Embedding equality and diversity in assessment and feedback policy and practice

University of the Highlands and Islands case study

Embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum strategic enhancement programme

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1. Introduction

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) is a federal partnership of the University's Executive Office and 13 Academic Partners comprising some of Scotland's colleges of further and higher education, and several specialist research institutes. As the only higher education institution (HEI) based wholly within the Highlands and Islands region, we are charged with the delivery of higher education to the dispersed populations that constitute this area of Scotland.

The University of the Highlands and Islands seeks to be distinctive and relevant in what we teach and how we deliver our curriculum. This includes using technology to give maximum flexibility to learners in respect of location and time. Within this context, the "networked delivery" of courses is particularly important and allows students within rural and geographically dispersed communities to undertake their studies from their own location. For our undergraduates, this can mean undertaking their degree programme from home, their nearest campus, or one of over 60 regional study centres, regardless of from where within the university's partnership their programme is being delivered.

The university is committed – and was partly created – to harness our geographic distribution and tertiary nature to break down barriers to accessing learning opportunities.

Our commitment to equality and diversity (including how we represent this within our learning and teaching practice and provision) is also reflected in a number of current and recent initiatives. This includes our participation in the Equality Challenge Unit project “Attracting diversity: equality in student recruitment in Scottish HEIs”, which will help UHI increase participation of underrepresented groups within the student body, and the recent achievement of the Athena SWAN Bronze Award. Our commitment to equality and diversity is also taken forward through our Disability Practitioners Group, and in various policies such as those around blended learning standards and recording of lectures as well as those relating to assessment.

Coming into the commencement of the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum strategic enhancement programme (EEDC SEP), the work outlined above was taking place alongside new strategic learning and teaching developments underway across the university. These developments included the founding of the university's Learning and Teaching Academy (LTA), which has a key role to play in the development, sharing and recognition of good practice in learning, teaching and assessment, and the development of a new learning and teaching strategy for the university.

Central to the founding of the LTA as well as the development of the new learning and teaching strategy was a commitment to articulating and embedding a set of educational
values for the future direction of learning and teaching at the university, and bringing into alignment with these values a range of policies and initiatives that support and influence our learning, teaching and assessment practices.

Further, from the outset, the development of the LTA and the new learning and teaching strategy intended to both embody and extend the university's commitment to equality and diversity with respect to learning, teaching and assessment, the curriculum, and student support. The opportunity to participate in the EEDC SEP was therefore extremely timely, and presented the university with a means to work with the HEA and the other participating institutions in order to embed further equality and diversity within our emerging strategic direction.

2. Aims

As our work on the EEDC SEP began to take shape, we worked with the SEP programme leader (HEA Equality and Diversity Academic Lead) to refine our original plan of work. We had intended to focus on three distinct strands of activity in the areas of assessment, academic development and gender representation within specific curricula areas, since all had been identified as important priorities in terms of equality and diversity practice and awareness.

However, in being guided to look at the relationship and synergies between both the EEDC SEP and our Equality Challenge Unit project as complementary enablers of change, we decided to focus on gender representation for the latter initiative and on inclusive assessment and feedback as the focus for our EEDC SEP project. Our rationale here (beyond that already explained with respect to the Learning and Teaching Academy and new learning and teaching strategy) was to help inform the development of a new assessment, feedback and feedforward toolkit, and to guide the potential content of a new alternative assessment policy, which was under discussion as we came into the start of the EEDC SEP.

In terms of determining and conceptualising what we understood by inclusive assessment and feedback practice, we found the work on inclusive learning and teaching by Thomas and May (2010) particularly useful. They offer a definition of inclusive assessment as:

\[
\text{the design and use of fair and effective assessment methods and practices that enable all students to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do (Thomas and May, 2010: 13).}
\]

For the project team, we recognised that in practice this would involve, but not be limited to, assessment practices that i) provided choice of assessment formats and topics; ii) that were culturally inclusive with respect to students' backgrounds, beliefs
and experiences; and iii) that were accessible in content and format to meet the needs of learners with disabilities.

