The Inclusion Consultant pilot

A reflection on a student voice scheme to help close the ethnicity degree awarding gap

Mathew Haine, Student Outcomes Manager, University of Reading

September 2023

Contents

Contextual statement

This report was written to reflect upon and review the Inclusion Consultant pilot programme. It has been used to inform | M   ec   ment

Introduction

There is a growing body of research advocating for student partnership in educational policy. Involving students in decision making can improve relationships between students and their institution (Bovill, 2019; Verwoord, 2016) and may even result in improved academic outcomes (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). Empowering students to be 'change agents' in their educational experience subverts the traditional top-down power dynamic which positions them as passive consumers.

This is especially important for students from underrepresented communities whose perspectives can often be minimised or overlooked. Students with lived experience of systemic inequalities are uniquely capable of providing personal insights that open avenues for more inclusive policy and practice (Bertrand, 2014). Each institution will have local, specific barriers to equality which must be identified and challenged. The changing face of education and lasting effects of the coronavirus pandemic mean we need an ongoing dialogue with students to anticipate and meet emergent needs.

One of the challenges of ensuring diverse voices are heard is that typical means of gathering student input (such as unpaid focus groups or drop-in feedback sessions) often inadequately meet the needs of underrepresented students and staff, implicitly centring the views and experiences of privileged groups (Felten et al., 2013). Students from underrepresented groups are more likely to face barriers to participation such as a reduced sense of belonging, a lack of representation and financial hardship. As part of any efforts to close the degree awarding gaps, we must deliberately cater to students most affected by inequalities in education. This ensures that we tailor solutions to relevant needs.

The need for such a scheme was clear at the University of Reading. Our degree awarding gaps – percentage point differences in final degree outcomes between comparison groups – are broadly consistent with those around the sector in relation to ethnicity. In 2020/21, 7.8% fewer Black, Asian and minority ethnic final degree qualifiers achieved a 2:1 or first-class degree than their white counterparts. An internal investigation, 'The Race Equality Review', uncovered differential experiences for Black, Asian and minority et   ic students anl

W K H

The Inclusion Consultant scheme

Research and design

We drew from precedent set by the University of Hertfordshire's 'BME Advocates' (Barefoot and Boons, 2019) and Kingston University's 'Inclusive Curriculum Consultants'. Using an adapted version of the Appreciative Inquiry project planning tool (Cooperrider et. al, 2008), our goal was to extract the most favourable aspects of schemes such as this to fit our institutional context (see our Advance HE case study, Wong et al., 2022).

We took the view that closing awarding gaps requires improving student experience in and out of the classroom. Consequently, we broadened the remit beyond curricula to enable us to meet the range of issues that students may be facing. We invited colleagues to request feedback on whatever barriers to student experience they had observed in their practice.

In 2021/22, we invited educational decision makers to visit the students and participate in moderated, problem-solving workshops, rather than deploying students around the university. We were reluctant to have students navigate environments which they may associate with reduced belonging, unequal power structures and conflicts of interest. We also wanted to provide an approach to eliciting feedback that would contain sensitive discussions within a consistent, facilitated safe space that was familiar to the students.

It was

The consultations were punctuated by 'group check-ins' in which students could reflect on their experience, suggest improvements to the process and explore problems of their own choosing.

A sample of consultation themes is provided below:

Muslim student experience and prayer space provisions.
Harassment and discrimination reporting procedures.
Improving representation in course content.
Designing inclusive recruitment materials.
Reviewing the university's gender identity policy.
'Active Bystander' training.
Experiences of accommodation and the hall warden service.

<u>Helping us to engage</u>

Around half of respondents provided suggestions for improving the delivery such that students would feel more prepared and engaged.

my practice' (6: very good, 4: good, 2: satisfactory). This signifies a theme across the student and staff feedback that the experience was positive but not all consultations produced tangible outputs and explicit enhancements to practice.

Thematic analysis of the responses produced the following themes:
　　　　and

Most staff responses highlighted an appreciation for the unique insights provided by Inclusion Consultants:

Some answers

attainment, such as positive relationships with staff and a greater sense of belonging. However, it is difficult to assess the impact on the broader student cohorts who are receiving the enhancements in the longer term, and the direct linkages to final degree outcomes (i.e., the awarding gap). A more robust evaluation strategy could be developed to comprehensively illustrate how policy and practice changes resulting from the Inclusion Consultant scheme are having an impact by focusing on individual changes.

Where progress can be made, project staff must be willing to lobby to translate the feedback into actions and progress. This includes petitioning colleagues to act by circulating the feedback to wider audiences. This si   Mt

Bovill, C. (2019) 'Co-creation in learning and teaching: The case for a whole-class approach in Higher Education', Higher Education, 79(6), pp. 1023–1037. doi:10.1007/s10734-019-00453-w.

Cooperrider, D.L., Whitney, D.K. and Stavros, J.M. (2008) Appreciative inquiry handbook: For leaders of change. Brunswick, OH: Crown Custom Pub., Inc.

Felten, P. et al. (2013) 'A call for expanding inclusive student engagement in Sotl', Teaching &amp; Learning Inquiry The ISSOTL Journal, 1(2), pp. 63–74. doi:10.20343/teachlearninqu.1.2.63.

Flutter, J. and Rudduck, J. (2004) Consulting Pupils: What's in It for Schools? Routledge, London. DOI:10.4324/9780203464380_chapter_4

University of Reading (2021) 'Race Equality Review', Available at: https://static.reading.ac.uk/content/PDFs/files/race-equality-review-report-2021.pdf (Accessed 09/08/2023)

Verwoord, R. (2016) 'Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty', International Journal for Academic Development, 21(1), pp. 86–89. doi:10.1080/1360144x.2016.1124967.

Wong, B., ElMorally, R. and Copsey-Blake, M. (2021) 'Fair and square': What do students think about the ethnicity degree awarding gap?, Journal of Further and Higher Education, 45(8), pp. 1147–1161. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2021.1932773

Wong, B., Haine, M., De Burgos, M. M., Henderson, A-M., and Copsey-Blake, M. (2022). Promoting an inclusive culture at the University of Reading: A case-study. Advance HE. Available here.