

# Liberation, Equality, and Diversity in the Curriculum



## Welcome

Hello and welcome to our briefing on liberation, equality, and diversity in the curriculum. This briefing gives you the basic facts about inclusivity in the higher education curriculum and highlights some of the work that is already going on to make the academic experience in higher education more equitable and reflective of the diverse world we live in. When we say we need to liberate the curriculum, we don't just mean the books listed on the syllabus, but also the way course content is delivered and assessed, and the environment in which students are expected to learn. Creating a more inclusive learning environment is vital if all students are going to feel welcome at university. If we want widening participation to really be effective, we need to focus not just on recruitment but also retention. A key way of doing this is encouraging our institutions to embed liberation, equality, and diversity in the learning experience, so that students from under-represented backgrounds know they are valued as equal members of the learning community. We hope you find this briefing a useful starting point to think about what your union can do to support a more equitable and inclusive curriculum.

In Unity,

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# Liberation, Equality, and Diversity in the Curriculum



## 1. Introduction

Embedding liberation, equality, and diversity in the curriculum means ensuring that all students have access to the same learning resources and have equal chances of success. It means that issues of liberation, equality, and diversity are incorporated into the curriculum as much as possible and that the learning environment is inclusive to all.

Although related, the terms 'liberation', 'equality', and 'diversity' are distinct from one another; each element has its place in an inclusive curriculum. **Liberation** means working to challenge and reverse the effects of structural oppression in society, which manifest themselves in higher education in numerous ways. **Equality** means that the curriculum should not disadvantage any student or group of students because of their background or characteristics.

**Diversity** means that the curriculum should represent the diversity of contemporary society and facilitate an environment in which all students feel welcome in the learning community.

In this context, the term 'curriculum' does not just mean the content which is taught in the classroom or assigned as reading, but the entire way in which learning happens. Issues of liberation, equality and diversity in the curriculum include teaching materials, assessment, and the learning environment. There are two strands to liberating the curriculum:

1. Ensuring that all students, regardless of their profile, have access to the same resources and facilities. Ensuring that students feel safe and welcome and have equal chances of success.
2. Bringing up issues of liberation, equality and diversity as part of the curriculum. Ensuring that curriculum content reflects our diverse population and encourages social

inclusion and mutual understanding of different perspectives.

## The problem

Many curricula in higher education are still built around the model of a 'traditional' student, and this creates difficulties and disadvantages for many of the different types of students who currently participate in higher education. A wide variety of quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that not all students are having equitable academic experiences.

The issue of an 'attainment gap' in higher education is often cited as a sign of the lack of inclusivity of the curriculum. The Equality Challenge Unit's *Equality in Higher Education Statistical Report 2010* highlighted a number of different attainment gaps in higher education.<sup>1</sup> For instance, on undergraduate degree courses, a higher proportion of men achieve first class honours degrees, but a higher proportion of women achieve upper second class honours degrees. A lower proportion of Black students achieve first class honours than non-Black students. Disabled students are also less likely to attain first class honours than those who have not declared a disability.

However, beyond degree attainments there are other concerns about the ways different students experience higher education. In the National Student Survey 2010<sup>2</sup>:

- Women were less satisfied than men, especially in the areas of academic support and learning resources.
- Disabled students were significantly less satisfied than their peers in every area of the NSS, with organisation and management being the area with the largest difference in satisfaction.

<sup>1</sup> Chris Brill (2010) *Equality in higher education statistical report 2010*. Equality Challenge Unit.

<sup>2</sup> HEFCE (2011) *National Student Survey: Findings and trends 2006-2010*:

[http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2011/11\\_11/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2011/11_11/)

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- Mature students have lower overall satisfaction levels.
- International students (both EU and non-EU) were significantly less satisfied with teaching than students from the UK, but students from the UK were significantly less satisfied than international students in the areas of assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources, and overall satisfaction.
- Satisfaction profiles varied greatly by ethnicity. Most notably, students from Black backgrounds were significantly less satisfied than students from non-Black backgrounds in the areas of academic support and teaching.

