MANAGING YOUR COURSE

2.1 Does your course monitor the number of applications received from different groups of students and seek to actively address any differences?

2.2 Do your interview (if applicable) and selection processes support all groups of applicants equally?

2.3 Are students made aware of all potential additional costs and equipment pre-entry?

2.4 Does your course have a consistent language and structure across its online spaces that students can easily navigate?

2.5 Do you record lectures/sessions? Do you have an agreed, documented course guidance on sharing recordings?

2.6 Do you have strategies in place to understand and share feedback on the experiences of all students? (especially those from under-represented groups) 🔖

Figure b - Questions for Managing Your Course

SUPPORTING THE STUDENTS ON THE COURSE

3.1 Do you have access to each student's profile and their support requirements?

3.2 Do you have a clear process for each student to have a named Academic Advisor (AA)?

3.3 Do you have any course AA projects/schemes that target specific groups of students? 🔖

3.4 Do you have library induction/study skills/diagnostic learning timetabled into induction and the early part of the course?

3.5 Do you provide online/face to face opportunities for all students to share their diverse experiences (especially those who may be from underrepresented groups) very early in the course? 🏳

3.6 Do you offer formative bite-size assessment opportunities early in the course, so students have an opportunity to "fail safely" and seek support?

3.7 Do you run defined sessions for students who may have failed elements of their assessments? (e.g. structured summer support, revision sessions etc.)

3.8 Do you have a clear course communications process to promote engagement at critical times for all your students? (pre-arrival, post-Christmas, 1st assessment period, during exams, study abroad, during off campus placement)?

3.9 Is space and time given in some teaching sessions and office hours for students to openly acknowledge and discuss racist or racialising behaviours? 🏳

3.10 Do your students have opportunities and a place to go to discuss racist or racialising behaviours which have impacted on them? 🏳

Figure c - Questions on Supporting the Students on the Course

BUILDING THE COURSE COMMUNITY

4.1 Does the programme explicitly plan activities that nurture a culture of academic belonging from the beginning? 🏳

4.2 Does the course explicitly foster a culture of social belonging at all levels?

4.3 Do you co-create or seek feedback from students on the planned course timetable and consider its potential to disadvantage certain groups?

4.4 Do in-class and online learning activities promote inclusion and expose students to a range of views, opinions and cultural contexts? 🏳

4.5 Do your course reading lists and resources offer a lens representative of a diverse population by including Black and People of Colour (BPOC), indigenous scholars and other authors with different cultural viewpoints? 🏳

4.6 Are your course materials and learning resources available electronically to support parity of access for distance, commuting, print impaired students?

4.7 Does the way you allocate students to group work activities enable the creation of ethnically diverse groups from different educational backgrounds? 🏳

Figure d - Questions on Building the Course Community

DEVELOPING ALL THE STUDENTS ON THE COURSE

5.1 Are there safe, well managed, interactive, virtual and physical classroom opportunities for all students to develop critical thinking and debate on issues relating to race, gender, global, social and cultural issues? 🏳

5.2 Are there planned opportunities in the curriculum/course design and delivery for all students to co-create some elements of course activity if they wish?

5.3 Are there explicit, embedded and accessible opportunities for all students (especially those in underrepresented or vulnerable groups) to access and benefit from quality and equality checked placements, paid internships and preparation for graduate employability?

5.4 Are academic skills integrated into the course, preparing students to take control of their further development?

5.5 Do you vary the session type to allow for all different types of learners and could any of these inadvertently exclude particular groups of students?

Figure e - Questions on Developing all the Students on the Course

CHALLENGING ALL THE STUDENTS ON THE COURSE

6.1 Does the course team have a way of identifying students who may be struggling with academic content?

6.2 Likewise, does the course team have clear practice in identifying talent and supporting those that need more stimulation and challenge?

6.3 Does the course use a range of differentiated activities and reading to support and challenge diverse cohorts?

6.4 Are the module assessment methods across each level of the course designed to enable all students to perform to the best of their ability?

