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Educational Leadership for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Curricula Design

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Abstract: This paper dissected the role of leaders in implementing equality, diversity and inclusion in UK higher education. Since most Higher Education Institutes are now monitored on their graduate outcomes, it is important that they are inclusive within planning curriculum design so as to give their students better chances and outcomes at completing their studies and being competitive in the global jobs market. The UK law and legislation worldwide is stepping up to value inclusion and now moving away from passive social exclusion. The research used ethnographical research in order to find out if equality, diversity and inclusion is being effectively implemented in curricula design. The results are based on one organisation in the Northwest of England using data collected over a 4-year period. A mixed method research design was also devised to use in-depth unstructured interviews to tutors of HND and degree programmes regarding curriculum design on their programmes. The findings show that there has been significant changes based on social and political influences, such that leaders are therefore working within standardised frameworks as a result of legislation. The primary research confirms that leaders have more understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion and it has the potential to self-sustain the UK higher education system.

Keywords: widening participation; equality; diversity; inclusion.

Introduction

Kauffman (2020) states that inclusive practice in Education is a ‘hot topic’ in modern times. This has shown within various social policies, and particularly education policies. The ideas and language in this case have been popularised worldwide by advocates for/ and individuals with disabilities worldwide including The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In the USA, major aspects of education for children with disabilities are separately governed by a federal law known as ‘The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act’ (IDEA). This requires that every individual, despite disability and other diverse qualities should be entitled to right to education in least restrictive environments and having individual learning plans where applicable. This is where equality and equity are implemented to ensure every individual has equal rights to access education within Higher Education.

This study looks at how important the aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion are in modern higher education and how they are being implemented. As the aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion are now etched in British society, they are governed by the government legislation of Equality Act (2010). The direct focus of the law is to remove discrimination within the UK society according to Butler (2016). However, it also covers different characteristics in society and how members of the public, employers, public service providers and therefore education providers need to accommodate for any diverse qualities without discriminating by law. This statutory requirement has now led to other aspect of education equality diversity and improvements such as Widening Participation policy which will be described in this paper.

How to cite

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The objective of this paper looks at whether the UK is competitive in equality, diversity and inclusion on a global level. The implementation of these qualities is to be examined as to whether they are providing the lawful requirements as well as giving opportunities to individuals to make them globally competent. A major objective of this element is to analyse and evaluate how HEIs are competent in producing graduates that are competent on the global jobs market. The analysis also aims to analyse whether the current system is sustainable long-term.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to analyse the role of education leadership in ensuring equality, diversity and inclusion is achieved in the UK HE industry. This will also determine whether the implementation aligns with international standards of anti-oppressive practice and if this will support sustaining the higher education standards in the future. The higher education system plays a major role in economic growth as future leaders and participants come through the education system. Do they have the right tools in guiding the country's competitiveness on a global level? Therefore, this question is to set the pace of the primary research directive and look closely at how the existing policies such as widening participation contribute towards equality, diversity and inclusion.

Literature review

What is curriculum?

Luke, Woods, and Weir (2013) described curriculum as the formal syllabus and course of study normally held accountable for what students learn and their outcomes ultimately. Curriculum is also normally what should be learned and is held accountable for ideological and cultural scrutiny. When there is a problem about the quality of learning, or graduate outcomes, the focus is then turned onto two factors, the curriculum and the teachers delivering it. However, there is a suggestion that good teaching involves bending and shaping the curriculum to respond to particular students' needs. This is where disability, culture, ethnicity and other aspects of diversity need to come into play and have some equity applied. However, Kelly (2009) took a critical look at curriculum as limiting and immoral and suggested it often ignores current affairs and needs of students to give them the right tools for progression.

Why equality, diversity and inclusion?

Participation in higher education has been expanding substantially in England gradually over the last century (Chowdry et al., 2012). However, this has also revealed concerns about inequalities of access to university for pupils regarded as socially disadvantaged pupils. The commonly underrepresented groups are grouped by disability, ethnicity, age and socio-economic status. Chowdry et al. (2012) further reported that pupils eligible for free school meals are commonly used as the indicator of low socio-economic status. 14% of these pupils participate in higher education at age 18-19 or 19-20 years compared with 33% of pupils not eligible for free school meals. They also state that despite attempts to increase participation of pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds, or other underrepresented groups, the degree participation and achievement appears to have gradually worsened in the 1980s through to the 1990s. This has triggered a chain reaction effect to encourage policy making based on 'Widening' participation.

The widening participation policy has been implemented for years since the coalition Government 2010 – 2015 as reported by Connell-Smith and Hubble (2018). The purpose of this policy was to double the number of students from under-represented backgrounds such as those from ethnic minorities and low-income backgrounds. The number of students from black and minorities was proposed to rise by 20%. This however

introduced what was known as a transparency duty on Higher education institutions to provide data on the backgrounds of their students. In 2016, the green paper on widening participation suggested universities would be expected to be directly involved with schools either by sponsoring existing schools or setting up new schools as to raise standards of attainment. However, this received a mixed reaction from the university sector.