There are also concerns about the environment in which students are expected to learn. In May 2011, NUS Black Students' Campaign released *Race for Equality*,<sup>3</sup> a report into the experiences of Black students in further and higher education. It found that although many Black students were positive about their teaching and learning environment, 23 per cent described it as 'cliquey', 17 per cent as 'isolating', and 7 per cent as 'racist'. Students described feeling left out of the learning environment and 'invisible' to their lecturers. 42 per cent

of Black students said the curriculum did not reflect issues of diversity, equality, and discrimination and 34 per cent said they did not feel able to bring their perspective as Black students in to lectures, seminars, and tutorials. There was frustration with lecturers who did not take into account diverse backgrounds and views, and respondents indicated that they felt that the Black perspective was not valued by their lecturers. Experiences of racial and cultural bias were a main reason for low levels of satisfaction with assessment and feedback as well as academic support.

Similarly, NUS Disabled Student Campaign's *Life not Numbers* report demonstrated that delays in providing disabled students with appropriate support, such as personal care or note-takers, can be extremely stressful for students, leading them to fall behind or even leave university early.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to remember that events outside of the classroom may affect a student's learning experience as well. NUS Women's Campaign's *Hidden Marks* report, which examined women students' experiences of sexual harassment, assault, and violence, found that many students who had been victims of sexual assaults or violence experienced problems with their

As an LGBT campaign we believe that LGBT issues have been actively cut out of education and academia due to LGBTphobia. The impact the LGBT movement has had on society, the contributions of LGBT people throughout history, and the very existence of LGBT people here and now are very rarely seen. By making the curriculum LGBT-inclusive we help to challenge the normative attitudes regarding sexual orientation and gender. This will help the fight against discrimination in and around our institutions and help familiarise people with what it is to be LGBT. We're excited that NUS and students' unions will be going deeper into this new area of work that could have a profound effect on not just LGBT students but all students. –**Vicki Baars and Alan Bailey, NUS LGBT Officers**

<sup>3</sup> NUS (2011) *Race for Equality: A report on the experiences of Black students in Higher Education*: [http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/asset/News/6124/NUS\\_Race\\_for\\_Equality\\_web.pdf](http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/asset/News/6124/NUS_Race_for_Equality_web.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> NUS (2010) *Life not Numbers: A report into the experiences of disabled students in higher education using personal care packages*. <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/disabled/Life-Not-Numbers/>

studies, most often relating to attendance.<sup>5</sup> NUS's report on the experiences of student parents also found that 39 per cent of students did not feel able to access the learning resources at their institution as much as they needed to due to factors relating to their responsibilities as parents. Practices deemed appropriate for 'traditional' students—such as providing the timetable on the first day of term—were not adequate for student parents and resulted in disadvantages to their learning experience. As a result, 65 per cent of lone parents and 60 per cent of parents overall had contemplated leaving their course.<sup>6</sup>

When taken as a whole, the evidence in this section suggests that the current higher education curriculum is not meeting the needs of all students equally. Some students are experiencing a disadvantage in engaging as members of the academic community because of who they are, and this should never be the case.

### **The importance of liberation, equality, and diversity in the curriculum**

There are a number of benefits that a more inclusive curriculum can bring for society, institutions, and individuals. An inclusive curriculum ensures that higher education continues to act as an agent for liberal and democratic values, and encourages mutual understanding of different viewpoints. Since all students' needs are accommodated, students have an increased chance of academic success. Finally, liberating the curriculum can help students reflect on their identity and their place in society. This can contribute to an individual's personal growth as well as their employability.

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<sup>5</sup> NUS (2010) *Hidden Marks: A study of women's experiences of harassment, violence, stalking, and sexual assault*.

<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/endingviolence/Hidden-Marks/>

<sup>6</sup> NUS (2009) *Meet the Parents: The experience of students with children in further and higher education*. <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/studentparents/Meet-the-Parents-Report/>

### **The QAA code of practice on disabled students<sup>7</sup>**

The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) code of practice on disabled students indicates several ways that institutions should be seeking to make their courses accessible to disabled students. Several of these points can also be considered best practice for other groups of under-represented students and could be adapted to help contribute to a more inclusive curriculum:

- The design of new programmes and the review and/or revalidation of existing programmes should include assessment of the extent to which the programme is inclusive of disabled students.
- The design and implementation of learning and teaching strategies and related activities, as well as the learning environment, should recognize the entitlement of disabled students to participate in all activities provided as part of their programme of study.
- Academic assessment practices should ensure that disabled students are given the opportunity to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes and competence standards.
- Academic support and guidance should be accessible and appropriate for disabled students.

