



DEVELOPING AND EMBEDDING INCLUSIVE POLICY AND PRACTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

This report is an outcome of a facilitative change programme, Developing and Embedding Inclusive Policy and Practice in Higher Education, involving ten higher education institutional teams and led by the Higher Education Academy.

The programme ran from 2007 to 2008 and was open to all higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. It offered a framework to facilitate and support HEIs in the development and embedding of inclusive policies and/or practices to enhance the learning experience of students from under-represented groups. The programme created a space for institutions to focus on, and exchange ideas about, policy and practice development and implementation.

Over the course of the programme, the Academy conducted research to explore the institutional teams' experience of developing and embedding an aspect of inclusion related to disability equality and/or widening participation. The research involved a series of observations, reflective questions, institutional visits, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. It aimed to capture the 'journey travelled' by the teams in managing and implementing an institution-wide change initiative. Ultimately, the research has contributed to a greater understanding of the processes involved in developing and embedding inclusion within policy and practice in HEIs.

Policy and legislative context

The UK policy, regulatory and legislative context for equality and widening participation calls upon HEIs to make systemic and cultural change. Moving these agendas “from the margins to the mainstream” (Thomas *et al.*, 2005) remains a significant challenge. It necessitates a shift away from supporting specific student groups through a discrete set of policies or time-bound interventions, towards equity considerations being embedded within all functions of the institution and treated as an ongoing process of quality enhancement. Making a shift of such magnitude requires cultural and systemic change at both the policy and practice levels. This was reflected in the emphasis given by the ten institutions on changing both policy and procedure, but also on enhancing staff attitudes and professional practice.

The change initiatives: development and implementation

The ten participating institutions aimed to develop and embed different aspects of widening participation and/or disability equality. The focus of their change initiatives are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the change initiatives

Institution	Theme of change initiative	Key aim(s)
Anglia Ruskin University	Equality proofing the curriculum	To facilitate academic staff to become skilled and empowered to develop and deliver an inclusive curriculum to meet the entitlements of a diverse student body
University of Bradford	Enhancing learning, teaching and assessment strategies and practices for disabled students	To achieve a more inclusive approach to learning, teaching and assessment
University of Hull	Disability equality impact assessments and academic approvals	To develop and embed an equality impact assessment procedure within the academic approval process for new modules and programmes
Leeds Trinity University College	Success for all: from widening participation to improving attainment	To provide the learning and support infrastructure to promote access, remove barriers, improve retention and enhance achievement, for all students
Manchester Metropolitan University	Building curricula for the 21st-century learner	To develop and embed tools to review diversity and enhance the design and delivery of all programmes
The Open University	Building the digital divide: widening participation and e-learning	To enable students from widening participation backgrounds to access and benefit from the University's e-learning communications
Queen Mary, University of London	Widening participation and students' writing in the disciplines	To develop a coherent approach to the development of students' academic literacy within the curriculum
Sheffield Hallam University	An integrated approach to equality and diversity	To create a learning environment that embraces and values diversity and maximises the use of inclusive policies and practices
University of Westminster	Embedding inclusive curriculum practices	To develop sustainable approaches towards inclusive curriculum design, delivery and assessment
University of Worcester	Developing inclusive curricula in higher education	To embed effective inclusive practices in learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum design

There were variations between institutions in the management of the change initiatives and the process used to implement them. Institutions chose methods that fitted their context and, while teams had methods in common, no two teams were found to use the same overall approach, even though they may have been targeting the same issue.

In implementing inclusive policy and practice, however, there were a number of common features across the institutions with regard to their approach. These can be summarised as follows:

- they all used a multi-pronged approach, using more than one method to bring about change;
- they were systematic and holistic in their approach, covering multiple institutional functions and elements of the student life cycle, and they adopted an embedded approach to ensure inclusive practices were delivered across several services within the institution;
- each used a proactive, longitudinal and iterative approach to achieving their aims and recognised the need to make anticipatory, rather than retrospective adjustments, the need to allow time to bring about the required changes, and the need to build in flexibility in the process;
- the initiatives were empirically based, with each team building an evidence base as a fundamental part of the change process.

The teams sought to promote a shared responsibility for achieving widening participation and/or disability equality. They sought to assure the consistent uptake of inclusive practices across the whole institution. The individuals involved in the programme were themselves agents for change. Over the course of the change programme they worked with many stakeholder groups across the institution including senior managers, academic staff, students, staff in quality assurance and enhancement among others, and encouraged collaboration and partnership between different functions and roles across the institution. Students were found to be key agents of change and their experiences and input helped to convince staff of the need for change. Teams adapted their methods and triangulated a range of evidence (drawn from literature reviews, surveys, focus groups, statistical analysis, action research and appreciative inquiry), ensuring both were tailored to the different stakeholder groups they sought to engage. They also drew on external sources of evidence such as Government policy, equality legislation and research literature to inform the change process, as well as internal documents such as the institutions' mission, policies and frameworks.

Language played an important facilitative role in the change process. The changing of particular words or phrases (such as using the word 'entitlement' rather than 'need') or the use of inclusive messages (such as 'inclusive practices enhance the learning of all students') were found to make a substantial impact upon stakeholders and promote a culture that fosters the success of all students.

Implications for inclusive policy and practice

A key finding of this study has been that sustainable and effective inclusive cultural change will only come about through institutions focusing simultaneously on both institutional and individual factors. They cannot be seen in isolation of one another, as they operate as two sides of the same coin.