Marangozov et al. (2014) wrote an article about an initiative under the Equality Act (2010) by the government where equality, diversity & inclusion grants were given to Further Education colleges and training organisations. This was done in order to allow them to develop the sector's capacity to meet the duty of inclusion and this sounds like a great initiative. This was commissioned by the Skills Funding Agency. As good as it is, one can always ask questions such as if the funding also includes training to organisations to fully understand inclusion, equality & diversity? This also does not ensure all organisations are following inclusion policies or training their staff to be competent in understanding inclusion elements such as disability awareness and how to best support individuals. Is it down to the organisation and their own morals? It may seem so as this initiative looks as if the authorities and commissioners would have fulfilled a need to provide provision, but managing it is another whole responsibility which cannot be guaranteed once the funding has provided a little awareness and resources.

Sustainability of higher education is an important aspect that is based on different qualities that have to be achieved nationally in order to have a competent continuity of the industry based on national and global expectations, anti-oppressive practice is important in terms of delivering education and services as well as ensuring those using the services are also trained to be competent in doing so. Therefore, the curricula design depends greatly on the success of anti-oppressive practice and the social justice basis of equality, diversity and inclusion (Barth, 2015). This will ensure the competence levels of equality, diversity and inclusion are globally competent and would support the long-term sustainability of the UK higher education.

This study also examines how the widening participation affects changes in HE at different levels of planning and delivering education. The levels examined are the macro, meso and micro in an HE institution in Greater Manchester. The macro level is where plans are implemented at government level. The implementation of the policy by the government directs how certain operations are acted upon within the HE sector directing them to follow specific instructions. The meso level consists of the management and boards of the institutions and how they perceive and communicate the changes and requirements to the micro, which consists of the individuals tasked with carrying out the required actions (Tutors and student involvement). The impact of social policy is a direct action of proactive and reactive strategies of governments, creating policy drivers. Power (2001) looks at the first driver of the WP to be implemented and delivered into the HE context. The disparities in education are an obvious concern of the government and they have to pass the instructions and plans to the meso level, which are the university management boards. However, the micro level which consists of the tutors, student support and pastoral teams have to ensure the curriculum designs are adapted to match certain changes implemented. These changes may include relaxed entry requirements to study for those identified as WP applicants. Other changes that are then affected may include curriculum design and assessment design to make it accessible for WP students.

In support of understanding the impact of change, Warren (2016) has discussed the impact of the widening participation policy on curriculum design and what the whole change process means in enactment. Warren (2016) identified that this provides a challenge in developing curriculum models designed to accommodate a more heterogeneous student population. The research was completed on the South African and Australian models of widening participation. The findings show that there is now a distinction between a separate, semi-integrated and integrated approaches of curriculum design. They then showed that the impact of the separate provision of the academic

support is less effective and that of a semi-integrated and integrated models offer better prospects beyond studies at universities. This therefore creates questionable views of whether the widening participation policy is communicated clearly to employers and curriculum designers. Do the policy designers understand the implications of policies on curriculum design?

Equality, diversity & inclusion in context

The organisation the researcher works in is a smaller HEI organisation that provides HNC, HND and Degree Top Up courses in partnerships with UK wide Universities and Colleges and awarding bodies. The course delivered are in Business management, Health and Social Care Practice for England and Computer Network Engineering. The students are an average age of 40 years old, and they range from those with level 3 qualifications as an entry requirement to those with level 2 qualifications with experience in the industry proven by references and their working profile. The course in Health and Social Care includes a requirement to complete 450 hours of placement to prove their links of practice and theory.

The organisation has 4 campuses in Bolton, London, Manchester and Oldham. There are a total of approximately 500 Students. All Tutors employed by the organisation have at least a Level 7 Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and that ranges to several employees with Level 7 master's degrees in education pathways. However, there is a strong understanding and drive in Inclusive Education and that is shown by how the organisation engages with the local communities and driving of their Widening Participation focus on giving opportunities to a diverse group of learners across all 3 campuses. One of the organisation's strengths is understanding equality, diversity and inclusion in all aspects. The organisation follows all policies and regulations in line with regulators and awarding bodies such as Pearson Education. This includes visits from external examiners that monitor the compliance and Student support in an adult learning environment.

Data is tracked to understand students' needs and monitoring through regular audits. The curriculum director has completed audits on all assessments completed and validates the grades before they are presented to the moderator. Standardisation meetings are held at the beginning of each module for the assessor to show their plan for delivery and assessment of the module. These will look at fundamentals such as how inclusive the teaching and learning materials are and how accessible they are to all students. All tutors are required to complete a unit recommendation form at the end of each module and highlight their best outcomes and any concerns including requesting materials to support the module and student needs to learn effectively. Student evaluations on their modules are also completed internally for the college to understand their perspectives and experiences on the course and individual modules. This is to continue providing necessary support for anti-discriminatory practice as stated by Thompson (2012).

