

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Education for Social Justice: Piloting Inclusive Curriculum Redesign to Enable Fair Outcomes and Promote Social Change

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Abstract: Seeking to address current HE challenges regarding the awarding gap and continuing dominance of curricula by West-centric knowledge traditions, and to promote transformational educational and social change, London Metropolitan University has launched its Education for Social Justice Framework (ESJF) for inclusive curriculum redesign. This paper explores the context and moral imperative of the ESJF, its integrative elements, pedagogical challenges and transformative potential, through critically reviewing its application during a pilot implementation in 2020-21, based on semi-structured interviews with six academics involved as course leaders of the participating programmes from a variety of disciplines. Alongside real challenges, staff engagement was enabled by their genuine affiliation with the ESJF values, an immersive training programme, and spaces to review and exchange practice. This was evidenced in accounts of course changes around embedding critical pedagogy, diversifying or decolonising content and materials, and developing inclusive assessment, with direct student input into course design and delivery.

Paper: Key challenges currently facing Higher Education (HE) in the UK, highlighted by recent transnational protest movements, “Black Lives Matter” and the student-led “Why is My Curriculum White?” and anti-imperialist “Rhodes Must Fall” campaigns (Batty, 2020; Peters, 2018; Pimblott, 2020), include, firstly, the continuing dominance of curricula by West-centric knowledge traditions and practices which reinforce normative Whiteness and undergird racism in HE (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Akel, 2019; Museus et al., 2015; Bhambra et al., 2018) and, secondly and relatedly, glaring disparities in student outcomes, where Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students have higher drop-out rates and are less likely than their white counterparts to be awarded a ‘good’ degree or find good jobs commensurate with their qualifications (Alexander and Arday, 2015; UUK, 2019).

Seeking to address these challenges and promote deep, transformational educational and social change, London Metropolitan University has produced and launched its Education for Social Justice Framework (ESJF) (London Met, 2020) as an integrative framework for inclusive curriculum redesign. Forged by an intersectional working group of staff and students, the framework is informed by research and innovative practice in the HE sector (Hockings, 2010; Morgan & Houghton, 2011; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Mirza, 2018; McDuff et al., 2020) and our own values, practice and awareness (Warren, 2020). The purpose of the ESJF is to ensure that all aspects of “curriculum” (Warren, 2016, p.12) - course content, learning, teaching and assessment, and the learning environment - are accessible, engaging, empowering and more closely aligned to the identities, lived experiences, cultural wealth, learning needs and interests of all our diverse students, over two-thirds of whom are from a BAME background.

In this paper we explore the context and moral imperative of the ESJF, its integrative elements, its pedagogical challenges and its transformative potential, through critically reviewing its application in practice during a pilot phase of implementation in 2020-21, based on the perspectives of six academics involved in the pilot as course leaders of the participating courses (degree programmes) from a variety of disciplines, as well as the impressions of the authors. Data from individual, semi-structured interviews with the course leaders is used to throw light on the above themes. It is proffered as an illuminative snapshot, not a comprehensive evaluation, as the pilot is in process at the time of writing. We conclude with some general implications of adopting an ambitious, holistic approach to curriculum and pedagogical transformation.

As revealed by the interviews, real challenges affecting staff engagement with the ESJF process are recognised: apprehension towards change, possible resistance to the critical pedagogy approach, time and workload constraints, and the intensive, pandemic-induced switch to online delivery. Nevertheless, genuine staff affiliation with the values of the ESJF, the immersive, cross-disciplinary training programme in support of its rollout that provides a language and set of concepts and principles with which to critically reflect on pedagogy and equity, and a space to exchange and disseminate existing inclusive practice, have all promoted active involvement in the implementation of the ESJF. That engagement is evidenced in the course leaders’ accounts of course changes around improving student support and access to learning guidance, diversifying or decolonising the syllabus and learning materials, inclusive assessment that draws on students’ own experiences and cultural resources, and embedding critical pedagogy, employability and opportunities for developing inclusive leadership. These changes are also reflected in the course development plans aligned to the ESJF produced by each team.

Students' input into curriculum development is visible through feedback on teaching, their organising learning spaces via social media, proposing topics for course content or sharing lived experiences that can enrich co-learning. With the extension of the period of pandemic disruption and forced

remote working, the tenets of the ESJF have taken on new relevancy as course teams considered the accessibility of their curriculum, the fairness of their assessment and the participative aspects of teaching. This has facilitated the opening-up of conversations which interrogate academic convention, and the ESJF has been embraced as both an audit tool and kaleidoscope through which to review how and what we teach.

Our experience in piloting the ESJF highlights the importance of adopting a whole institution approach that encompasses all aspects of the student journey; the significance of deploying an integrative curriculum framework that embraces the relational and pedagogical not just content dimensions; and the centrality of staff and student engagement in deliberative and development activities that can facilitate teachers in redesigning their educational practice, build communities of practice among staff, and engage students as partners in co-design.

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