

Paper

Developing and Embedding Inclusive Policy and Practice within the University of Birmingham

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Abstract

The University of Birmingham established an *'Inclusive Curriculum Working Group'* in February 2014 to explore how inclusivity can become more effectively developed and embedded within the curriculum in order to support colleagues in thinking about inclusive curriculum design so as to promote success amongst all students. The main focus of the Working Group is to identify challenges and barriers in order to provide practical solutions and embedded changes to policy and practice. This article describes the innovative data collection methods that will be drawn upon through a process of educational enquiry to monitor change over a given timeframe in relation to agreed goals and success criteria. This includes an organisational change framework (McKinsey 7S) that will be used to enable the impact of the Working Group to be measured and monitored over a given timeframe in relation to agreed goals and success criteria. Future publications will report on progress in relation to the proposed activities, evaluate the methodology and data collection methods and explore the extent to which the project outcomes can be drawn upon more broadly within the higher education sector.

Introduction

As reflected in its Equality and Diversity Scheme (UoB, 2011), the University of Birmingham has a commitment to developing and promoting equality and diversity for all staff and students. As part of this commitment, and building on recent work in the higher education sector (for example May & Bridger, 2010; QAA, 2012), an *'Inclusive Curriculum Working Group'* was established in February 2014 to explore how inclusivity, in its widest possible sense, can be more effectively developed and embedded within the curriculum in order to support colleagues in thinking about *'inclusive curriculum design from a generic as well as subject or disciplinary perspective'* (Morgan & Houghton, 2011:5) so as to promote success amongst all students.

Inclusive curriculum design is described by the Higher Education Academy as an approach that *'takes into account students' educational, cultural and social background and experience as well as the presence of any physical or sensory impairment and their mental well-being. It enables higher education institutions (HEI) to embed quality enhancement processes that ensure an anticipatory response to equality in learning and teaching.'* (Morgan & Houghton, 2011:5).

To reflect this broad perspective, membership of the Working Group has therefore been drawn from across the University. It includes representation from the Guild of Students' sabbatical and non-sabbatical Officers who have activity portfolios in key inclusivity areas including mature and part-time students and female students. The main remit of the Group is to identify issues, challenges and barriers to greater inclusive practice, provide practical solutions to identified issues, and embed changes to teaching and learning approaches. In seeking to develop and embed such practice, the initial activities of the Working Group include:

1. Collating and disseminating resources and materials related to inclusivity.
2. Identifying and disseminating examples of effective practice in inclusive curricula.
3. Enabling wider representation and input, in particular from students, to help better understand and address inclusivity issues and needs.
4. Exploring how inclusivity may be better, and more naturally, embedded with core areas of University activity including, but not limited to:
 - a. Resources and using technology and Canvas to create accessible learning materials
 - b. Teaching delivery
 - c. Assessment and feedback
 - d. Personal tutoring
 - e. Student access.
5. Organising events to raise awareness of good practice in inclusivity and share effective approaches from both within and outside of the University.

The focus and remit of the Working Group demonstrates the commitment of the University towards the description on 'equality, diversity and equality of opportunity' within guidance provided by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) on learning and teaching which notes:

'An inclusive environment for learning anticipates the varied requirements of learners, for example because of a declared disability, specific cultural background, location, or age, and aims to ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities.' (QAA, 2012:4)

By drawing upon both University and national policy documents in respect of diversity and inclusion, a series of draft principles have been developed that will serve to guide the activities of the Inclusive Curriculum Working Group (see Box 1).

1. Whilst the nature of students' particular learning experiences may vary according to location of study, mode of study, or academic subject, as well as whether they have any protected characteristics, every student should experience parity in the quality of learning opportunities.
2. Equality of opportunity involves enabling access for students who have differing individual requirements as well as eliminating arbitrary and unnecessary barriers to learning.
3. Disabled students and non-disabled students should be offered learning opportunities that are equally accessible to them, by means of inclusive design wherever possible and by means of reasonable individual adjustments wherever necessary.
4. Offering an equal opportunity to learn is distinguished from offering an equal chance of success.

Box 1: Draft principles guiding the Inclusive Curriculum Working Group (adapted from QAA, 2012; QAA, 2013).

Research design

The role and function of the Inclusive Curriculum Working Group illustrates a strategic approach to enhancement that seeks to bring about desired change in policy and practice through working with a wide range of individuals from across the University. It provides a mechanism to ensure a coordinated and coherent approach at a practitioner level with the ability to engage students directly in the development and delivery of the activities undertaken.

