209

Compliance to Compassion. Evaluating Inclusive Education Culture and Practice

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

This paper reports on the formative evaluation of the "Pathways to Inclusion: Inclusive Education Practice Guide" at a UK research-intensive university. Framed by Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), the evaluation engaged academic and professional services staff in collaborative workshops exploring how the guide was used, what improvements were needed, and how impact could be meaningfully understood. Findings highlighted the guide's role in cultivating inclusive pedagogies while also revealing structural barriers, such as workload, culture, and systems, that hinder compassionate and inclusive practices. The study highlights the importance of co-produced professional learning and collegial communities that challenge performative approaches to inclusion. This paper argues that inclusion must be reframed not as compliance, but as a relational and cultural practice rooted in care. The evaluation offers insight into how higher education can reclaim a discourse of compassion, value, and collective responsibility in an increasingly pressured sector (Clements, 2023)

Full paper

This paper presents findings from the formative evaluation of the *Pathways to Inclusion* guide at a research-intensive university. Conceived as a dynamic, institution-wide resource, the guide supports inclusive teaching and learning across disciplines and professional roles. It is situated within the university's strategic equity framework, challenging higher education to move beyond procedural compliance and encouraging staff to view inclusive education as a shared and embedded cultural norm. The guide invites educators to critically reflect on their positionality, values, and pedagogical assumptions. The evaluation aimed to understand how the guide is used in practice, identify opportunities for

enhancement, and explore ways of conceptualising impact, not through metrics, but via cultural, relational, and compassionate transformation (Lister et al., 2022).

The study was underpinned by Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and Realist Evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). AI encourages strengths-based reflection and collective imagining of better futures rooted in what already works, paired with a realist lens that emphasised the influence of institutional structures that enable or block inclusive practices. This approach aligns with broader theoretical framings of inclusion as a relational, situated, and values-driven endeavour (Noddings, 2013; Lister et al., 2022).

Online workshops were held, engaging academic and professional staff from diverse disciplines and career stages. Each followed AI's four phases: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. Participants used collaborative digital whiteboards to share ideas, which were anonymised and thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework.. Workshops were co-facilitated by the academic developer and evaluator, ensuring a collaborative ethos throughout.

Discovery – What Works Well
 Participants highlighted the guide's credibility, practical relevance, and interactive design as key strengths. Specific features such as the ThingLink navigation system and embedded staff case studies were praised for promoting deeper user engagement. This affirms the guide's capacity to function as a flexible, self-directed learning tool, a crucial consideration in a sector where staff face significant time constraints and competing demands. The guide's design was seen as grounded in pedagogical relevance, contributing to its perceived legitimacy and effectiveness.

Dream - Imagining Change

Participants engaged in critical reflection, which provided areas for future enhancement of the guide. Key themes included providing clearer, role-specific pathways through the content to match diverse responsibilities and pedagogical needs. Suggestions also included adding multimedia formats to address varying preferences and enhancing accessibility. Concerns about cognitive overload, particularly around complex concepts, prompted calls for streamlined content and improved navigation. Insights align with Universal Design for Learning principles (CAST, 2024) and Waddington's (2021) notion of compassionate design, both of which emphasise choice, clarity, and responsiveness. The feedback also echoes relational pedagogical approaches that centre care and adaptability (Gravett, 2023; Bovill, 2020).

Design – Enabling Change
 To embed the guide more fully into everyday practice, participants recommended aligning it with processes such as programme reviews and validation, promotion criteria, and appraisals. Structural integration was seen as essential to reposition inclusive practice as core to academic life. Training sessions and tailored support were also suggested to help

staff move from passive awareness to active implementation. A communications strategy to increase visibility and affirm institutional commitment was considered crucial. Compassion, in this context, means acknowledging workload, building time for reflective change, and ensuring that inclusive practice is seen as both sustainable and meaningful.

Destiny -Rethinking Impact

Participants were asked how success of the guide should be understood. They rejected metric-driven evaluations, instead valuing qualitative indicators such as personal stories of change, peer learning, inclusive redesigns of curricula, and growing visibility of inclusive practice in recognition frameworks. Participants highlighted the complexity in attributing changes in metrics directly to the guide. Importantly, staff spoke of the emotional labour and fear associated with "getting inclusion wrong." For inclusive practice to flourish, they argued, institutions must foster a culture where vulnerability, experimentation, and imperfection are not penalised. Inclusion must be viewed as a relational, ongoing, and co-created process, embedded in trust and shared responsibility.

This redefinition of impact, shifting from performative metrics to meaningful engagement, supports wider calls for holistic evaluation in education (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Clements & Short, 2020). It reframes inclusion not as a box-ticking exercise, but as cultural work: fostering collegial trust, restoring compassion, and supporting community-led transformation. In doing so, the guide functions less as a compliance instrument and more as a catalyst for cultural and pedagogical renewal.

By foregrounding evaluation of inclusion practice as a relational and compassionate process, the study contributes to a growing body of work that positions educational transformation as context-sensitive, values-based, and collectively owned.