Embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum: a social work practitioner’s guide

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Current state of play</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Context and background</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.1 Regulation in the UK</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.2 Wales</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.3 Northern Ireland</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.4 Scotland</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Theories and strategies</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Case studies</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Highlighting social inequality, power and oppression through learning and teaching activities</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Facilitating self-reflection on equality and diversity in personal values and professional practice</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Embedding equality and diversity in social action projects</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conclusions</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Bibliography</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Introduction

This guide is designed to provide academics and practitioners with strategies for embedding equality and diversity (E&D) into teaching and learning practices within the discipline of social work. Whilst the guide focuses on this discipline, those working in social policy education will also find elements of what follows useful.

The guide begins with a summary of the recent changes to social work education in England with an exploration of the context of the rest of the UK, followed by theories and strategies which can facilitate the embedding of E&D in the social work curriculum. A selection of case studies gained from academics within the sector has been produced to demonstrate the ways in which E&D can be used in teaching.

2. Current state of play

2.1 Context and background

The social care workforce in the United Kingdom is becoming increasingly diverse and a continuing flow of people from diverse backgrounds is taking up training to join this workforce. Within the past five years, there have been a number of debates surrounding the future of social work education following a number of changes and reviews. These include:

- the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) was set up in January 2010 to implement the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force which was a response to the death of Peter Connelly. The SWRB included employers, social workers, service users, carers and educators taking part in guiding, developing and implementing reforms;
- formation of The College of Social Work (TCSW) as recommended by the Social Work Task Force. TCSW upholds agreed professional standards, and works for its members while promoting the profession externally;
- curriculum guides issued by TCSW on a number of areas of social work education for qualifying programmes and continuous professional development. The one pertinent to this document is Diversity and oppression (Singh 2012);
- transfer of General Social Care Council (GSCC) statutory functions to Health and Care Professionals Council (HPC) which is now the regulatory body of social workers in England;
- the new Professional Capacities Framework (PCF), developed by the SWRB and now owned by TCSW, is an overarching professional standards framework which sets out consistent expectations of social workers at every stage of their career;
- the Munro Review of child protection in England. Professor Eileen Munro was commissioned by the newly elected coalition Government in 2010 to review child protection procedures in England. After two interim reports, Professor Munro published her final conclusions in May 2011 seeking far less bureaucracy and more flexibility for local authorities to develop services rather than focusing upon central government targets;
- changes to social work bursaries. Students who are not ordinarily resident in England are not entitled to a student bursary for social work;
- appointment of Chief Social Workers in September 2013 (Isabelle Trowler, for children and families, and Lyn Romeo, for adults). Both appointed to improve social work practice and lead the reform of the professional while championing and sharing best practice;
- two official reviews of social work education during 2014 – Martin Narey and David Croisdale-Appleby.

Two significant educational developments have changed the face of social work education, namely Step Up to Social Work and more latterly, Frontline. Both programmes have an emphasis on postgraduate learning and a fast-track model of social work education. Many of the political concerns are associated with a perceived gap
between social work education and practice with children and families. This is reflected in the more recent fast-track and alternative social work education provision, Frontline. Further, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR, commissioned by the Department of Health) has undertaken two feasibility studies (e.g. Clifton and Thorley 2014) both proposing the creation of a fast-track graduate recruitment programme for the adult and mental health sector.

A number of high profile events have highlighted concerns surrounding social work in relation to safeguarding. This has involved both the child and adult sector. Namely, within children services this has related to the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly, and within adult services concerns were highlighted about Winterbourne View Hospital, a facility for people with learning disabilities and autism. The concerns relate to identification of abuse and inter-agency working and communication. In addition to this, the findings and recommendations of The Francis Inquiry Report (which identified systematic and organisational failures within the NHS) have shaped health and care policies and services.