However, in seeking to bring about such change, natural questions regarding how this change may be measured and benchmarked are raised in order that the extent of genuine progress can be determined. Whilst the more robust evaluation of educational activities is becoming increasingly widespread across the sector, this is often in relation to discrete or focused interventions; seeking to explore the progress of interventions and approaches that take place across a large organisation is far more complex, and in addition, further complicated by not only the need to measure changes in policy and practice, but also cultural and attitudinal shifts. This poses an interesting debate that can be explored through a process of educational enquiry in a manner that is reinforced by the disciplinary skills of those involved in the process and as described by Cleaver, Lintern and McLinden (2014).

Given the emphasis upon implementing institutional change at a number of levels and involving a wide range of stakeholders it is proposed that a cyclical process of 'action research for organisational change' will be drawn upon for the Inclusive Curriculum Working Group (Lynch, McLinden, Douglas & McCall, 2012; Zuber-Skerrit, 1996). This incorporates:

1. Strategic planning (Plan)
2. Implementing the plan (Action)
3. Observation, evaluation and self-evaluation (Observe/Monitor)
4. Critical and self-critical reflection on the results and making decisions for the next cycle of research (Reflect).

Initial meetings of the Working Group to date have been predominantly concerned with the 'planning' stage of this cycle. The activities have included determining the scope, remit and membership of the group; agreeing key terminology; identifying key resources and developing suitable methods for data gathering and monitoring institutional change. A recent programme of activity has sought to explore, by involving a wide range of staff and student stakeholders from across the entire University, current issues and challenges relating to inclusivity that can form the basis of a series of activities that the Working Group will oversee during 2014/15.

What constitutes success?

Before an approach to measuring or determining 'success' can be developed, it is necessary to first consider what success might look like and how it may manifest itself across the institution should the Working Group deliver on its identified mission. Such considerations firmly align with the planning stage of the Participatory Action Research Cycle. By having an appreciation of what successful outcomes from the Working Group could be, this makes it possible to identify approaches, including measures, that allow the progress towards these outcomes through a series of indicators to be measured. While not exhaustive, Table 1, provides some examples of success indicators/measures that can be applied to the Working Group:

Indicative measures of success
A visible web presence related to inclusivity, including staff and student internal and external webpages
Availability of a range of resources from within the University that are accessed and utilised by both staff and students
Positive changes to International Student Barometer Data
Positive changes to Birmingham/National Student Survey Data
Student performance, and in particular a narrowing of the attainment gap amongst learners
A reduction in the number of appeals and complaints due to issues associated with inclusivity
Inclusivity explicitly embedded within the University Teaching and Learning Strategy
References to inclusivity with University appointments and staff selection and promotion
Inclusivity is firmly embedded within the values of the University

Table 1: Indicative success measures: Inclusive Curriculum.

Monitoring change

A particular challenge when restructuring multi-level institutional procedures is how to ensure alignment in relation to proposed changes. Given the broad remit of the Working Group, particular methods are required to enable its impact within the institution to be measured and monitored over a given timeframe in relation to agreed goals/success criteria. One model that has been outlined as being applicable to help organisations seek 'harmony' in their activities in order to create more inclusive practice within higher education is the 'McKinsey 7S Framework' (May & Bridger, 2010). The framework is based upon seven interdependent elements that contribute to organisational effectiveness (Figure 1). The seven elements are further broken down into 'hard' (strategy, structure and systems) and 'soft' elements (shared values, skills, style and staff). The authors of the model argue that for an organisation to perform effectively there needs to be alignment and coherence between each of seven elements (Pascale & Athos, 1981). The model also offers the opportunity to gauge the effectiveness of any change made within a particular 'S' in relation to the other elements by considering the various inter-relationships and the impacts it may have upon those.

