

Culturally Sensitive Curricula: Understanding the Barriers to Implementation in Higher Education

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Amid growing calls to decolonise, diversify, and make curricula more culturally sensitive, there is a pressing need to support academics in adapting their teaching and pedagogy. Although academics play a vital role in creating inclusive education, research shows some educators are hesitant to engage with racial and cultural issues. This longitudinal, observational study investigated perceived barriers to implementing culturally sensitive curricula (CSC) through six workshops with 25 educators from a Sports and Health department at an English university. Data collection included pre- and post-workshop questionnaires, observations, reflective activities, and semi-structured interviews. Four key barriers emerged: Externalisation of Responsibility and Resistance to Personal Accountability; Beliefs about the Discipline; Self-Awareness and Privilege Barriers; and Reluctance to Upset the Status Quo. These findings offer important insights into the challenges academics face in adopting CSC, helping inform faculty development efforts to promote more equitable, inclusive, and responsive teaching practices.

Full paper

Over the past decade, calls for greater diversity and inclusion in Higher Education (HE) have intensified, with students and academics advocating for curricula that reflect diverse perspectives and challenge Eurocentric legacies. Movements such as 'Rhodes Must Fall' and 'Why is My Curriculum White?' have highlighted the exclusion of marginalised voices and the persistence of structural inequalities (Arday, 2018). In the UK, these inequities are evident in the persistent ethnicity degree awarding gap and the underrepresentation of Black professors. This paper addresses the perceived barriers lecturers face in transforming their teaching to promote cultural sensitivity. We explore lecturers' responses to a six-week workshop series based on Thomas and Quinlan's (2023, 2024) CSC framework and tools, offering insights into fostering inclusive teaching practices.

A CSC is a curriculum designed to ensure that “attitudes, teaching methods, teaching materials, curriculum, and theories relate to, affirm, and respect students’ diverse cultures, identities, and contexts” (Thomas and Quinlan, 2023:284). CSC aims to enrich the curriculum by integrating diverse cultural perspectives, thereby enhancing its inclusivity and relevance (Quinlan et al., 2024).

Research on professional development in HE indicates that educating academics about teaching can positively impact their teaching, particularly by fostering student-centred approaches (Postareff et al., 2007). However, Stes et al., (2012, 2021b, 2013) found that instructional development programmes often failed to change teacher behaviours or the teaching environment as perceived by students, and did not result in improved student learning outcomes, highlighting the importance of exploring how they might be more effective.

We apply the CTPF to analyse the responses of participating lecturers to assess not only their willingness but also their resistance to integrating culturally sensitive practices into their teaching. This framework provides a lens through which to understand how deeply these lecturers are willing to engage with the workshop content and how it might challenge their existing pedagogical beliefs and practices. The framework helps to identify some of the factors that facilitate or hinder the adoption of culturally responsive pedagogies and contributes to a broader understanding of how educational practices can be transformed to better address inequities within HE.

This longitudinal observational study examined participants in six CSC workshops for academics, led by the second author, an academic developer specialising in anti-racist education, at an English university's Sport and Health department. Each 90-minute weekly session focused on a specific aspect of CSC. Participants completed a pre-workshop questionnaire a week before the first session. The first author attended all sessions as a participant observer, recording discussions and feedback through reflection activities such as feedback forms and "minute papers" (Angelo and Cross, 1993). A post-workshop questionnaire followed the final session, and follow-up interviews occurred three to six months after the final workshop.

Thematic analysis was the primary method for data analysis, useful for identifying and reporting patterns or themes while minimally organising the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To explore patterns emerging from the data, the first author engaged in an iterative and reflexive process that combined both inductive and deductive approaches. The process was grounded in the Critical Transformative Praxis Framework (Jemal and Bussey, 2018) and guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2019, 2020) Contemporary Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Our analysis revealed four major barriers to implementing CSC. First, the externalisation of responsibility and reluctance to assume personal accountability emerged as a key

challenge. Many educators demonstrated resistance to viewing cultural sensitivity as an intrinsic part of their teaching practice.

Second, participants reported a perceived disconnect between CSC and their academic discipline. This is particularly pronounced in STEM fields, where curricula are often framed as neutral and shaped by external accreditation requirements. Such views limited the perceived relevance of CSC and contributed to uncertainty about implementation.

Third, barriers related to self-awareness and privilege were evident. Many White male educators acknowledged their positional advantage, and the structural inequalities embedded in academia. However, this awareness sometimes led to paralysis or inaction, with participants feeling overwhelmed by the systemic nature of the issues and uncertain about how to respond meaningfully.

Finally, we found a reluctance to disrupt the status quo by addressing race and culture explicitly. Educators expressed discomfort discussing race in the classroom, fearing missteps or backlash. This fear often resulted in avoidance, perpetuating silence around critical topics and reinforcing existing inequities.

These findings have important practical applications for professional and curriculum development in HE. Without addressing the deeper resistance among academics highlighted here, efforts to create culturally sensitive classrooms risk being superficial. Educators must pair critical awareness with concrete action to meaningfully and sustainably meet diverse student needs.