Figure f - Questions on Challenging all the Students on the Course

Evaluation:

The Tool webpage has a feedback box through which ongoing updates are made in response to the users. The Tool was being used by all our courses as mandatory in 2019-20 (161 undergraduate and 189 post graduate courses). The Covid -19 emergency stalled initial completion by some of our courses but all will be mandatorily required to complete and report on it as part of the 2020-21 academic quality cycle. The Tool use will be fully evaluated after one academic cycle. An online survey and a focus group of a selection of academic course teams will focus mainly on exploring the quality of reflective discussions that were undertaken in the course teams, any changes made, its ease of use, value and practicality and recommendations for future amendments. Module level reflection is encouraged once the initial course level gaps have been identified.

In parallel, some thematic qualitative analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013) of the action plans and enhancement reports will be undertaken to elicit innovative actions and practice themes which can be shared as best practice. We will also explore as a specific measure changes in course BAME attainment gaps, student satisfaction and retention rates as part of our ongoing quality monitoring.

In the meantime, interim feedback has been sought through email response to users. Users have welcomed the Tool and appreciate the wide consultation which has informed its design. It is regarded as "very assertive, which many other inclusive initiatives lack". The flagged questions highlighting the issues underpinning the BAME student attainment and success gap have been praised for their focus. The full evaluation will, in time, illuminate further staff thoughts on the Tool and a further wave of responsive amendments will be undertaken. Early feedback is positive, especially in relation to the rooting of the questions in research, the simplicity of the guidance and language and the ability for course teams to discuss their own course needs in relation to consideration of their own course student demographics and teaching approach. The general nature of the questions means that solutions can be found that best suit the academic style of the students and the discipline being taught. For example, courses in our Business School which had lower numbers of students accessing placements and internships (question 5.3) are working on a new project with the Careers staff to address this. Other course, for example in health and social care that have no issue

with placement access have developed more focus on considering how students are allocated to groups (after question 4.7 generated practice gaps). The perception that "thankfully, this is not a one size fits all approach" appears to be an emergent factor in colleagues' willingness to use the Tool. Staff have used the Tool to complement our institutional drive to improve our student retention and our graduate outcomes which have been a cause for concern with our institution reported to fall 15% behind the UK average of 80% for graduate jobs. In 2017 the gap between our performance and national average was 15% and this has now narrowed to 5%.

Future considerations

The Tool is comprehensive, and its aims and purpose and the innate complexity of the topic will continue to make it a work-in-progress. The Tool is just one part of a huge initiative the institution has made to slowly improve the outcomes of our students and there is more to be done to push the scores up.

Practising what we preach, we feel such a Tool on inclusion should be inclusive itself and thus we want it to available, as soon as it is refined after the next cycle to a broader network of educators to grow its visibility and effectiveness. We have already facilitated deeper conversations about inclusion and diversity in our university

A follow up activity which encourages teams to review their module practice and to focus on questions in the Supporting (Fig c), Building Community (Fig d), Developing (Fig e) and Challenging (Fig f) sections of the Tool will be undertaken if the course level reflection identifies gaps in practice which could usefully be ironed out at a more granular level.

Some staff feel that their awareness of diversity issues raised through reflection on the questions has improved and changed their practice. Discussion with staff during and after early use of the Tool and as part of the institutional drive to raise highly skilled graduate employment led to new initiatives for their student groups. This included the consideration of offering more bursaries to those in need and planning a new BAME student mentoring scheme. Institutionally, the funding of more mock assessment centres and employer visits are being considered and potentially expanded as part of the institutional access and participation work.

Recent world events have also led to discussions about wider black inclusion issues at our university. The Tool, particularly the questions on racialised behaviour (questions 3.9 and 3.10), social belonging (question 4.2) and reading and resource lists (question 4.5) have helped course teams understand that higher education is not immune from racism and they must strive to address the persistent inequalities in students' access, participation and experience. This discussion is helping to catalyse awareness and action on wider initiatives such as our Zero Tolerance campaign, plans for contextual offers, hardship funding and our progress towards better outcomes reported through our Access and Participation Plan narrative

However, a beneficial impact in just one course, generated by a course team that takes the diversity lens seriously and diligently may improve that one course over time but will not have an impact on our whole university needs and our overall attainment and experience

data. It is therefore important that the Tool continues to be promoted via a coherent two-pronged approach – both as an institutional, strategic, contextualised directive and as a tool for course specific, action focussed enhancement. In the meantime, the Tool is for use by others and feedback about its use, clarity and value in the wider Higher Education sector is actively encouraged and sought.

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