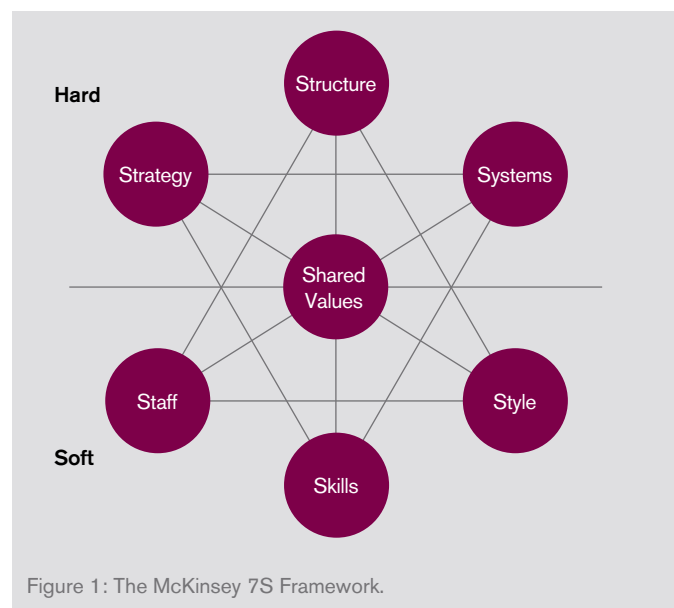


Figure 1: The McKinsey 7S Framework.

The McKinsey 7S Framework highlights the fact that, in creating whole organisational change, attention must be paid to different elements of the organisation and is based on the premise that, for an organisation to perform well, each of the seven elements needs to be aligned and mutually reinforcing. For an organisation to perform 'effectively' therefore, there needs to be alignment and coherence between each of the elements. As such the model can be used to help identify what needs to be realigned to improve performance during change. The model could therefore help to demonstrate the inter-relationships between the factors that together support institutional effectiveness and show how changes in one area can have knock-on effects for other areas demonstrating the need for any proposed change to be looked at in relation to the whole (Peters & Waterman, 2004).

Given the Working Group is seeking to bring about changed institutional practice in relation to an inclusive curriculum this framework will be drawn upon to explore different elements of the organisation at various points in the action research cycle to help demonstrate the inter-relationships between the factors that together support institutional effectiveness and show how changes in one area can have knock-on effects for other areas. The framework can be used therefore as an initial audit tool within the planning stage of this cycle and as a means of identifying and reviewing progress towards agreed priorities within later stages. A series of pilot 'measures' are being developed in relation to different sources of evidence and will be used as a means of monitoring change over the selected timeframe. Examples of indicative evidence sources and measures in relation to each element of the framework are presented in Table 2.

'S'	Indicative Evidence Source	Indicative Measures
Strategy	University strategy and policies, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shaping our Future (Birmingham 2015) University Education Strategy The Student Charter Equality Scheme (2011-2015) 	Reference to key words relating to project focus
Structure	Organisational structures, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> University structures College and School level structures 	Measures of gender, ethnicity
	Campus or 'hard' structures, For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Buildings Campus Teaching rooms 	Measures of type, access, hearing assistance, lecture capture, wheelchair accessibility, etc.
Systems	General access systems, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internet Intranet 	Measures of language and accessibility (for example number of clicks to reach inclusivity issues) for relevant pages
	Student or staff based systems, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> VLE Lecture capture 	Measures of language and accessibility; usage statistics (amount, specific needs groups, for example dyslexia or non-English speaking background)
	HR or Admin Systems, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion systems Athena Swan 	Measures drawn from metrics: percentage change in gender and ethnicity in promotion to senior grades
Staff	Reported demographics, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender Ethnicity Other relevant measures drawn from human resources reporting systems 	Measures as a percentage change
Skills	Human capital measures, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online diversity course Staff qualifications Other measures of skills base 	The UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education includes specific links to inclusivity and access, and percentage of staff who subscribe to those links through fellowship of the Higher Education Academy
Style	Current attitudinal measures, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff survey Leaving interview data Complaints statistics (inclusivity related) 	Measures of percentage change; equality and diversity, bullying and reporting processes
Shared Values	Espoused values	Relevant strategies policies and statements
	Derived values	Explore extent to which there is alignment between espoused values and those derived from analysis

Table 2: Indicative evidence sources and measures in relation to the McKinsey 7S Framework.

As no literature has yet been found reporting on how the McKinsey 7S framework has been applied in the context of higher education, part of the work of this project will be to develop the model for use within the University. This may then have broader strategic value to other change-oriented initiatives both within the University and the higher education sector more broadly.

Conclusion

The design and remit of the Inclusive Curriculum Working Group aligns with findings by the Higher Education Academy about the need for inclusive learning initiatives to take a multi-pronged approach, be systematic and holistic, take an embedded approach, and target multiple institutional functions (Thomas & May, 2010). By framing the activities of the group within a process of educational enquiry, opportunities are presented to develop and test innovative data collection methods such as the McKinsey 7S that traditionally may not have been used within higher education settings in order to monitor change. Future publications are planned to report on progress in relation to future activities within this project and evaluate the selected methodology and data collection methods.

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