Student involvement and inclusion

The college has a policy of Student representatives across all cohorts and this has led to a direct channel of communication ensuring Student perspectives are considered at all times. Student experience is understood as annually, plans for charity events and cultural festivals include students and their ideas of what they would expect or like to happen. These are planned by staff and students with consideration to all College policies and this year these have been restricted due to COVID-19 social distancing. These were still completed online with activities such as the virtual cake baking morning and online quizzes. Mulinge, Arasa, and Wawire (2017) specify that one of the modern successes in Education is to involve Students in certain governance of their courses and institutions. This ensures their needs and requirements are respected from a partner's perspective.

Student support and learning resources are regularly reviewed to ensure Student welfare is of top quality. The college provides a physical library in both campuses and all module books are identified by a sticker system which was implemented by Student Services. This allows students to be more confident in finding the books they require at any given time they visit the library. The library has new computers for Students to use and there are quiet computer learning centres on the campuses. Across all four campuses, there is a ratio of five Students to one computer. Reading materials such as journals and databases are updated at the beginning of each term allowing the standardisation process to ensure all resources have been tested and reviewed on their relevance to the taught modules.

The organisation has a good scope on supporting the student journey beyond their studies and is always aiming to improve on understanding and enhancing Student destinations and tracking them to allow strategies for growth. The organisation has good relationships with local employers as the HND course requires Students to complete 450 hours in placement. This has led to relationships with placement providers such as Nurse Plus and the Priory. There is a placement officer that engages local organisations and we have invited several employers that come voluntarily to give talks about what opportunities will be available to Student's after gaining their qualifications. This also help us to ensure our curriculum supports the policies used in practice and these are used in placement for compliance.

Table 1. Additional student support to enhance equality of opportunity

Additional support to students	Links to external bodies	Outcomes
Placement support	Nurse plus	Over 20% of student secured work placements
Student and employer engagements	Rapha Care & Support Solutions	Students get an annual visit for career advice
Career insights	The Priory	Students get an annual visit for career advice
Placement support	Eden Care	15% of Health and Social Care students secured placements

Source: own elaboration

How has inclusion been achieved?

Teaching and learning

There are also scheduled student meetings where the student representatives meet with the programme managers and curriculum directors to discuss any issues or success points that the college may need to be aware of. The idea of diversity is visible in how the college has approximately 80% being from ethnic minorities and the staff are also fairly diverse in ethnicity as well as sex and age. 70% of students are female while 3 staff members are over the age of 60.

The organisation follows the guidance and framework of Pearson Education and practices monitoring from external examiners that ensure the process is following a framework that promotes focus on skills to enter a work environment. The curriculum design is planned in collaboration with employers such as NHS and other industry leaders. This includes ensuring they are taught reflective, inclusive and interactive criteria to enable transferable skills and engagement in problem solving. The level 5 HND is a recognised qualification by one of the Statutory regulators and inspectors of health and social care services, the Care Quality Commission (CQC). Students are recognised as leaders such as managers or supervisors with this qualification and they can progress to either manage whole facilities and even own their own health and social care businesses. Pearson (2018) also specifies that all lecturers teaching on their programmes need to be qualified and teach high quality material in compliance with professional standards that have inclusive practice as one of the fundamentals.

Assessments

All taught units are assessed internally by trained tutors. After a term of approximately 10 weeks, assessments are completed in the form of assignments. The assignments take different forms from written reports, essays and even presentations as these also aid the skills of problem solving using different methods. These also vary with most completed by individuals and some completed by groups working as a team. The assignments are different to exams as they are separately addressed with a deadline for submission. They are to evidence the set learning outcomes and taught material should give the students material to fulfil requirements of the outcomes. To make them practical, they can also be broken into more than one assessment and the collective outcome can determine the grades achieved contributing to credits that will evidence completion of all learning outcomes and qualifications. The inclusive input is implemented by co-producing with students to give them freedom in planning some of their assessment types according to their preferences. Personalisation in assessments gives the opportunity to all learners without discrimination of different abilities and preferences.

Learning during the Covid-19 pandemic May 2020 – July 2021

The use of the virtual platform Zoom became very popular worldwide at the beginning of the lockdown which forced many education institutions and businesses to conduct their business online and human contact virtually. Nash (2020) describes how this platform allowed many businesses and education to stay alive and effective. However, Nash (2020) also talks about an emerging challenge of digital literacy. This challenge was faced by many students that may not have been very technical anyway before being then forced to use technology in order to access their education. Nash also hints at the difficulties that may have been overlooked such as accessibility to the actual resources such as computers, internet access and affordability of these resources. However, some look at how continuity in education during the pandemic has been hailed as a success as people would have been discouraged to return to education had it been suspended completely Nash (2020). Especially adult learners, life could get in the way and it will be a very difficult situation.

