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Title Inclusive principles into inclusive practice: introducing an institutional Inclusive Curriculum Framework in Higher Education

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Introduction

The UK higher education sector has achieved some success in widening participation (UUK, 2016). However, institutions have been slow to adjust their practice to accommodate their more diverse student body with resultant gaps in student retention, progression and attainment. While the reasons for low continuation rates and under-attainment are undoubtedly highly complex and multi-faceted, there is evidence that university curricula are less accessible and meaningful to students coming from a variety of 'non-traditional' backgrounds (Meuleman, et. al., 2015; Soria and Bultmann, 2014). This paper introduces an institutional level pedagogic Framework adopted in a post-1992 UK University which addresses the inclusivity of the academic curriculum. It will outline the epistemological foundations of its key principles and address how it was operationalised. However, first we outline the disparate narratives of inclusive education evident in the literature before we address the ways in which the Inclusive Curriculum Framework combines these into a cohesive structure.

What is an inclusive curriculum?

A broad account of an inclusive curriculum is well established in the sector and purports to offer a curriculum which meets the needs of all learners (Hockings, 2010). However, two disparate narratives are evident. This first centres on the accommodation of disabled students and students with learning differences (Marquis et. al., 2016). The second narrative shares with other forms of critical inquiry the recognition that knowledge construction, power and privilege are inextricably linked (hooks, 1994). This school of thought recognises that normative practices in educational structures, as well as the curriculum content itself, are implicated in maintaining and extending the educational advantage of some groups of students over others. Whilst the broad principles of an inclusive curriculum are articulated, if disparately, through these narratives on inclusive education, there remains a lack of clarity and guidance on how inclusive principles translate into tangible changes in curriculum at all levels, from content, delivery styles and assessment regimes (Carey, 2012).

Demystifying the Inclusive Curriculum: a framework for action

The Inclusive Curriculum Framework was developed in a diverse post-1992 UK higher education institution to facilitate the translation of inclusive principles into practice. It identifies three principles which together embrace and reflect the multiple constructions of inclusivity in the education literature. The conference paper will more fully deconstruct these principles which are outlined briefly below:

Create an accessible curriculum: this principle is not simply about the accommodation of disabled students and those with learning differences (DSSLG, 2017), but extends beyond

this to recognise that educational practice is culturally-specific (Haigh, 2002, 2009). Accessibility, therefore, must consider cross-cultural course design and delivery mechanisms (Song-Turner and Willis, 2011).

Ensuring that students see themselves reflected in the curriculum: this principle operates on two levels. The first is epistemological and challenges the grand narratives of Eurocentric academic traditions which de-legitimate and marginalise some knowledges (Tange and Kastberg, 2013). It also addresses the wider movement to decolonise and democratise education thereby ensuring that multiple perspectives are embraced and celebrated and that students from all backgrounds are welcomed and feel that they belong (Mbembe, 2016). The second level acknowledges the need for students and staff to see 'people-like them' in their everyday higher education experiences as role models and mentors, in case-studies and content.

Equipping students to work in a globalised and diverse world: this principle reflects the work of Barnett and Coate's (2005) who theorise the curriculum not simply in terms of content, but in terms of 'engagement'. Students who are exposed to multiple perspectives and life-worlds will be better equipped to work collaboratively with others from a variety of cultures, backgrounds and positions in the workplace (Svensson and Wihlbord, 2010). Educational environments are important sites for the development of intercultural knowledge and broader diversity skills. They are 'hopeful' spaces where "patterns of segregation can be interrupted and intercultural learning can occur" (Lee et. al., 2012: vii).

Operationalising the Inclusive Curriculum Framework (ICF)

The ICF offers Higher Education institutions and their staff, both professional and academic, a roadmap which sets out how inclusivity can be addressed. It is a simple and practical tool which identifies multiple implementation and intervention points. At its most strategic level, the Framework can inform an institution's educational mission. However, the Framework's adaptability ensures that it can also be adopted by individual academics as a roadmap for the development of their teaching sessions.

It facilitates the embedding of inclusive practices from concept to review. What we mean by this is that the key principles of inclusivity identified in the framework can be enacted when academic staff are designing the concepts of their course/module/teaching session as well as when they are considering their learning & teaching strategies and how they interact and engage with their student body. In addition, the framework encourages staff to employ the principles of inclusivity in developing their assessment strategies and, as importantly, how they involve their students in developing effective feedback and feedforward practices that benefit all students. Finally, the framework ensures that the principles of inclusivity inform the evaluation and review of University curricula, in its broadest sense, through quality assurance and quality enhancement processes. In essence, it facilitates the embedding of inclusive pedagogic principles across the academic lifecycle. The framework outlined here acts as a scaffold to academic teams when designing inclusive courses

The full conference paper will set out the implementation strategy for this curriculum design framework in a post-1992 University in the UK. In addition, it offers an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Framework from the perspective of academic staff in the institution. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence will be presented to explore the efficacy of this framework to affect concrete changes in academics' understanding of inclusive curriculum

and their ability to deliver a more inclusive offer. In so doing, the piece will examine the implementation of the ICF and examine if it alleviates the current feeling by some University educators that they have been left to negotiate “their own path through an emotive and complex subject.” (Carey, 2012: 752).

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