Workforce planning continues to be a challenge for social work. On the one hand, in certain regions of the UK there would appear to be a surplus of social work students graduating and not being able to secure employment. Changes to the eligibility criteria for bursaries to study social work degrees have been introduced, in part, to address this issue. Conversely, there is a shortage of social workers in certain regions and particularly in children’s services.

2.1.1 Regulation in the UK

The following sections on regulations across the UK with regard to social work education practice pertain to the time of publication (April 2015). These are, as always, liable to change. These sections outline the regulations to which we must respond as social work educators and against which the examples, strategies and case studies in sections three and four should be read.

Social work regulation is a devolved matter in the UK, which means there are three other social work regulators located in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales alongside the HCPC in England.

A memorandum of understanding has been agreed between HCPC, the Care Council for Wales, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISSC) and the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) (collectively 'the four councils') and this sets out a framework for the working relationship between the four councils in relation to the regulation of social workers and the approval of social work education across the UK.

2.1.2 Wales

The Care Council in Wales is developing a continuing professional education and learning (CPEL) framework for social workers in Wales. The overall aims are to improve the standard of social work practice and to support social workers as they progress from being newly qualified to experienced. Wales is a diverse, bilingual country. More than just words, published by the Welsh Language Policy Unit (2012), identifies the integral part that meeting language needs plays in promoting individual rights and well-being, as well as promoting dignity and respect for Welsh speakers. It refers to the ‘active offer’ as the responsibility to respond to language need as an integral element of care. This is particularly important in considering the central role of communication in assessing need and delivering appropriate and effective social care. Encouraging and supporting the development of Welsh language skills in the workforce not only improves the quality of the service provided but also benefits the workforce, who gain opportunities to use and develop Welsh language skills. See more about the framework at http://www.ccwales.org.uk/continuing-professional-education-and-learning/#sthash.8Ofauu8L.dpuf. Davies (2011) argues that such policies require language sensitivity on the part of the social work practitioner, a sensitivity that involves self-reflection on aspects of empowerment and anti-discrimination in relation to language and society. A curriculum that embeds this self-reflection – as exampled in section three on empowerment – will better enable social work practitioners to respond to the Welsh – and wider international – context.
2.1.3 Northern Ireland

The NISSC has a framework which provides a range of professional NISCC awards in social work which are based at postgraduate level.

Key principles in the framework for social work practitioners are:
- being a professional: demonstrating the skills, knowledge and ethics which make you a professional social worker;
- being professional: in how you make decisions and how you work across disciplines;
- being active in practice: continuously developing skills and knowledge to update and improve your practice.

2.1.4 Scotland


The CLF is for everyone working in social services in Scotland but it is not a mandatory framework. They are not expected to replace what they have done with the CLF but rather to use the framework to support what they are already doing or planning to do and help them add value to this.

The CLF sets out what people working in social services need in order to be able to do their jobs well both now and in the future, and what their employer needs to do to support them. The 13 personal capabilities are based on emotional intelligence and aim to describe the ways in which people manage themselves and their relationships with others in the workplace. In the CLF, each of the personal capabilities is described across four stages of progression which are engaged, established, accomplished and exemplary. With regard to equality and diversity, there is emphasis on recognising the positive value of, as well as respecting, diversity and different cultures and values, as well as promoting and advocating diversity and inclusion. There are a number of indicators under each of the stages of progression which describe what each personal capability might look like and provide ways in which each stage could be evidenced. This allows social service workers to develop their personal capabilities and gain recognition for their progress. It also allows employers to set benchmarks for the behaviours and soft skills they expect their staff to demonstrate in different job roles and encourage them to develop further. When implementing the suggestions explored in the following sections, it would be useful for social work practitioner educators to map their interventions against this framework to ensure maximum efficiency of curriculum design.

The CLF aims to keep improving the quality of outcomes for people who use social services by supporting the people who are delivering these services to be the best they can be. This requires a shared commitment from both the worker and their employer. It is important that each individual social service worker takes responsibility for their own learning and development throughout their career and that employers provide opportunities for continuous learning and improvements in practice. These responsibilities are already set out in the codes of practice for social service workers and employers of social service workers which can be found on the SSSC’s website at www.sssc.uk.com.