With regard to the role of feedback, we felt there was a particular importance for feedback and feedforward practices that were orientated towards providing constructive guidance relevant to the individual, which was developmental with respect to future work, and which was part of an ongoing dialogue that supported the individual to progress through the various stages of their studies. Existing work that resonated with the team in this respect included the Re-engineering Assessment Practices (REAP) project (e.g. Nicol, 2009), as well as examples of institutional policies and guidance on inclusive feedback available within the wider sector, including those from the University of Bath (2016).

While the thematic focus of our work for the EEDC SEP evolved during the early stages of the programme, our aims relating to what we wanted our involvement in the programme to help us achieve remained unchanged. We anticipated and worked towards three key outcomes of our participation:

- better informed institutional policy and practice, including the new learning and teaching strategy;
- provision of relevant exemplars and toolkits to guide good practice;
- enhanced curriculum design and implementation.

To help us achieve these aims, we identified a number of specific work packages to be taken forward. Most were identified at an early stage of the programme; others emerged as we made progress.

The work packages comprised:

1. Benchmarking research, including conducting a literature review and identifying case studies and resources from the sector.

2. Mapping research findings on inclusive assessment and feedback practice to a new institutional assessment toolkit.

3. Developing an enhanced programme of professional development opportunities.

4. Raising the profile of the EEDC SEP and our work for it as part of the annual UHI Equalities and Diversity Day.

5. Developing and funding an internal scholarship project on inclusive assessment and feedback.
6. Taking an integrated approach to informing new strategy and policy.

As will be evident within our aims, and the streams of work we identified, our approach to engaging with the EEDC SEP was to seek to harness the programme as a means to consolidate, enhance and integrate several strands of related activity, in order to lay a foundation for the continued development and enhancement of practice.

3. Approaches

The benchmarking research, undertaken primarily by the project lead as the focus of our first work package, informed and underpinned the other strands of work undertaken at the University of the Highlands and Islands for our EEDC SEP project. The approaches we have taken to the work, and what we were able to achieve to date, is outlined below in relation to the development of resources, professional development, recognising and sharing good practice, and influencing and embedding within institutional strategy.

Development of resources

The primary way in which we sought to contribute to the development of resources was to use our engagement with the SEP to inform the content of a new institutional toolkit in assessment, feedback and feedforward. Two members of the programme team were leading the development of this resource, which intended to bring together and update a range of internal guidelines and exemplars with external resources from the HEA, Jisc and other national bodies and organisations.

The assessment, feedback and feedforward toolkit (Figure 1) underwent initial design, review and further iteration during our work for the EEDC SEP, with the content for the toolkit in the areas of inclusive assessment and feedback practice shaped by our activities for the programme. This includes the addition of resources shared by the HEA Equality and Diversity Academic Lead and those uncovered by our own benchmarking research into existing literature, guidelines and resources.

There will be further iterations to the toolkit going forward, including in relation to the initial implementation of the new learning and teaching enhancement strategy in 2017/18.
Professional development

In defining our professional development work package for the EEDC SEP, we originally had a specific target of running three staff workshops relating to assessment, feedback and feedforward, and which would include a strong focus on equality and diversity within assessment and feedback practice. Our intention here was to embed the consideration of equality and diversity in a wider exploration of good assessment and feedback practice, placing it in context of the kinds of best practice to which we should all be adhering.

As it transpired, we were able to offer a richer range of professional development opportunities than we anticipated. This was achieved through the running of workshops at the internal learning and teaching events being held within particular Academic Partners of the university – including workshops in which the assessment, feedback and feedforward toolkit was featured and explored – and by harnessing the programme of professional development activities that was beginning to be offered centrally by the Learning and Teaching Academy. This included offering online seminars with internal and external guest speakers through the LTA Connect series of monthly webinars, including a well-attended and -received webinar from Dr Sean Walton, University of Salford (Figure 2).

We also began to scope a university-wide assessment and feedback symposium that would bring our work on the EEDC SEP to the fore, and provide a range of discussion and workshop opportunities to engage with issues in inclusive assessment and feedback practice and with the assessment, feedback and feedforward toolkit. However, as the Equalities and Diversity Day we were already committed to began to take shape,
we decided to carry forward the symposium into the new academic year and this will now take place, online and face-to-face, on 15 and 16 November 2017.