An inclusive curriculum can also form part of an institution's retention strategy. Researchers for the *back on course* programme have found that some types of students are over-represented amongst

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<sup>7</sup> Quality Assurance Agency (2010) *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 3: Disabled students*: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Section3Disabilities2010.pdf>

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students who did not complete their course of study.<sup>8</sup> This included mature students, those who had achieved zero, one, or two 'A' levels, those with a BTEC (vocational) qualification, those who selected the ethnicity option 'prefer not to say', those who had not applied through a centre, and those who had no or low UCAS tariff scores. Institutions have increasingly looked to an inclusive curriculum as part of a strategy to help improve retention.

The need to liberate the curriculum forms an important role in the fight against racism. The Stephen Lawrence Report stressed the need to diversify the curriculum. A liberated curriculum will benefit students and wider society, as well as tackling the age-old problem of discrimination, as we begin to learn and understand the experience of other students we are better placed to see the world from a pluralistic view point. We are delighted that NUS understands the need to liberate the curriculum, it is a positive step and we hope the sector will do the same. -**Kanja Sesay, NUS Black Students' Officer**

Institutions also have a legal obligation to provide education in a non-discriminatory manner. The Equality Act 2010 consolidates and streamlines existing discrimination laws and aims to support the progress of equality. Once it is fully implemented, it will mean that institutions have a duty not only to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students and to eliminate harassment, victimisation, and discrimination against students with 'protected characteristics'<sup>9</sup>, but also to

advance equality of opportunity and "foster good relations" between different groups of people.

Incorporating issues of liberation into the curriculum also contributes to campaigns for liberation in society at large. In addition to the content that is taught and the way that content is assessed, higher education has a 'hidden curriculum'—the "values, dispositions, and social and behavioural expectations" that are rewarded in higher education.<sup>10</sup> For instance, lecturers that refuse to print handouts, or course materials that talk exclusively of heterosexual couples, send messages about who is valued in higher education. This hidden curriculum serves to reinforce existing social relations, so fighting to make the curriculum more inclusive and open to different types of students can help disrupt this process of reproducing inequalities.

## Dealing with the counter-arguments

Although more and more institutions and staff are realising the value of creating an inclusive curriculum, you may still encounter some resistance to these ideas. However, most of the time you can challenge these arguments simply by explaining more of what liberation, equality, and diversity in the curriculum is all about.

Some reluctance to change the system may be due to the idea that the whole system should not be changed just for the benefit of a small group of students. Actually, an inclusive curriculum benefits **all** students. By enabling students to reflect on issues of liberation, equality, and diversity, an inclusive curriculum better prepares all students for life in a diverse society. Similarly, a supportive learning environment in which all perspectives are valued helps all

<sup>8</sup> Laura Graham (2010) *Interim findings report: Analysis of retention data from the back on course scheme*. UCAS.

<sup>9</sup> The Equality Bill 2010 lists the following as protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment,

marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief (including lack of belief), sex, and sexual orientation.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Margolis (2003) *The Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education*. Rutledge.

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students to be more confident contributors to discussions.

A common argument against liberation, equality, and diversity in the curriculum is that the current curriculum merely reflects the reality of society, so there is no point in attempting to change it. For instance, as the argument goes, the majority of articles in a particular field are written by men and this is the reason the majority of authors on a syllabus will be men. This is true to some extent, since universities exist in society and are influenced by its norms, but universities can take action and lead the change they want to see in society. As Dr Vicky Gunn has pointed out in relation to LGBTQ perspectives on higher education, “what we include [in the curriculum] and how we teach it are intrinsically interlinked and together can form the basis of the dominant culture provided by the student’s department.”<sup>11</sup> This dominant culture sends signals to students about who is valued—and if a student does not feel valued, they are much less likely to succeed.