All teams instigated changes at the institutional level affecting internal policy and procedures with a view to bringing about widespread use of inclusive practices. Methods used to enable institutional-level change included: reviewing and developing policy; conducting equality impact assessments; revising performance management or induction processes; and data analysis.

Addressing individual-level change was found to be a significant part of the process by which inclusive practice was developed and embedded across the participating institutions. A variety of different methods were found to be required to engage individuals across the institution, as no one method was found to engage all individuals. These methods included: forming advisory or working groups; working with known advocates/champions; providing or supporting the processes of continuing professional development; providing opportunities for dialogue; disseminating effective practice; changing management processes; conducting research; and developing resources and materials.

Conclusions

There are three key emerging conclusions. Firstly, change is required at both an institutional and individual level to bring about inclusive policy and practice. Attention to one requires attention to the other and changing one has implications for the other. To ensure the consistent uptake of inclusive practice across the institution, it is necessary to modify institutional policy and processes, and work with individuals to promote positive attitudes and changes to practice. To embed widening participation and equality could arguably be not about doing different things, rather it involves doing things differently.

Secondly, it is essential to build an evidence base from which to bring about change. Evidence plays a significant role in the process of change, providing the means to demonstrate an imperative to change and the benefits or impact of change, as well as identify priorities for action. It is necessary to generate and draw on robust evidence that is pertinent and tailored to the particular institutional context and stakeholder groups.

Finally, a multi-method, tailored approach is necessary involving different stakeholder groups and functions across the institution. Inclusive policy and practice should be considered in relation to multiple functions of the institution and requires a mixed method approach. To maximise effectiveness, methods should be adapted to the context and stakeholder groups being targeted.

Recommendations

Policy makers

- Promote dialogue and debate with and among institutions about the meaning of inclusion within the context of the social, economic and political climate.
- Recognise that inclusion is an intrinsic aspect of effective operation and delivery and encourage the sector to treat it as a mainstream issue. Encourage institutions to embed inclusion within every division of their organisations, to include: learning and teaching; research; widening participation; economy and society; finance and assurance; leadership, governance and management.
- Recognise the shared nature of responsibility for inclusion at all levels of institutional policy and practice and facilitate institutions to interpret these responsibilities for different role groups.
- Take every opportunity to listen to institutional experiences and challenges so as to tailor the provision of support to the sector.
- Recognise the need for appropriately tailored advice and guidance to support the development of inclusive cultures within institutions and help them to embrace both policy and legal requirements to the fullest extent possible.
- Allocate resource to further the development of inclusive cultures within higher education institutions and sharing of effective approaches.

Higher education institutions

- Take a holistic and proactive approach to developing an inclusive culture, simultaneously addressing both policy and practice and targeting all functions and groups of staff across the institution.
- Facilitate a shared responsibility and accountability for inclusion, using a range of different methods (including performance management, curriculum design and continuing professional development) tailored to particular roles.
- Acknowledge inclusion as part of an ongoing process of institutional enhancement of the student experience, rather than as an additional consideration.
- Identify agents for change to facilitate all staff to operationalise their responsibilities and to support the embedding of inclusive practice within institutional policy. Allocate resource (such as time, staffing, funding) as appropriate.
- Take steps to ensure there is a common vision and understanding of inclusion and its associated practice across the institution. This requires attention to be paid to both institutional strategies and their interpretation and implementation by individuals. Refresh the language used within policy and practice to reflect this vision.
- Collect and triangulate different sources of evidence (such as external, internal, empirical and statistical data) as part of the process by which to develop an inclusive culture. Use robust and appropriate evidence to generate a clear rationale for change that responds to institutional context and is tailored to the responsibilities of stakeholder groups. Also put in place strategies for the measurement and evaluation of the impact of the changes implemented.
- Employ appropriate (and often different) approaches to the process of embedding inclusion within institutional policy and facilitating individuals to develop inclusive practice.
- Ensure that whatever methods are used to bring about change, they are adapted to the particular contexts in which they are being applied (e.g. departmental, job role, institutional function).
- Take a flexible, opportunistic approach to change by 'piggybacking' on, or taking advantage of, current developments.

- Cultivate positive cross-institutional partnerships (between departments, staff groups, as well as between staff and students), as part of working towards the creation of an inclusive culture.
- Use a variety of methods to engage students in the process of developing and embedding inclusive policy and practice. Raise the profile of the student voice and further their role as agents of change and co-contributors in this process.

Individuals

- Understand that you have a shared responsibility to contribute to the development of an inclusive culture. Seek advice and information proactively about what you can do to promote change through your role, using internal and external sources.
- Work with champions or nominated change agents and in partnership with staff in other departments/roles.
- Recognise that working towards an inclusive culture is an incremental and ongoing process of enhancement and as such the undertaking is never complete.
- Ensure equality and widening participation is routinely considered as part of all institutional functions, activities, processes and future plans.
- Actively seek to engage students in developing inclusive practice and recognise them as partners and key change agents in developing an inclusive culture. Foster positive relationships with students in order to ensure your individual practices and approaches are effective in promoting the success of all students.
- Look for opportunities to enter into dialogue and discussion about the meaning and implications of inclusion with colleagues.
- Engage in a range of activities (such as continuing professional development; events; advisory/action groups; research; self-assessment toolkits) to promote your understanding and use of effective inclusive practice. Use such activities as an opportunity to share effective practices and experiences with colleagues, as well as to reflect on any personal prejudices or misassumptions you may have about particular equality or student groups.

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