Other platforms

Microsoft teams was also another virtual platform which was utilised by institutions in order to maintain contact and access to courses and learning. This platform was identified as one that allowed transparency and helped students to keep focus on their work. It allows users to store their files and share files and the use of platforms. There was also the feature of virtual meetings. However, one of the drawbacks was the limited number of faces visible to users at a single time meaning the contact from the classroom could not be reciprocated (Storyals, 2019).

Student attainment and engagement

It has been reported by Plakhotnik et al. (2021), across Europe, many students showed a pattern of how they have been affected in their performance and attainment. The study across France, Germany, Russia and the UK of 2, 707 students show a sudden rise in university support facilities. One of the most used support elements was pastoral support as well as academic aid support which showed students felt the sudden struggle to cope and perform as well as they always done. This study also showed that people automatically tend to experience stress more when they feel a sudden loss of a resource. The loss of face-to-face learning means it left many learners anxious and feeling isolated in their learning environments which are usually interactive. It also showed how personal resources may not have been invested in before the pandemic with 35% of students admitting that they use computers provided by universities. The absence of social activities also left people without external motivation.

Moate et al (2019) also speaks about how it becomes very difficult when students have to suddenly find themselves with other personal challenges and pressures such as financial hardships and balancing work and family duties. This would have created a turbulent situation on their wellbeing overall.

Student support

During the pandemic many students needed support from the institutions more in terms of personal financial issues, psychological issues and welfare in general. Universities bridge a lot of gaps in students' welfare with several types of interventions apart from their academic needs. This includes meeting cultural and religious diverse needs of several students (Plakhotnik et al., 2021). Some of the support comes from peers giving students a sense of belonging and the positive relationships with other creating autonomy as a group. Universities also support students in increasing their chances of employability and ensuring they are learning all the skills they need to enter the world of work or further higher education.

Social effects on students

The pandemic provided several challenges to all students in higher education. These vary in social and economic. The social aspect is one that seem to have been overlooked. However, Office for National Statistics (2020) carried out a Student Covid Insight Survey. In this survey it was found that student experience which is one of the biggest concerns for educational institutes deteriorated greatly during the pandemic. Over 53% of students reported being very dissatisfied with their university experience as they indicated that they felt they had missed out on the anticipated social experience of university life being in lockdown. In the same survey, 65% reported not to have attended any of their virtual taught sessions due to lack of motivation.

Government support

During the pandemic, there was a great need for financial and social support from the government. This support was great as many people in employment were forced to isolate and not attend work. HM Revenue and Customs (2020) described the situation in the UK as the pandemic set in as unpredicted. This led to many employers setting up to make job cuts as they could not afford to keep employees on their payroll without any production. This led to the government stepping in and paying around 80% of employee wages to ensure the British public did not lose their livelihoods. However, this scheme did not consider students most of which would have been in part time employment and not eligible as full-time workers. This particular group was left without the financial support. However, the organisation in study was able to access government support for specific students to apply for hardship funds. These allowed them to be able to purchase resources such as new laptops and other devices that allowed students to access learning. One to one support was also provided where tutors engaged with at risk students based on several characteristics of widening participation.

Research design

The research was completed in three campuses of the same HE organisation across Greater Manchester. The research problem and aim are finding out if equality, diversity and inclusion is implemented effectively through leadership and how it is responded to by those at ground level in higher education. The widening participation policy therefore will be examined in how it affects curriculum design and if it is a challenge for those involved. In this institution, the WP students have been identified as those from low socio-economic backgrounds returning to education as mature students. They are recruited to study with considerations of their experience in vocational areas such as Health and Social

Care. The qualifications in maths and English are subsidised with level 2 exams provided when interviewed, if the students do not hold these qualifications on application.

Data collection was carried out using the pragmatist philosophy as this topic required a positivist approach to capture statistics of the widening participation students and their HE journeys. However, an interpretivist approach was also required in order to get a full understanding of how the widening participation policy and inclusion as a whole is perceived by those who work within its designs and constraints. Therefore, a mixed methods approach was used which included semi-structured interviews and semi-structured questionnaires. The reasons behind mixed methods was that there will be questions such as how staff understood the success of the widening participation policy in promoting equality, diversity and inclusion. Even though the qualitative method would support this type of question, the collection of numerical data is also needed to compare factual information regarding progression, attainment and achievement of the students. This would in turn provide a perspective of the success of the WP policy in changing outcomes for the WP students against the views of staff on the success of the widening participation policy. Comparing variables of widening participation students, and non-widening participation students is also dependent on quantitative methods, using a structured questionnaire. However, as manageable and simple as it was utilising a questionnaire, there were some limitations such as delays with some of the questionnaires not being returned timely

The sampling technique used was volunteer sampling with tutors, campus managers, pastoral and academic support teams. Even though this method is usually associated with achieving a large sample, it was limited with the organisation being small, and not considered big in context with HE. The number of students in total is just over 500 in all three campuses and that consists of 3 courses of HND and a Top up degree. The subjects covered are Health and Social Care, Business Management and Computer Network Engineering. In comparison, a typical university in the Northwest of England will have a total of approximately over 20,000.