NUS’s liberation campaigns—Black Students’ Campaign, Disabled Students’ Campaign, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Campaign, and Womens’ Campaign—also offer invaluable advice on dealing with arguments against liberating the curriculum. They have been making these arguments for many years in a variety of contexts and will be able to help you win any argument you are confronted with.

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<sup>11</sup> Dr Vicky Gunn (2008) *Thinking about higher education learning environments from a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) perspective*. Briefings on Equality and Diversity.

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## 2. Elements of an inclusive curriculum

The following sections discuss issues of liberation, equality and diversity in the curriculum in relation to specific elements of the learning experience. Different types of students have different needs for their curricula. However, liberating the curriculum is not only about getting institutions to

address the needs of different demographic groups. It is important to remember that there is diversity within diversity; not all Black students have the same educational needs, for example. These elements affect each student differently, but it is important to consider how the curriculum can be changed for the benefit of all students.

### Engaging with gender across the disciplines<sup>12</sup>

The *Gender in Bachelor's and Master's Degrees* website ([www.gender-curricula.eu](http://www.gender-curricula.eu)) provides guidance on how to mainstream issues of gender equity in higher education. The site provides examples of how to incorporate gender into a wide range of subjects. Some are selected below but many more are available at the above site. These examples could be adapted to address issues of liberation, equality, and diversity for other groups as well.

#### Architecture

The curriculum could address the ways that cultural constructions of gender have historically influenced, and continue to influence, the design and perception of buildings and cities. This could incorporate an exploration of the ways in which architecture and urban design can be regarded as a reproduction of gender relations.

#### Business Administration

The curriculum could incorporate a critique of the supposed neutrality of this discipline. For instance, an analysis of the role of gender in organisational theory and the way that gendered organisational structures may impact career progression.

#### Medicine

Within the Medicine curriculum, students can be encouraged to develop insight into the role that gender plays in different areas of the profession, including the way that gendered social roles and living conditions may impact upon pathology, diagnosis, and treatment. Students could also reflect on the way that gender can influence communication with patients.

#### Comparative Politics

An analysis of the role of gender in the creation of the welfare state could be incorporated into the comparison of various political regimes. When studying political transformations, the role of women and women's movements could also be considered.

<sup>12</sup> Dr Ruth Becker, *Gender in bachelor's and master's degrees*. Women's Research Network, Universität Dortmund.

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## Curriculum Content

One of the main ways that liberation, equality, and diversity can be embedded in the curriculum is through incorporating these issues into the content of the course. This is easier for some subjects than others, but there is scope in all subjects to make the curriculum content more reflective of diversity and more thoughtful about issues of liberation. However, it is important to avoid being tokenistic. Diversity should be embedded into the mainstream curriculum, rather than being singled-out as separate from the main curriculum. Some elements of curriculum content that can be considered are:

- **Course topics:** Wherever possible, course topics should include the perspectives of minority groups and women.
- **Suggested readings:** Suggested readings should feature writers from a wide variety of backgrounds. Alternative perspectives to the 'mainstream' narrative should be considered.
- **Case studies:** Case studies are used across many disciplines and are an easy way of incorporating diverse views. Instead of stereotypical examples, the people featured in case studies can be more nuanced and reflective of the diversity of the learning community.
- **Identity as part of the curriculum:** By incorporating issues of identity into the curriculum, all students are given a chance to consider the way that their identity shapes their learning experience and how this relates to their place in society.

## Teaching Materials<sup>13</sup>

A number of simple steps can be taken to make teaching materials more inclusive. Although many formatting recommendations are designed for the benefit of dyslexic students, these changes actually make the document more readable

<sup>13</sup> Dr Charles Gore and Deb Viney (2006) *Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination*. Curriculum Innovation for Diversity,

I have heard from people in the sector that liberating curriculum content can only work in humanities courses (for example, Martin Luther King or Malcolm X as part of your history syllabus). I totally disagree—Diversity can be incorporated in many more subjects. I hated Biology (probably as I was no good at it) but if I was taught that it was Ibn Al-Haytham that invented many foundations of science, including the mechanics of vision and perception, my interest would definitely have been there. Or if I was told that it was actually a Muslim women called Fatima al-Fihri who invented the worlds first University (Al-Qarawiyyin, 841 CE)—how many misconceptions would that change or challenge in today's society!  
– **Usman Ali, NUS VP (Higher Education)**