3. Theories and strategies

This section of the curriculum guide aims to highlight some key theoretical perspectives and strategies in relation to embedding E&D in the social work curriculum.
Equality and diversity should not be perceived as an ‘add on’ which will create additional work for staff and academics involved in social work education. Instead, the commitment to providing good quality education and respecting the diversity every learner brings to their social work training and employment should be paramount. In addition, E&D should be ‘embedded’ rather than ‘imposed’ as this can undermine the success of the strategy. On the other hand, ‘embedding’ suggests a gradual and sustainable process which has the potential to take people alongside. Clearly, there are legal implications for not engaging with equality and diversity and this needs to be carefully considered within institutions and subject teams.

The recently agreed international definition of social work provides a useful starting point for any discussion about the place and value of E&D in social work. It states that:

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that **promotes social change** and development, **social cohesion**, and the **empowerment and liberation** of people. **Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities** are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and **indigenous knowledge**, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.” (International Federation of Social Work 2014)

The bold terms ‘social change, social justice, human rights, respect for diversities, and indigenous knowledge’ reflect the nature of the social work profession and the role social workers must play in ensuring this for themselves and the users of services they provide. Indeed, there are legal requirements for working in a non-discriminatory manner with people. The Equality Act 2010 requires elimination of discrimination, advancing equality and fostering of good relations for different groups. While equality is about creating a fairer society in which everyone can participate, diversity is about valuing the differences in society and how these differences can contribute to a more inclusive society. The value of this is no less the case for higher education and for social work education.

In designing and delivering the social work curriculum, it is crucial that elements of E&D are embedded from the point of admissions through to curriculum design and in taught modules and practice learning, creating a foundation for further development post qualification. There is ample opportunity for the embedding of E&D in all modules: sociology, psychology, mental health, disability, law, research, methods and models, to name a few, invite the embedding of explorations of subjects such as race, religion, sexuality, gender identity and disability (cf. Nixon and McDermott 2010). Within the context of practice learning, the direct work with service users provides opportunities in which embedded E&D can be situated. Indeed, much work has already been done on this, especially in relation to disability (e.g. Sapey et al. 2004; Wray et al. 2005; Craig and Zinkiewicz 2010).

Curriculum guide – diversity and oppression (Singh 2012)

The TCSW curriculum guide on diversity and oppression highlights the importance of encouraging students to reflect on their personal experiences of encountering and negotiating diversity, and to explore these in relation to the “broader conditions in which they are produced”. It outlines key areas where curriculum content can and should include E&D themes. For example, with regard to mental health, it emphasises the fundamentality of students understanding the stigma, stereotyping, discrimination and oppression faced by people with mental ill health and encourages deeper understandings, respect and negotiation of these diverse modes of being.

At the heart of this strategy has to be the commitment by the people who deliver social work education. There can be no progress for embedding E&D into the social work curriculum if social work educators, tutors

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1 Volume 2.3 of the HEA’s journal Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences is dedicated to the teaching of sensitive subjects and contains many examples that could be adapted to social work education contexts.
and practice educators do not recognise and appreciate its inherent value. Social work educators can themselves be the barrier to successfully embedding E&D in the curriculum due to possible sub or unconscious prejudices, values and views (see below on unconscious bias). Research suggests that students are more likely to engage in classroom-based activities when they feel safe, respected and understood (Light et al. 2009). It is important, therefore, that social work educators are able to manage any tensions which may arise in the classroom while avoiding the privileging of majority or dominant ideas and voices. Although concentrating on gender, the University of Roehampton’s Formations of Gender and Higher Education Pedagogies project provides staff development activities that could be utilised for social work education to help with this, enabling staff to explore how to create learning environments that are respectful, consciously promoting equality and valuing diversity (Burke and Crozier 2012).

