Liberating the Curriculum

There are a number of benefits that "equality proofing" the curriculum can bring. For society at large, it ensures that further and higher education continue to act as an agent for liberal and democratic values, encouraging social cohesion and mutual understanding of different viewpoints. It also benefits the individual by allowing them to reflect on who they are and their place in society. Indeed, if individuals are not able to do this, it can be argued that it stunts their personal growth and reduces their employability.

So how exactly do we liberate the curriculum?

There are 2 strands to looking at equality in the curriculum:

1. Ensuring all students regardless of their profile, have access to the same resources and facilities and ensuring students feel safe, giving students equal chances of success.

2. Bringing up issues of equality as part of the curriculum. Ensuring that case studies and resources reflect our diverse population and a curriculum which aims to encourage social inclusion and education about different profiles of people.

One or both of these things may be something which you may want to think about when running a campaign on assessment, your campaign could investigate how your institution ensures that their curriculum considers equality in their curriculums and help to shape policy in this area or actively encourage opportunities for students to bring their experiences and perspectives into the classroom and use them as an integral part of the learning process though engaging them in curriculum design. Whatever path you choose to take, we hope these next few pages will give you some indication on the type of resources already available.

After the Equality Act 2010 passed in April, new measures will be introduced over the coming years which will have a direct impact on institutions and students' unions.

The Equality Act 2010, consolidates an streamlines current discrimination laws and aims to strengthen the law to support the progress of equality. The Equality Challenge Unit have a dedicated page on their website on how institutions and students unions will be affected by the new legislation, including a specific briefing on the implications for students' unions: http://www.ecu.ac.uk/subjects/equality-act-2010.

The Equality Challenge unit has also done research on ethnicity, gender and attainment. As well as finding an achievement gap, its findings suggested that further linkage and coordination is needed at governance, strategic and curriculum development levels between principles and practice of equality and diversity, and learning, teaching and assessment functions…More research and development activities are needed to strengthen demonstrably fair, inclusive and helpful assessment and feedback regimes for all students.[4]

Diversity Audits

Dr. Charles Gore (Lecturer in the History of African Art) and Deb Viney (Diversity Advisor and former lecturer in Human Psychology) of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, anticipated in their 2006 HE Academy Symposium that diversity audits may become more widespread within the HE

4. ECU and HE Academy Ethnicity and Degree Attainment Project Report, 2008. http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/files/ethnicity-gender-and-degree-attainment-project-final-report.pdf/at_download/file

sector although they recognise that "It is, naturally, impossible to achieve inclusion of an infinite range of issues, but units and their participants can benefit from a process of consideration of what more could be done."[5] In their symposium, they outline some examples of questions a diversity audit may ask:

1	Are the learning outcomes expressed in a fashion that does not introduce unnecessary or unintended barriers? Are they sufficiently flexible to permit "reasonable adjustments" to meet specific needs when necessary?
2	Does the unit (explicitly or implicitly) address an appropriate range of diversity issues in connection with the subject material?
3	Do the supporting materials (course handbooks etc.) include information about the institutional resources and systems available to support students who have additional needs? Do they include an "Equal opportunities / diversity statement"?
4	Are the teaching materials presented in formats which are easy to read?
5	Are teaching materials made available in alternative formats (e.g. electronic)?
6	What use is made of electronic aids such as posting material in a Virtual Learning Environment [VLE] such as Blackboard?

If case studies are used do they draw on a full range of examples from all strata of society? |
| 7 | Are assessments all dependent on reading / writing skills?

What other skills could / should be assessed? |
| 8 | Does the teaching draw on the full range of learning styles and utilise a range of accessible resources? |
| 9 | Does the programme recruit from the full range of students? |
| 10 | Do all students have positive experiences on the unit?

Are there any differences in experience between student groups? |
| 11 | How do staff experience the unit? Are there diversity issues for teaching staff? |

5. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/inclusion/wp/web0393_infinite_diversity_in_infinite_combination.doc p2

They used these questions to do an audit on their African Art Part 1 course and used the following process to answer the questions above:

1. **review course learning outcomes** to check for any unintended barriers or diversity issues and for flexibility to make reasonable adjustments as required.

2. **check course materials** – modify to make easier to read.

   i. font – sans serif preferable e.g. arial.

   ii. font size – preferably a minimum of 12 unless electronic version is easily available.

   iii. justify – to the left margin only, right margin ragged.

   iv. spacing (min 1.5 line spacing but also general spacing of material) and text layout – for ease of reading.

   v. highlight important information such as assignment questions.

   vi. paper – off white or pale colours.

   vii. organisation – use page numbers, headings and labels.

   viii. is electronic format available?

   ix. is appropriate use made of a virtual learning environment [VLE]?

3. **check supporting materials** (course handbook, publicity materials etc.) for inclusive language and appropriate inclusion of diverse images and equal opportunities statements etc.

4. **evaluate case histories / other course content for representation of men** / women, minority groups and diversity issues.

5. **consider diversity issues which may / should arise in the course content** (see discussion document attached).