The data collection procedures started with the inclusion and exclusion process of the sample, which reduced it to a total of 20 from 26. The inclusion and exclusion qualities are described in the Prisma flow chart below (see Figure 1). When the participants were selected, the data collection process followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) principles and the participants were all provided with a consent form (BERA, 2018). The consent form ensured that fundamental principles were followed which are ensuring all participants understand their participation is voluntary and they have the right to withdraw at any time. They were also informed that all data collected is kept confidential and cannot be used to identify individuals, or their personal views. The questions presented were examined to reduce any physical or psychological harm to all participants. Finally, briefing and debriefing was carried out with all participants before and after taking part, ensuring they understood the full meaning and contribution of their participation. Ethics underpin reliability and validity in ensuring the research has been conducted accordingly with research standards that do not manipulate data or use unreliable sources such as vulnerable or biased participants.

The data was analysed using thematic and narrative analyses. The results therefore show qualities of what the implications on staff working within the constraints of the widening participation policy are, what the perception of the WP policy's success on students' outcomes is to the staff as well as comparing data regarding retention, attainment and achievement of widening participation students and non-widening participation students. Any other findings that will fall outside the emerging themes will then be narrated in how they were provided, or what they meant for the participants. With the interviews being semi-structured, the process will begin the analysis by asking further questions if the responses fall outside common themes or common agreed working patterns.

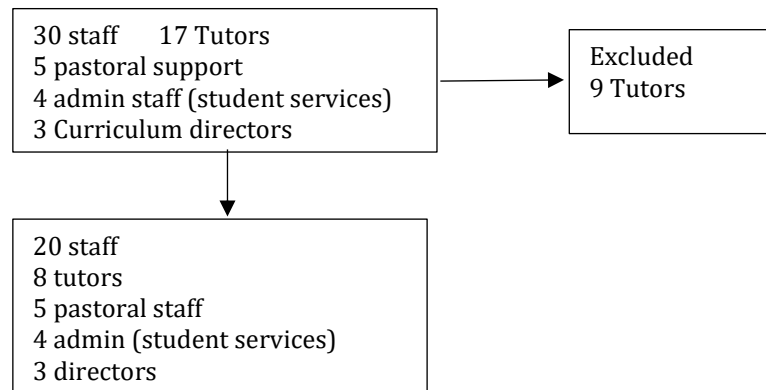


Figure 1. Inclusion and exclusion of sample

Source: own elaboration

The excluded staff were excluded to ensure there was no bias and balancing the numbers of participants from as many different departments as possible.

Table 2. Profile of participants

Participant	Position	Experience (years)
A	tutor	5
B	Tutor & programme lead	13
C	tutor	8
D	tutor	4
E	Tutor & programme lead	11
F	tutor	11
G	Tutor & programme lead	6
H	tutor	3
I	Pastoral & listening	2
J	Pastoral officer	6
K	Pastoral and student experience manager	14
L	Pastoral trainee	1
M	Pastoral officer	4
N	Reception/student services	3
O	Student adviser (services)	5
P	Student finance manager	16
Q	Student services admin	4
R	Curriculum director	11
S	Director of HE	6
T	Director of student services	8

Source: own elaboration

Table 3. Research methods & instruments

Research question	Research method	Rationale	Sample
Is the widening participation policy supportive of the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda?	Semi-structured interviews. These will focus on issues such as what the staff in the sector think of the role of the widening participation policy in support of equality, diversity and inclusion.	This method is appropriate for this question as it allows the interviews to be directed on main topics such as what opinions staff involved have of the actual role of the policy to support equality, diversity and inclusion.	All sample of 20 staff in one HE institution across 3 campuses
Are changes to the curriculum to accommodate	Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. These	This method is appropriate to examine what the	All tutors (8) in one HE institutions across 3 campuses

widening participation communicated clearly by management to all bodies working with students?	will ask staff on what their perspective of how equality, diversity and inclusion is perceived and communicated by leadership teams.	staff involved with students think of the support and communication of equality, diversity and inclusion from management and leadership teams.	
Is equality, diversity and inclusion on course to sustain higher education in the UK?	Ethnographic studies to track the outcomes of students supported through the widening participation policy in promoting equality, diversity and inclusion.	This method will use This method will use progression data and feedback from the industry regarding the pathway of previous students in vocational employment.	Data available in the HEI.

Source: own elaboration

Reliability and validity in research are important. The researcher has considered a few ways of ensuring this is increased. Questionnaires and interviews have not included staff closely working with the researcher as they may manipulate qualitative data and intend not to victimise themselves when giving their opinions and views. A consent form has been devised to ensure the participants are briefed and understand the study they are participating in. Consent is important as it validates the participation and ensure voluntary participation is reached decreasing bias (BERA, 2018).