There are a number of theoretical perspectives that lend themselves to the very core of E&D and they are anti-racist, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice, unconscious bias, the social and medical models of disability and empowerment. In addition, the social work values of human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity and competence further provide a thread which should run through all components of social work education. With reference to practice learning, domain three of the PCF is specifically about diversity and requires social work students to be able to “recognise and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice” (TCSW 2012). Practice educators are required to assess students against this and other capabilities such as values and ethics, and also rights, justice and economic wellbeing. Case study 3, from California State University Dominguez Hills, showcases a way to do this in a practice-led environment.

Anti-racist practice involves recognition of the impact of race and racism in the lives of people in society and seeks to challenge practices which enable racism and racist attitudes to thrive. Anti-racism attracted a form of social work practice which separated the liberal notion of equal opportunities, and developed an agenda for change which challenged dominant power relations (Denney 1998). Advocates of anti-racist practice place an emphasis on black and minority ethnic (BME) people’s lack of access to powerful institutions which also tend to be dominated by the white majority group. Case study 1, from the University of York, offers an effective method for addressing this.

Unconscious bias is said to happen automatically in the subconscious (Equality Challenge Unit 2013, p. 1); consequently, we have little control over it. It is when our environment, culture and background influences judgments we make about others, resulting in a certain type of behaviour or response to people who are different from ourselves. Understanding and acknowledging the sources of these biases are a useful way to minimise their impact on our daily interactions and an effective strategy to acknowledge and respect equality and diversity. The Equality Challenge Unit has produced useful guidance on this (2013), including a training pack to be used within a higher education setting. All practitioners in higher education, social work educators and/or otherwise, would benefit from undergoing such training.

The medical model of disability views disability as an ‘illness’ or deficit within the body requiring medical intervention, while the social model advocates the role of society in ‘disabling’ and disadvantaging people through oppression and exclusion (Shakespeare and Watson 2002). Clearly, recognition of these models, alongside an interrogation of their utility and influence on social work practice is important. Reasonable adjustments should be made throughout the student journey in higher education from accessible admissions and feedback policies, teaching and learning strategies, teaching and seminar rooms, and practice-learning opportunities to ensure that students with disabilities and additional needs are not disadvantaged by existing procedures and protocols. Case study 2, from the University of Chichester, could prove an effective model here.

Finally, the idea of empowerment in social work is one which attempts to move away from a problem-based approach, which according to Saleebey (2002, p. 9) “indicates the intent to, and the process of, assisting individuals, groups, families and communities to discover and expend the resources and tools within and around them”. A social work curriculum which incorporates strengths and empowerment-based perspectives
will contribute to an overall strategy to embed equality and diversity in the curriculum. Its presence in the international definition of social work is not coincidental.

### Introducing E&D from the very beginning

Havering College introduces E&D at the point of induction. All new students attend various workshops to introduce them to the institutional policies around E&D. Additional workshops around LGBT awareness, culture and race, disability, gender etc. are provided. There is a guide for teaching staff on E&D which covers key areas such as planning, teaching and learning, materials, assessment and behaviour management.

This approach reiterates the importance of an institution-wide strategy to embed E&D and has currency for social work educators and tutors. This model can be adapted and incorporated into programme and course handbooks for social work programmes more generally and/or with the specific good practice examples outlined below.

### 4. Case studies

The following case studies have been gathered from across and beyond the UK. While social work education orientated, they could be adapted to most discipline contexts.

#### 4.1 Highlighting social inequality, power and oppression through learning and teaching activities

**Institution:** University of York.

**Institutional contact and contact details:** Dr Simon Cauvain, simon.cauvain@york.ac.uk.

**Equality and diversity evidenced through:**
This activity models inclusivity and also connects to two of the five areas articulated in HEA’s embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum theoretical overview: building exposure and understanding; and encouraging self reflection.