## Accessible teaching materials

Dr Charles Gore and Deb Viney of the School of Oriental and African Studies, describe some of the ways that materials can be made more inclusive:

- **Font:** sans serif preferable (e.g. Arial)
- **Font size:** preferably a minimum of 12 unless an electronic version is easily available
- **Justify:** to the left margin only; leave right margin ragged
- **Spacing:** line spacing minimum of 1.5; check general spacing of the document for clarity as well
- **Important information:** highlight using bolding the most important elements of a document
- **Paper:** print on off-white or pale coloured paper
- **Organisation:** use page numbers, headings, and labels
- **Electronic format:** make available whenever possible

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and clear for all students, which helps to promote the success of all students. In addition to ensuring that formatting is as clear and accessible as possible, course materials can also be made more inclusive by incorporating equal opportunities statements where appropriate, and using diverse imagery and language.

## **Inclusive Assessment**

Inclusive assessment is based on the principle that all students should have a way of demonstrating that they have achieved the learning outcomes of their module or course. Inclusive assessment does not make assumptions about the needs of certain students; instead it considers the strengths and weaknesses of all students. Inclusive assessment uses the full range of assessment options available and often students have a choice from a range of assessment methods.

assessment inclusive so that it does not pose a disadvantage to any student or group of students.<sup>14</sup> At present, disabled students have a formal method for considering the way that assessment requirements may impact negatively on them. Other groups of students who also experience lower attainment do not have systems in place to address this.

However, there is evidence that the modified assessment provisions available to disabled students are not fit for purpose. Waterfield and West identify three reasons:

- They are a “compensatory approach...based on the medical model of disability.” They seek to assimilate students into an existing system. There is no recognition of a need for systemic change to the way assessments are carried out.
- Arranging these modified provisions is becoming a burden on institutions and

## **Fostering an inclusive learning environment<sup>15</sup>**

The Scottish Funding Council and Universities Scotland have produced a Race Equality Toolkit (see further resources) which gives guidance on how universities can engage with equalities legislation. It encourages lecturers to ask themselves the following questions to ensure the classroom environment is welcoming and inclusive to students from all ethnic backgrounds. These could easily be adapted to apply more broadly to diverse groups of students.

- Are all students valued equally regardless of their ethnicity, culture, faith and diverse backgrounds?
- Is racism within the learning environment—whether overt, covert, intended or unintended—swiftly addressed?
- Do other learning environments, such as the virtual learning environment (VLE), promote and assist equality and diversity?
- Within the context of race equality, how can the quality of lecturer/student relationships affect the learning environment in the class?
- Is there consideration of how being in a minority in a student group might impact on learning and teaching?

The SPACE project, run by Judith Waterfield and Bob West of the University of Plymouth, identified the need to make

<sup>14</sup> Judith Waterfield and Bob West (2006): *Inclusive Assessment in Higher Education: A resource for change*. University of Plymouth

<sup>15</sup> Universities Scotland (2006) *Race equality toolkit: Learning and teaching*.

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is not sustainable as the number of disabled students continues to grow.

- Modified assessment provisions are usually arranged by disability services rather than the academic responsible for setting the assessment; there is no evidence that these provisions are the exactly correct adjustments in order to 'level the playing field'.

Instead, Waterfield and West advocate for inclusive assessments, which are built into the course design and structured in such a way that they do not disadvantage anyone in the diverse student body. Of course, there may always be unique cases that need to be dealt with on an individual basis, but for the most part, students' assessment needs should be met from within the mainstream curriculum.

## Anonymous Marking

Anonymous marking, sometimes called 'blind marking', is a system of assessment where the student's name is unknown to the assessor. The most common form of anonymous marking involves assigning students a number which is used instead of their name to identify their work throughout the assessment process. Research suggests that anonymous marking can help to reduce both the fear of and the likelihood of discrimination. Anonymous marking does not solve the problem of discrimination, but it is an important component of liberating the curriculum.

Anonymous marking can benefit all members of the academic community in a variety of ways:<sup>16</sup>

- **Freedom from discrimination and prejudice:** Research has shown that marks for both women and Black students can improve upon introduction of anonymous marking.