Some limitations have been considered to practicality in this research. Firstly, the representativeness of this study will not be matched to represent the whole population of the UK higher education. At this research stage, the results are based on one HE institution in Greater Manchester. The idea of focusing on this one organisation also shows that there will be results that may be a theme reflecting this particular institution's practice, but may be portrayed differently elsewhere. Being a tutor/manager at the same institution, there is a high chance bias as the participants may give information they perceive to be acceptable, or expected by the researcher in regards to their working relationship. This has been named as observer bias by Suter (2012). By using the researcher's own organisation, there is a chance personal opinions and perspectives when analysing qualitative data may introduce another level of bias based on how the researcher has worked with students fitting the profiles in discussion. The use of 20 staff clearly does not represent the whole population of people working in the HE context, or the experiences of different institutions. The way an institution is managed and staffed will shape the perception of workload and challenges faced. Another limitation was having adequate time to interview staff without time constraints. This was a challenge that could be overcome with availability of funds, or maybe using other instruments such as focus groups.

Findings

20 questionnaires were given out with the following data. Starting with Question 1, all 20 staff of the sample have now been interviewed to share their views on the widening participation policy in supporting equality, diversity and inclusion within their working context. There were similarities that produced some themes and these were analysed accordingly using thematic analysis. The majority of participants when asked what they thought in general about the widening participation policy's success on equality, diversity and inclusion in HE participation, the response was that they feel it is great as it offers opportunities to the right people and there is potential to change their outcomes in life. They know of students that have gone on to careers in areas such as Health and Social Care that would have been discriminated by eligibility criteria before. This means they end up with tangible opportunities to embark on life-changing careers

and change their socio-economic statuses as well as predictions for the future. All participants also shared the views that there needs to be more support from the government's perspectives as the financial support available is not inclusive of people such as single parents. They collectively suggest that, often some students will miss classes as they have to work and they do not have the comfort of adequate time to concentrate on the education. Therefore, the discriminatory view is not fully eradicated.

All participants therefore said there should be more interference from the government to provide more ongoing financial support while studying (knowing there is financial support currently). Further to that, employers should also engage in identifying those fitting the criteria of widening participation in order to give them equal opportunities (by introducing employment quotas to increase equality, diversity and inclusion). Some of the tutors said the whole policy is not thought through how participants may think their life has changed and yet they may struggle to find stable careers after completing university. This is because being from poor socio-economic backgrounds, the tutor observed the widening participation students may lack skills in navigating competitive job markets and excel in their fields. This identified that they may still experience discrimination after obtaining their qualifications (Figure 2).

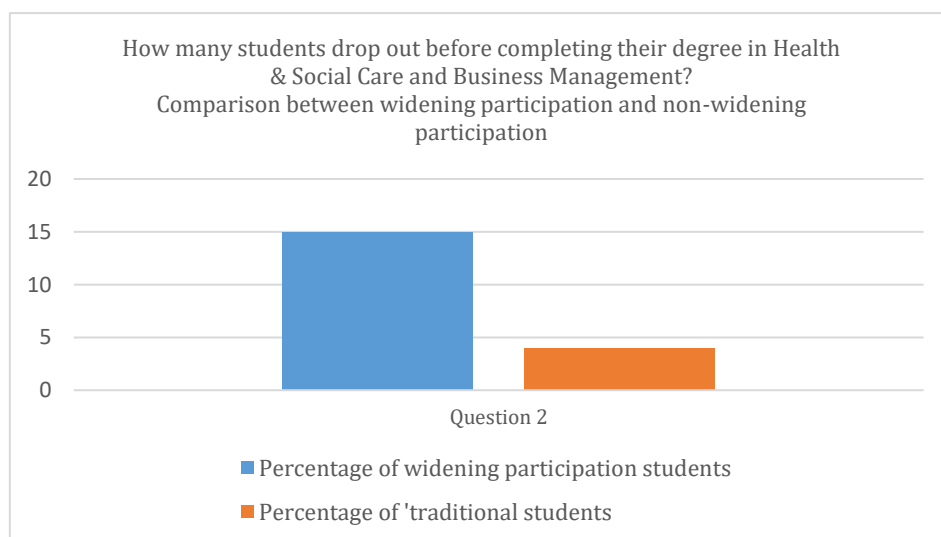


Figure 2. Comparative dropout rates in health & social care and business management
Source: own elaboration

From Figure 2, it is evident that the number of widening participation students dropping out of their studies before completion is larger than that of those perceived to be 'traditional' students at 14% compared to 2.4%. However, there is no clarity to what the narrative of widening participation is limited to as this could be age, socio-economic status and other distinctions within the examined institutions. This is also not a reflection of equality and inclusion support failing.

From Figure 3, the data provided by all participants has indicated that all of the staff involved in the research project had received training and information booklets based on understanding equality, diversity and inclusion. This is a majority outcome that shows the competence of the organisation and this shows good practice.