**Rationale for introducing an aspect of E&D:**
The belief that concepts of ethics, values, equality and diversity each play a fundamental role within social work education.

**Summary of the case study:**
The following scenario describes a practical element to teaching within an ethics and values module taught to postgraduate and undergraduate social work students with an overarching aim of highlighting issues of societal inequality, power and oppression (Ahmad 1990; Thompson 2012). The objectives include:
- highlighting complexities of prejudice;
- drawing attention to intersectionality;
- provoking insight and encouraging empathy;
- encouraging positive approaches in practice.

It comprises the purposeful and provocative introduction of an activity in the form of a ‘sweetie game’.

The process involves a cohort sitting in a large circle around a bowl of sweets. Each student is subsequently given a card describing their character which must be kept secret. Characters include ‘22- year-old male
asylum-seeker’ and ‘25-year-old HIV-positive female’. A series of 20 set questions are read aloud in turn by the facilitator, and characters are invited to collect a sweet from the centre - only if they can respond to each question with an ‘easy yes’. Questions include: ‘Do you feel comfortable kissing your partner in public?’ and ‘Do you see people like you represented positively on television?’

Characters’ total sweet counts are indicated by a show of hands at countdown. This leads to discussion about totals as well as the revealing of characters. The list of questions is then explored further with characters describing their feelings around their responses. An all-important debrief enables students to explore their learning through experience within the academic environment.

Benefits for the students:
Student feedback has consistently been very positive with reports of increased empathy and understanding of personal potential for prejudice and discrimination.

Benefits for the department/team/institution:
Students join courses with wide-ranging experiences and understanding of these concepts, and this example offers a pedagogical approach that resonates with individuals and groups.

Changes required by the institution/department/team for effective implementation:
This intervention requires:
• the development and collation of appropriate learning resources;
• provision of information and guidance for lecturers. For example, explicit safeguards presented from the outset around dealing with sensitive topics help students prepare for the emotional challenges involved in the game and thereby encourage deeper learning. Provision of support to lecturers for developing these safeguards enables their effective implementation.

4.2 Facilitating self-reflection on equality and diversity in personal values and professional practice

Institution: University of Chichester.
Institutional contact and contact details: Ms Kish Bhatti-Sinclair, K.Bhatti-Sinclair@chi.ac.uk.

Equality and diversity evidenced through:
This activity models inclusivity and also connects to two of the five areas articulated in HEA’s embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum theoretical overview: building exposure and understanding; and encouraging self reflection.

Rationale for introducing an aspect of E&D:
The module Social work law and Social policy is a core module of the MA Social Work degree. Within the module, two sessions are taught on equality, race and diversity to help students reflect on the application of relevant laws to personal values and professional practice and to encourage further insight into types of disadvantage and discrimination facing service users and carers.

Summary of the case study:
As part of this module, the students partake in an interactive session combining a lecture with small group work. Students are asked in small groups, using flipchart paper and markers to:
• list all the groups in society who face discrimination;
• cluster/circle the groups who face racism;
• cluster/circle the groups who face sexism;
• cluster/circle the groups who face discrimination on the grounds of disability;
• cluster/circle the groups who face discrimination on the grounds of sexual difference or orientation;
• cluster/circle the groups who face discrimination on the grounds of class, accent, regional/geographic difference.
Then in a large group they are asked to consider:
- Who faces more discrimination (frequency)?
- Who faces deeper discrimination (experience)?

The learning is derived from examination and analysis of the list. The clustering results in appreciation of how disadvantage manifests in quality and quantity for some people more than others, and in relation to multiple identities. It also highlights difference which may be, for example:
- visible and easier to see, such as colour, sex (mostly);
- invisible, such as mental ill health and learning disabilities;
- long standing, such as sickness.