**LTA Connect: Critical perspectives on inclusivity**

In this LTA Connect webinar Dr Sean Walton from the University of Salford, examined the persistence of attainment gaps between a variety of student groups, and how critical perspectives can offer an explanation of these gaps. Ways of re-framing our approaches to diversifying the curriculum were also discussed.

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<td><strong>Contact Name</strong></td>
<td>Alex Walker</td>
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**Outline**

This session examined some of the key pre-occupations of policy makers and academic developers within the inclusivity agenda. Dr Walton introduced critical pedagogy and critical race theory (CRT), to provide frameworks for an explanation for, the persistence of attainment gaps between a variety of groups. Diversity interventions to address these gaps.

**FIGURE 2: LTA CONNECT WEBINAR ON THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT INCLUSIVITY**

As for the Equalities and Diversity Day itself, this took place on 23 February 2017. For the first time, this annual event was run as an online event focused around a series of webinars. It was co-ordinated and facilitated through the Learning and Teaching Academy in partnership with our institutional project lead for the EEDC SEP. The webinars focused on a range of topics such as digital inclusion, autism spectrum support, access and inclusion strategies, and embedding equality, diversity and inclusion in the curriculum. External guest speakers included Margaret McKay from Jisc and Suzanne Marshall from the College Development Network (CDN) in Scotland.

In a similar vein to the continued work on the assessment, feedback and feedforward toolkit that we intend to take forward, we will be continuing to increase our focus on equality and diversity in learning, teaching and assessment in the range of professional development opportunities to be offered by the Learning and Teaching Academy.

**Recognising and sharing good practice**

Although not identified as a specific objective when we began our work for the EEDC SEP, we realised there was an important opportunity emerging through which we could share good practice in relation to inclusive learning, teaching and assessment. This was through the implementation of ALPINE (Accredited Learning, Professional development
and Innovation in Education). ALPINE is the university’s new continued professional development framework for recognising good practice in learning and teaching, learning and teaching support, and learning and teaching leadership. It is aligned to the HEA’s UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), and allows the university to award colleagues with recognition as Associate Fellow, Fellow or Senior Fellow of the HEA.

As part of the recognition process, those seeking Fellowship of the HEA through submitting a portfolio of practice are required to submit at least some of their evidence in the form of digital artefacts. This enables UHI to disseminate good practice and useful resources across the university. The means by which this is achieved is through the UHI Toolkit, the university’s online repository of educational resources. Digital artefacts are uploaded to (or linked to from) the Toolkit, with an accompanying record created for each artefact that explains what it is and how it might be of use to others, and which also contains keywords and tags (for example ALPINE, assessment and feedback, inclusive practice).

Through the ALPINE recognition process, we are now seeing colleagues who are engaged in assessment and feedback, and other areas of practice, sharing relevant resources online. As Figure 3 illustrates, this includes a member of the EEDC SEP project team who shared the assessment, feedback and feedforward toolkit they helped develop as part of their own professional recognition as a Senior Fellow of the HEA. We will continue to harness the ALPINE recognition process in this way, including bringing
to the surface and sharing further examples of inclusive learning, teaching and assessment practice.

Influencing and embedding within institutional strategy

The new learning and teaching enhancement strategy for the university was being developed in the same timeframe as the running of the EEDC SEP. A key objective within our original proposal was to use our engagement in the programme to help inform those dimensions of the strategy that concern learning, teaching and assessment practice, student support, curriculum design and delivery, and the embedding of equality, diversity and the values of inclusion.

The strategy itself has been designed to establish a common language for the development and sharing of good practice in learning and teaching across the university, and to overarch and complement the learning and teaching strategies or plans that a number of the individual Academic Partners of the university have in place.

The strategy comprises 12 learning and teaching enhancement values, or precepts, which are in turn aligned with illustrative exemplars indicating how that value may be embedded in practice. Figures 4 and 5 respectively illustrate the exemplars relating to the values of “assessment and feedback for learning” and “supporting the student as an individual”.

| Where possible assessment should go beyond testing knowledge, skills and understanding and instead present meaningful learning opportunities in the form of practical project work, designs, evaluations, research studies, creative outputs, and other real or realistic tasks and activities. | Formative feedback opportunities should be designed in to every unit or module, and provide students with guidance (to the group or the individual, through pointers or exemplars) which will allow them to gauge their progress and inform their future work. | Establish feedback as a dialogue that supports a student as they progress to each new stage of their studies, e.g. through having the student identify action points from their previous semester’s feedback to discuss with their Personal Academic Tutor at the start of the new semester. |

**FIGURE 4: EXEMPLARS FOR “ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK FOR LEARNING”**
As will hopefully be apparent, the ethos that underpins these values, and the exemplars themselves, aligns directly with the aims we had for our engagement with the EEDC SEP, and indeed with how we were conceptualising what form inclusive assessment and feedback practice would take as outlined in the aims section of this case study.