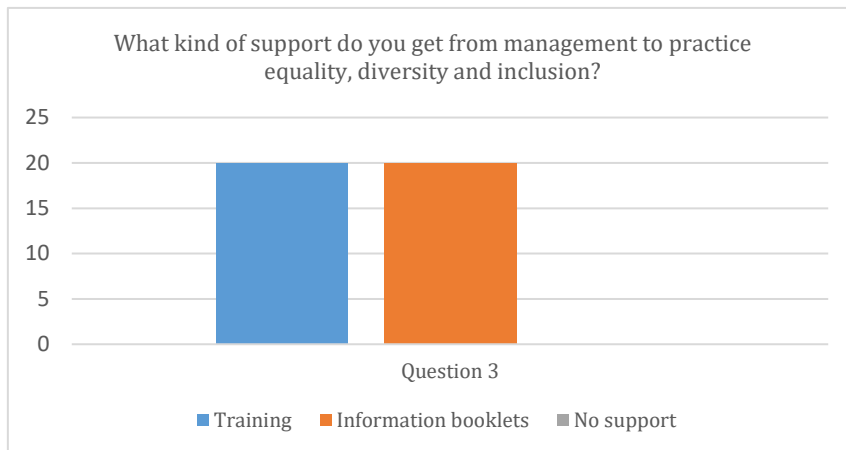


Figure 3. Support from management for equality, diversity, and inclusion practices
Source: own elaboration

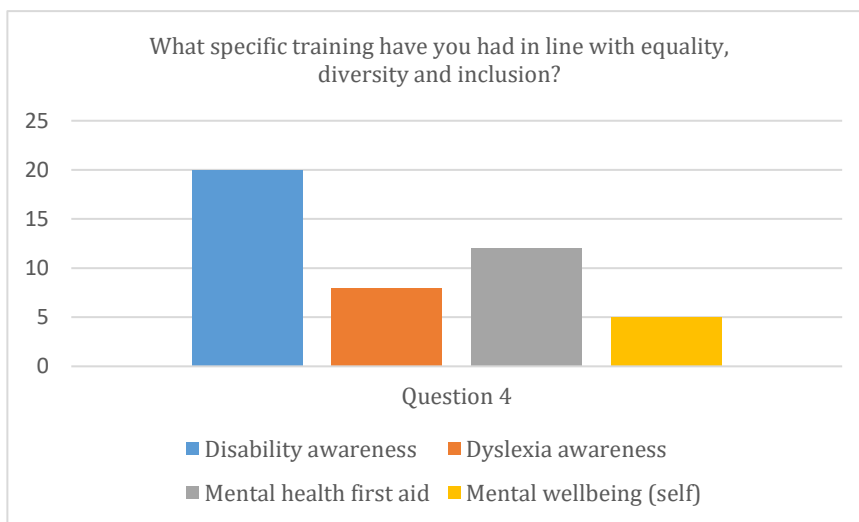


Figure 4. Training in equality, diversity, and inclusion: specifics
Source: own elaboration

In Figure 4, participants have evidently received some form of training showing they understood equality, diversity and inclusion from many angles such as understanding disabilities as well as supporting people with a diverse range of issues. This would be supported by the idea that the different departments would be able to work in unison with referrals and other ways of ensuring all support needs of the students are met by the team.

From the chart below (Figure 5), when asked about the success rate of different groups of students, it seems however that the students from the widening participation seem to be prospering in terms of finding work and establishing a career. However, this data does not take into account the amount of those that drop out before completing their degree. As a result, this concludes that the equality, diversity and inclusion policy is effective in changing the outcomes of the target group.