- **Marks based on the quality of work:** Anonymous marking ensures that students know the mark they receive is a reflection of the quality of their work. It also reduces suspicions of bigotry against lecturers and minimises potential conflict, safeguarding both staff and students.
- **More clarity about the causes of discrimination:** The removal of the possibility of bias at the assessment stage can provoke a more thorough investigation into attainment gaps.

## An inclusive learning environment

The atmosphere of the learning environment is important so that all students feel welcomed as full members of the learning community. NUS's *Race for Equality* report indicated that Black students felt their questions or concerns were treated with derision due to a perception from staff that they had less academic potential than their peers. This

Women's educational paths are too often determined before they even walk into the classroom. From societal perceptions of women's roles and interests to the dearth of women in the higher echelons of academia, entering education and having a real choice about what you study is a pipe dream for thousands of women.

In the classroom women are often invisible; curricula are dominated by the writing and ideas of men with women's issues and thoughts seen as an optional add-on if they are mentioned at all.

From access to progression to participation women students' academic careers are defined by their gender. Whether subtle or direct, sexism has a huge impact and we have a responsibility to tackle it and improve women's education. – **Estelle Hart, National Women's Officer**

<sup>16</sup> For more information, see <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/highereducation/learning-and-teaching-hub/anonymous-marking/>

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need not be because the staff are prejudiced, but they may lack understanding of how to deal with their diverse student body.

Students can also contribute to the atmosphere of the learning environment. For instance, the Equality Challenge Unit's report into the experience of LGBT staff and students in higher education found that over 46 per cent of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students surveyed had received homophobic or biphobic remarks from other students. Respondents stated that these comments affected on their confidence, stress levels, or ability to concentrate.<sup>17</sup> When such comments are made in an academic setting, lecturers may not be equipped with strategies for dealing with these comments. As a result these views are not challenged, and consequently some students may feel excluded. Because of these issues, it is important that teaching staff are comfortable addressing issues of liberation, equality, and diversity.

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<sup>17</sup> Equality Challenge Unit (2009) *The Experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans staff and students in higher education*.

### 3. How to liberate the curriculum

In this section you will find some examples of projects which have helped to strengthen liberation, equality, and diversity in the curriculum. Although much of the existing work in this area has come from institutions, students and students' unions have an important role to play in promoting equality in the curriculum. The Higher Education Association (HEA) has recently undertaken a programme of work on Developing and Embedding Inclusive Policy and Practice in Higher Education; its work found that **"students were found to be key agents of change and their experiences and input helped to convince staff of the need for change"**.<sup>18</sup>

#### Use the HEA's self-evaluation framework

The Higher Education Academy has developed a self-evaluation framework to allow institutions, programmes, or individuals to evaluate the extent to which they have 'embedded' liberation, equality, and diversity into their structures and cultures. This consists of a series of statements, which the user can rate on a scale of how much has been achieved on the different elements of the programme. The user also identifies what evidence there is to support this rating. Several strands of the framework relate to creating an inclusive curriculum, and the statements provide an idea about the types of actions that institutions could take to move towards an inclusive curriculum. The box to the right gives some examples (see further resources for more).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Dr Helen May and Kath Bridger (2010) *Developing and Embedding Inclusive Policy and Practice in Higher Education*. The Higher Education Academy, page 4.

<sup>19</sup> Dr Helen May and Liz Thomas (2010) *Embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum: Self-evaluation framework*. The Higher Education Academy, pages 8-11.

#### Strand 3: Curriculum Design

- Learning outcomes and/or competence standards do not adversely impact upon or discriminate against particular students or groups
- Curriculum content is sensitive and varied, informed by different social and cultural perspectives and builds on students' educational interests, experiences, and aspirations
- Programmes provide a range of learning and teaching approaches that take account of the diversity of students and build effective working relationships.
- Curriculum is designed to provide a range of assessment and feedback approaches. The institution provides sufficient organizational flexibility in all programmes to accommodate student diversity and individual pathways.
- Programmes are routinely assessed to ensure that equality groups are not adversely affected.
- Staff have access to information, advice, and guidance in order to design an inclusive curriculum.