Our engagement with the EEDC SEP had a direct influence on our thinking with respect to the aforementioned dimensions of the learning and teaching enhancement strategy. Indeed, with regard to the development of the strategy as a whole, we found two valuable guiding principles within the “belonging and engagement” and “enabling potential” aspects of the HEA’s EEDC model (Hanesworth, 2015). The emphases these principles respectively placed on “the creation of environments (physical and virtual) and on learning experiences in which all students can feel like they belong...” and “...are given the opportunity to reach their potential and in which no student is automatically disadvantaged” (Hanesworth, 2015: 5) resonated strongly with our vision for the strategy.

To ensure the strategy is one that can be enacted, and the values successfully embedded as a common language for enhancing learning and teaching, it includes a number of implementation objectives. Those objectives, which are most directly relevant to our work and aspirations for the EEDC SEP, are outlined below.

Modify the programme approval and re-approval process, specifically so that the learning and teaching section of CUR04 forms require an articulation of which specific values within the strategy apply to programmes and programme schemes, and how
they are instantiated within the programmes and schemes in question.

Revise the existing Blended Learning Standards into a new Learning Standards which provide specific guidance on designing and facilitating learning and teaching in the areas of practice covered within the values. This also complements an action concerning the further development of the Blended Learning Standards that resulted from the Enhancement Led Institutional Review in 2016.

Identify a limited number of units, modules and programmes that can be supported to further embed, between them, a range of the learning and teaching enhancement values with a view to (i) evaluating evidence of enhanced learning and teaching, and (ii) providing evidence-based exemplars, resources and activities that can be easily adopted or adapted for other units, modules and programmes. (UHI learning and teaching enhancement strategy, objectives 5, 7 and 8).

The learning and teaching enhancement strategy was formally approved in June 2017, and will begin to be implemented in earnest from the start of the 2017/18 academic year. In taking the strategy forward, and particularly in relation to the objectives outlined above, we will be harnessing it as an influencer on policy, practice and curriculum design and delivery in ways that further our learning, teaching and assessment both generally, and within this in relation to the embedding of equality and diversity. This will include through the modules and programmes that we will work with directly to become exemplars of good practice in the specific area of inclusive assessment and feedback.

4. Impact and influence

Our expectation at the outset of the EEDC SEP was not to achieve a direct impact on practice, but rather to use our work on the programme to provide the foundations for the enhancement of practice through aligning a number of emerging developments, and directly influencing the development of the new learning and teaching enhancement strategy. In this respect, given our aims were quite ambitious, we were taking a pragmatic view that significant institutional change is unlikely to be possible within the limited timeframe of a strategic enhancement initiative; however, what is entirely achievable is to define and shape the institutional context for the desired change to occur (Comrie et al, 2009).

In this respect, we feel what we have achieved through the EEDC SEP has been invaluable.
5. Next steps

In terms of immediate next steps, then, in addition to the continuing work outlined above, we will be undertaking a revision to the existing assessment and feedback policy to include new guidelines on alternative assessment practice. This will become part of our work to develop new policies and frameworks to support the implementation of the learning and teaching enhancement strategy. We are also committed to evaluating the embedding and impact of the new strategy and the associated enhancement values, and will be ensuring that the work undertaken for the EEDC SEP informs key aspects of the evaluation with respect to assessment and feedback practice, and embedding equality and diversity within the curriculum. We also hope to deliver on the one work package identified for the EEDC SEP that was not successful, which was in developing and funding a scholarship project on inclusive assessment and feedback practice to be taken forward through the Learning and Teaching Academy. We will offer this as an opportunity to colleagues across the university within a future scholarship call, and are hopeful of interesting proposals.

6. References


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