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## **Developing Institutional Partnership Approaches to Diversifying and Decolonising the Curriculum**

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### **Research Domains**

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

### **Abstract**

Our paper discusses a student-staff partnership project to diversify and decolonise the curriculum at a UK Higher Education institution. The Inclusive Practice Partnerships (IPP) Scheme is a five-year project that co-creates an inclusive curriculum with students. Responding to the need to address differential outcomes, the Scheme focuses on the representation of racial, ethnic and cultural identities within module content and delivery. The research includes a mixed-methods longitudinal evaluation that investigates the impact of changes to the curriculum on students' experiences of belonging and inclusivity, and their attainment. The IPP Scheme is unique in the sector in focusing on diversifying and decolonising across a wide range of subjects. Importantly, the Scheme uses academic developers' expertise to facilitate this pedagogic work, developing an institutional approach with localised strategies and outcomes, and working closely with student and staff partners to change perceptions about the relevance and importance of curriculum reparation across disciplines.

### **Full paper**

Research during the last 25 years has raised concerns over the degree awarding gap between different undergraduate student groups when comparing gender, ethnicity and socio-economic

backgrounds across the UK Higher Education (HE) sector (Cotton *et.al.*, 2016; Richardson, 2015; Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Stevenson 2012). Several cross-institution HE initiatives and studies that seek ways to close the degree awarding gap between White students and those from Black Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds have developed within this context. Key themes of belonging and positive representation within curricula have emerged from these reports and these have influenced the development of the Inclusive Practice Partnerships (IPP) Scheme.

An absence of a feeling of belonging to a University community has been highlighted as a possible reason why students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are performing less well academically and have more negative perceptions of the possibility of pursuing a career in academia, compared to their White counterparts (UUK, 2020, p41). Importantly, it is noted that ‘a lack of diverse representation in curricula can result in alienation, marginalisation, and differential outcomes for students from marginalised backgrounds’ (Abou El Magd, 2016; cited by Mapstone *et.al.*, 2019). Partnership projects between university students and staff can be an effective way of enhancing students’ belonging, confidence and resilience, which in turn, can contribute towards enhancing undergraduate student attainment (Cook-Sather, 2018; Mapstone *et.al.*, 2019). Additionally, reviewing the curriculum in partnership with students has been identified as an effective methodology for enhancing student engagement and attainment, particularly when addressing awarding gaps, as the curriculum plays an important role in relation to inequalities and social justice: it ‘can harden the patterns of inequality or break them’ (Shay & Peseta, 2016, p.361). As Universities UK describe: ‘universities have a powerful opportunity to shape society by privileging a more diverse range of voices’ and to do this by ‘reviewing curricula and teaching and learning practices across all disciplines...[is] part of any wider commitment to improving equality of opportunity’ (2020, p41).

The IPP Scheme is a five-year student-staff partnership project that aims to make positive and impactful changes to our undergraduate curriculum at the University by drawing together these key findings from past research projects as well as developing our own institutional approach to diversifying and decolonising using

academic developers to lead this pedagogically informed work. The Scheme is a key part of University strategy to address differential degree outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, meeting commitments set out in both the Access and Participation Plan (2019), where there are two targets to reduce the gaps in student degree outcomes between Black and White and Asian and White students by 50%, and the Race Equality Charter Action Plan (2019).

The IPP Scheme will continue to operate each academic year until June 2025, with an accompanying mixed methods evaluation that investigates impact on student experiences and outcomes throughout this five-year period. Our longitudinal evaluation methodology is informed by a Theory of Change (NESTA, 2011) analysis, which outlines the stages of anticipated change including those evident in differential attainment and, specifically, degree awarding gaps between undergraduate students over time. Drawing on annual survey, attainment and continuation data, we are investigating changes relating to undergraduate students' attitudes and experiences of belonging and inclusion on modules that are or have been reviewed by IPPs, as well as student attainment and continuation, exploring differences according to students' ethnic group.

Whilst observable impact on degree outcomes will only become discernible from 2024/25, in this paper we examine findings from the first two years of the Scheme, drawing initial conclusions about influences on student experiences of belonging, inclusivity, continuation rates and module attainment. We also discuss qualitative interview data to make recommendations for student and staff partnership working as a methodology for diversifying and decolonising the curriculum. Partnership is seen as a way to position both students and staff as active and equal collaborators in critiquing and co-creating the curricula and pedagogy through a meaningful and reciprocal process (Cook-Sather et.al., 2014). However, previous student staff partnership projects have all been relatively small-scale. In this paper, we will explore the challenges and successes of implementing these ways of working cross-institution in a large-scale Scheme, which will serve as a useful guide for other institutions seeking to engage in the important work of

curriculum reparation.

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