#### Strand 4: Curriculum Delivery

- Learning is student-centred and interactive, engaging all students through a range of methods.
- The materials, resources, and examples provided positively embrace the diversity of students' backgrounds, interests, experiences, and aspirations.
- Learning materials are available in sufficient time and in different formats.
- Staff offer flexibility in curriculum delivery to enable all students to participate.
- Staff review incorporates inclusive curriculum delivery.

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It is really exciting that the Higher Education Zone is working on liberating the curriculum. This is particularly important for disabled students, as there are many barriers to overcome in accessing the curriculum. Ninety percent of disabled people have a hidden disability, and this is the same for students. Often lecturers and course structures fail to acknowledge the wide scope of disabilities and how the curriculum, if diversified, can become more accessible.

It can take simple measures to make the curriculum accessible. For instance, lecturers providing handouts to dyslexic students beforehand can go a long way, and may mean that a student can go from a 2:1 to a first, if the correct support is put into place. –

**Rupy Kaur, National Disabled Students' Officer**

## Perform a diversity audit

A diversity audit is an attempt to check that all elements of a course's curriculum are appropriate for a diverse learning community and that issues of equality, diversity, and liberation are appropriately embedded in the course. A set of questions similar to those listed above may form a starting point, but these need to be operationalised into an audit, with practical steps or checks which course leaders can undertake to make sure their course is appropriately incorporating liberation, equality, and diversity into the curriculum.

Dr Charles Gore and Deb Viney, of the School of Oriental and African Art (SOAS) used a diversity audit to examine the course 'African Art Part 1'. Their audit had the following steps:<sup>20</sup>

- **Review course learning outcomes** to check for any unintended barriers or diversity issues and for flexibility to make reasonable adjustments as required.
- **Check course materials** and modify to make easier to read (as detailed in the 'teaching materials' section of this briefing)

- **Check supporting materials** (such as the course handbook) for inclusive language and appropriate inclusion of diverse images and equal opportunity statements
- **Evaluate case histories / other course content** for representation of different types of people and diversity issues
- **Consider diversity issues** which may / should arise in the course content
- **Review course recruitment, retention, and achievement** (e.g. diversity variable statistics) and associated action plans
- **Review course assessment strategies** for the skills and knowledge being tested; variety of assessment; availability of alternative forms of assessment
- **Review staff and student feedback**, considering the means by which feedback is obtained and whether these have or are likely to provide opportunities to express views which may lead to genuine changes

They note that it is important to frame diversity audits as a chance for enhancing the curriculum rather than an intrusion into academic freedom. Careful consideration of issues of liberation, equality, and diversity can improve the experiences of both students and staff.

<sup>20</sup> Dr Charles Gore and Deb Viney (2006) *Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination*. Curriculum Innovation for Diversity, page 2.

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## **Incorporate into staff development**

A major challenge in initiatives which seek to liberate the curriculum is embedding this within the culture and structure of the institution; staff need to understand the importance of liberation, equality, and diversity in the curriculum and be equipped with the tools necessary to incorporate these issues into their courses and foster an inclusive learning environment. One way of achieving this is by using existing staff development structures. Many institutions in the HEA's *Embedding Inclusive Policy and Practice* programme used staff development as a key strategy in their plans. Using existing staff development structures, but incorporating new information and tools on liberation, equality, and diversity in the curriculum, helps to 'mainstream' these issues rather than segregate them as separate to the core of staff responsibilities.

As part of their project on Equality-Proofing the Curriculum, Anglia Ruskin University determined that staff buy-in to the principle of equality in the curriculum is an important factor in creating a climate where equality and diversity are embedded in the organisation. They noted that "the commitment of an organisation to inclusive practice is best demonstrated where individuals are required to be both responsible and accountable for the delivery of inclusive practice is best demonstrated where individuals are required to be both responsible and accountable for the delivery of inclusive practice as part of employee appraisal/performance assessment and CPD provision".<sup>21</sup> Anglia Ruskin designed a research for learning and teaching staff called TeachInclusive which features a series of short videos of staff talking about inclusive practice.