**Benefits for the students:**
Students are introduced to the key legislation, including the Equality Act 2010, aimed at combating discrimination, but they are also encouraged to explore the ethical issues, along with their own attitudes towards discrimination as a professional. This encourages a deeper self-reflection by students on equality and diversity and a stronger understanding of their role in minimising discrimination, advancing equality of opportunity and fostering good relations in their future professional practice.

**Benefits for the department/team/institution:**
This intervention provides an example of embedding equality and diversity in social work law teaching which works towards mainstreaming equality and modelling good practice.

**Changes required by the institution/department/team for effective implementation:**
The activity requires:
- the development and collation of appropriate learning resources;
- provision of information and guidance for lecturers. This may include, for example, information on how – and why – to alert students to the sensitive nature of the exercise.

### 4.3 Embedding equality and diversity in social action projects

**Institution:** California State University Dominguez Hills.
**Institutional contact and contact details:** Dr Mekada Graham, mgraham@csudh.edu.

**Equality and diversity evidenced through:**
This activity models inclusivity and also connects to three of the five areas articulated in HEA’s embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum theoretical overview: fostering belonging and engagement; building exposure and understanding; and encouraging self reflection.

**Rationale for introducing an aspect of E&D:**
California State University Dominguez Hills, educates an ethnically diverse student body and is located in a diverse, complex urban setting in one of the poorest communities in Los Angeles County. The programme especially emphasises providing culturally and contextually appropriate services in communities with demographic characteristics similar to those in working class neighbourhoods surrounding Dominguez Hills.

**Summary of the case study:**
The Critical race theory (CRT) and Intersectionality module examine the tenets, major assumptions and themes of CRT and considers its application to various dimensions of social work practice. Students also engage in a variety of self-reflexive activities that serve to examine their own biases in order to embark on social work practice that is critical of discrimination and oppression of underserved populations. Assignments include co-facilitation of a class, a personal narrative, and a social action project.
The personal narrative is an important aspect of the overall programme in promoting and working with clients’ understanding of their experiences.

The brief for the social action project is framed around using a CRT to design an action project (however modest) to improve a situation. Students have created Facebook pages for particular social issues, i.e. homelessness in LA, started online petitions and posted policy briefs. One student created a website about Asian Pacific Islander mental health services and resources.

Overall, the module fits neatly with the diverse student community and their experiences with its focus on reflective thinking which enables students to tell their stories and journey to graduate education.

**Benefits for the students:**
The Critical race theory and Intersectionality course serves as the foundation for providing students with an understanding of Critical Race Studies and its application to the field of social work practice.

**Benefits for the department/team/institution:**
The project has opened up opportunities for transformative practice in action shaping student learning experiences directly with communities.

### 5. Conclusions

In summary, the previous sections of this short guide highlight that the embedding of equality and diversity in social work education should take into consideration the follow key findings:

- an understanding of the historical and current context of social work education is critical in understanding the drivers for E&D in the UK;
- E&D remains integral to social work education and practice and it is incumbent on all involved in social work education to promote and integrate it in the various strands of social work;
- social work academics are guided by existing theory and practice frameworks, which can facilitate the embedding of E&D in their curricula;
- all processes beginning with admissions should be fair and transparent and offer social work students, practitioners and tutors opportunities for ongoing reflection about their individual and collective commitment to E&D;
- learning, teaching and assessment styles, content and procedures should be informed by principles of E&D, unconscious bias, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory ideals.

Further, any framework being proposed should take into account Barnett’s following argument: “Preparing students for living and learning in a diverse democracy is to address the whole student: intellectually, affectively and socially.” (Barnett 2011, p. 678)

This statement could not be any closer to what this curriculum guide is seeking to highlight. Consequently, we suggest the methods required to successfully embed E&D should address the student:

- **cognitively**: using self-reflection, teaching methods, teaching materials, teaching content and assessment;
- **affectively**: considering values, personal style, emotions and feelings;
- **socially**: including diversity in groups, exposure to different worldviews and opinions.
6. Bibliography


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