6. **review course recruitment, retention and achievement** (e.g. diversity variable statistics) and associated action plans.

7. **review course assessment strategies** for skills / knowledge being tested; variety of assessment; availability of alternative forms of assessment; etc.

8. **staff and student feedback** consider the means by which feedback is obtained and whether these have / are likely to provide opportunities to express views which may lead to genuine changes.

Institutions in Scotland asked for guidance on how to comply with the then amended Race Relations Act 2000 and the Scottish Funding Council and Universities Scotland produced a useful toolkit for institutions to monitor compliance.

The Toolkit is not prescriptive. It does not provide a blueprint for how race equality should be addressed in learning and teaching but it encourages the academic staff to self-evaluate, and to review the curriculum and their teaching and assessment methods, in order to create as inclusive a learning environment as possible.[6]

Although the toolkit deals mostly with racial equality, it gives institutions the opportunity to review all aspects of their institution and offers many potential enquiries a review can take as well as tips of how to integrate discussions into the curriculum. Its appendices also offer great insight into websites and further reading around equality issues.

With particular regard to assessment the toolkit asks:

5.1 How can procedures be put in place to ensure assessment requirements are understood by all students?

6. Race Equality Toolkit, 2000, Page 5 http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/aboutus/scotland/Race_Equality_Toolkit2006.pdf

5.2 Can assessment instruments and procedures be adapted to promote race equality?

5.3 Can assessment instruments and procedures be re-examined to encourage inclusion?

5.4 Does scheduling of assessment take into account religious observances and demonstrate awareness of the needs of students in class as far as possible?

5.5 Do all students understand what plagiarism means?[7]

From p55 onwards it also asks institution a whole host of useful questions, from curriculum design to staff training.

Another useful resource when looking at equality issues in the curriculum is the QAA code of practice for disabled students. Page 25 of the code states:

Staff should be aware of their responsibility to design inclusive programmes and should seek training and ongoing support where necessary. Staff should be given access to sources of advice both from within the institution and externally.[8]

The code also talks about ensuring the accessibility of feedback as well as ensuring a flexible approach to assessment, making sure that all students have the same opportunities to succeed.

"Research has demonstrated that disabled students are less satisfied when compared to their non disabled peers when it comes to receiving adequate support from their intuition. An accessible environment is crucial for disabled students to fulfil their highest potential and therefore fairly marked exams and assessments are crucial in order to remove discrimination."

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

NUS Women's Campaign - Liberating the curriculum and anonymous marking

Gender segregation does exist in education and there are many subjects that are dominated by either men or women and therefore minimises the opportunities for students to take up courses that would not traditionally be aimed at them, based on their gender. Liberating the curriculum and ensuring that women and men feel they have access to all courses would be a big step to ensuring that equality of opportunity was offered to all genders in education. In the same vein, to ensure that women and men are able to take up a course and be treated fairly during the assessment process, anonymous marking is essential to ensure that no gender bias exists and attitudes and perceptions cannot be a part of the process.

From the perspective of women students, whilst legislation might support equality for women, we know from research and evidence that women still suffer from sexism in everyday life. In education, we recognise that there is a lack of women role-models i.e. only 13% of vice chancellors are women (The Educational Backgrounds of Vice Chancellors, The Sutton Trust, November 2008) and there is also gender-bias in the material used by students to carry out there course i.e. Recommended literature for studies is more likely to have been produced by men (with some notable exceptions such as nursing as it is a course that is dominated by women, due to gender-stereotyping). Liberating the curriculum would change this gender-bias and ensure that women felt they could go on to be academics and vice chancellors, without being a minority or seeing these roles as being reserved for men.

**Olivia Bailey,
NUS Womens Officer**

7. Race Equality Toolkit, 2000, Page 49 http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/aboutus/scotland/Race_Equality_Toolkit2006.pdf

8. Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 3: Disabled students, 2010 page 23

Useful Resources

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (USA): Advice on Effective Curriculum Transformation
(The Diversity Web)

www.diversityweb.org/Digest/W97/advice.html

This web page links into a larger website (www.diversityweb.org).

The site is designed to act as an interactive resource hub for higher education and claims to be 'the most comprehensive compendium of campus practices and resources about diversity in higher education that you can find anywhere.

The Education Alliance at Brown University: The Diversity Kit – An Introductory Resource for Social Change in Education

www.lab.brown.edu/pubs/
diversity_kit/index.shtml

This publication focuses on human development and cultural diversity. It explores issues of diversity in education that are essential for teachers who are committed to diversity and quality education for all students.

Leeds University Anti-Racist Toolkit

www.leeds.ac.uk/CERS/
toolkit/Section%20One.htm

Seven Principles for Good Practice: Enhancing Student Learning

(Winona State University)

www.winona.edu/president/seven.htm

University of Strathclyde: TEACHABILITY

www.teachability.strath.ac.uk

The Teachability project promotes the creation of an accessible curriculum for students with disabilities through making freely available informative publications for academic staff.

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