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<sup>21</sup> Dr Helen May and Kath Bridger (2010) *Developing and Embedding Inclusive Policy and Practice in Higher Education*. The Higher Education Academy. Page 108.

## **Highlight successful students**

Much of the discourse around issues of equality, diversity, and liberation comes from a deficit perspective—it views non-traditional students as in need of special accommodations and focuses on issues of underachievement, dropout, and other academic problems. To counteract this discourse, University of the Arts London undertook a project which focused on successful students from non-traditional backgrounds (first generation graduates, Black students, disabled students, and international students). The *Tell us about it* project sought the voices of students who had overcome barriers to succeed at the university and asked them to reflect on what had helped them to succeed. Each student involved with the project created an art object or multimedia piece to explore their learning experience. The university mounted an exhibition featuring these artefacts and stories, celebrating success while simultaneously developing a bank of knowledge about how to support students from diverse backgrounds.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> University of the Arts London (2008) *Tell us about it: Student voices in creative practice*.

## 4. Conclusion

A curriculum which addresses issues of liberation, equality, and diversity and includes all students as equal participants is a vital part of improving the quality of learning and teaching in higher education. This briefing provides an introduction to liberating the curriculum. It gives an overview of the issues at stake and some of the different elements of the curriculum which should be considered in relation to their inclusivity. The case studies and other practical tips are suggestions for actions that can be taken to campaign for a liberated curriculum. Institutions have taken some of the first steps towards creating a more inclusive curriculum; now it is students' unions' turn to get involved and make sure that liberation, equality, and diversity are embedded in all aspects of their curricula.

To learn more about NUS's work on liberation, equality, and diversity in the curriculum, visit our websites:

- Liberating the Curriculum:  
<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/highereducation/learning-and-teaching-hub/equalityinthecurriculum/>
- NUS Black Students' Campaign:  
<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/black/>
- NUS Disabled Students' Campaign:  
<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/disability/>
- NUS LGBT Campaign:  
<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/lgbt/>
- NUS Women's Campaign:  
<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/womens/>

Or email [usman.ali@nus.org.uk](mailto:usman.ali@nus.org.uk)

## 5. Further Resources

- Becker, R. (2006). **Gender in bachelor's and master's degrees.** Women's Research Network, Universitat Dortmund.  
[http://www.gender-curricula.eu/en\\_curricula\\_suche.php?gruppe=alle&lg=en&main=2](http://www.gender-curricula.eu/en_curricula_suche.php?gruppe=alle&lg=en&main=2)
- Equality Challenge Unit briefing on Equality Act 2010:  
<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/search?equalityareas%3Alist=equality-bill>
- Equality Challenge Unit (2009) **The experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans staff and students in higher education:**  
<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/lgbt-staff-and-students-in-he>
- Gore, C. and Viney, D. (2006) **Infinite diversity in infinite combination?** Symposium given at Curriculum Innovation for Diversity, York St John University College:  
[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/inclusion/wp/web0393\\_infinite\\_diversity\\_in\\_infinite\\_combination.doc](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/inclusion/wp/web0393_infinite_diversity_in_infinite_combination.doc)
- Margolis, E. (2001) **The Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education.** Rutledge:  
<http://www.udel.edu/anthro/ackerman/hidden%20curr.pdf> (Excerpt)
- May, H. and Bridger, K. (2010) **Developing and Embedding Inclusive Policy and Practice in Higher Education.** The Higher Education Academy:  
[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/inclusion/DevelopingEmbeddingInclusivePolicyPractice\\_ReportFinal.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/inclusion/DevelopingEmbeddingInclusivePolicyPractice_ReportFinal.pdf)
- May, H. and Thomas, L. (2010) **Embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum: Self-evaluation framework.** Higher Education Academy:  
<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/inclusion/EmbeddingEquality.pdf>
- Universities Scotland (2006) **Race equality toolkit: Learning and teaching:**  
<http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/raceequalitytoolkit/>
- University of the Arts London (2008) **Tell us about it: Student voices in creative practice:** <http://www.arts.ac.uk/clipceti-tellusaboutitpublication.htm>
- Waterfield, J. and West, B. (2006) **Inclusive assessment in higher education: A resource for change.** University of Plymouth:  
<http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/pages/view.asp?page=10494>