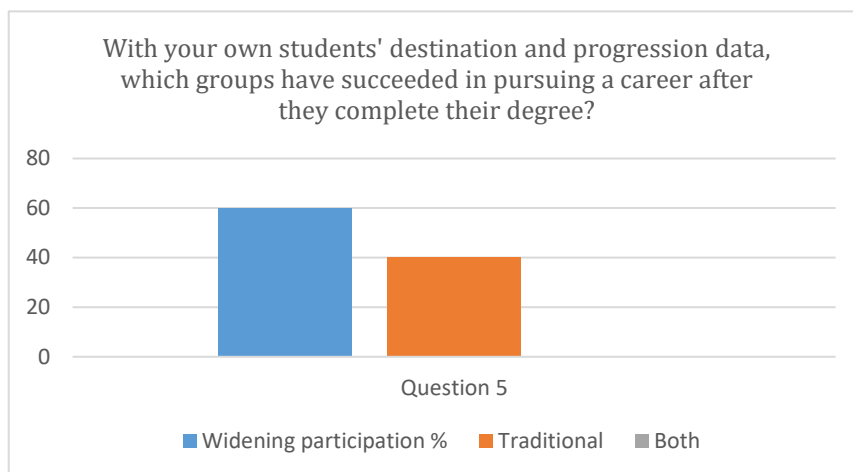


Figure 5. Career pursuit success among student groups
Source: own elaboration

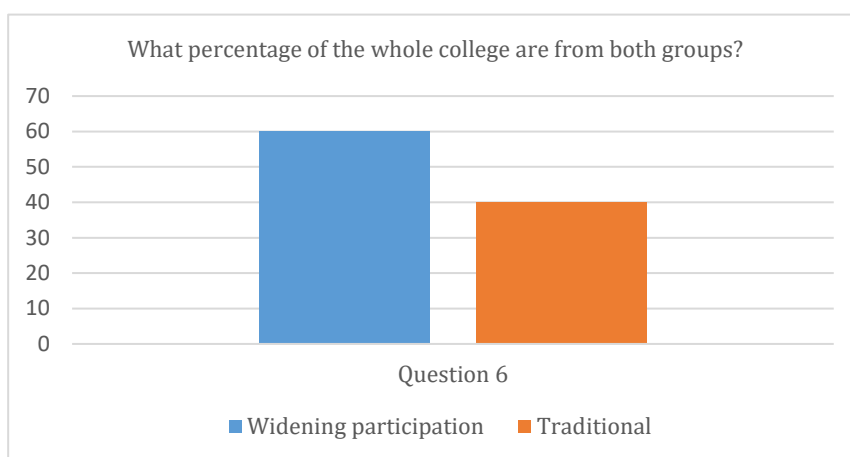


Figure 6. Percentage of total college population from both groups
Source: own elaboration

From Figure 6, the success of the policy in providing access is evident as the percentage of the whole college is greater than that of 'traditional' students. It also shows that the college would be financially beneficial to this scheme as without the policy, there would be a small number of students which may threaten the existence of the college altogether. The widening participation do seem to be doing well considering they are in vocational courses and are likely to be motivated by supporting their families and not prefer to not go straight into work on completion of studies.

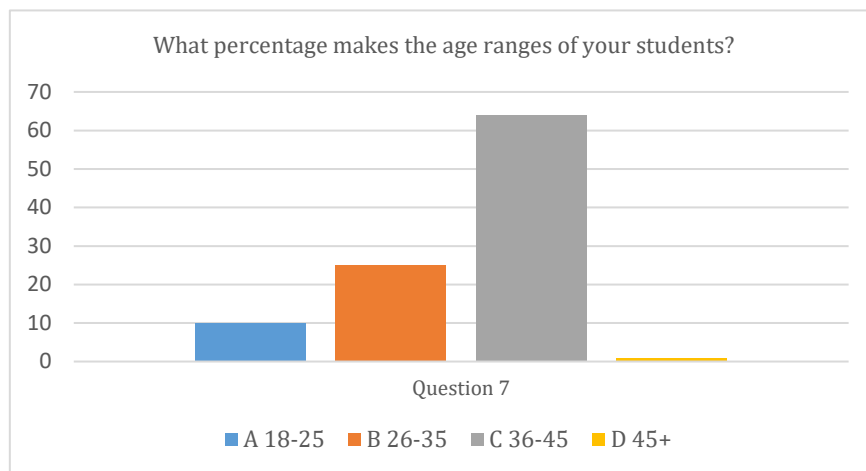


Figure 7. Student age range distribution by percentage

Source: own elaboration

The percentage here shows that the majority of students in this institution are above 36 years old and these are people that would have otherwise had opportunities earlier on to go onto accumulating experience in their chosen careers. This suggests that the institution is heavily involved in widening participation as the characteristic is mature students. The institution's ethos therefore is proving to be succeeding in equality, diversity and inclusion.

Questions 8 to 13 were completed in the form of semi-structured interviews. The responses have been grouped into similar themes below and analysed based on the interview outcomes and interactions.

Question 8, When asked if they feel the widening participation policy is doing what it is supposed to do, in terms of reducing inequalities. Participant B, D, F (tutors), J (pastoral officer) N (receptionist), O (student advisor) and participant T (director of students' services) interviewed said there are elements of this. They identified that there are indeed inequalities in society leading to less participation from certain groups making them underrepresented. They pointed out these inequalities lead to people from certain communities without opportunities to work in competitive industries and provide better financial lives for their families. For example, many of the students they have taught have ended up in careers in Health and Social care and have proceeded onto other degrees such as nursing meaning they have a job or career for life. On the other hand, they also pointed out that the careers they are directed into are not the ones perceived for to be for people from better socio-economic backgrounds. As a result, they feel that it is not a short-cut into improving their economic statuses and therefore may have been designed to keep the poor below those in the 'competitive' careers. However, collectively the WP policy has delivered and transformed the outcomes of the students finding career paths.

Participant A (tutor), I (pastoral officer), K (student experience manager), P Student finance manager), Q (Admin worker) and T (director of student services) then said they do not feel there is enough support following entry into university as this does not automatically improve their socio-economic status. They said it is up to the person to show some resilience, but at the same time the resilience will only be shaped by how many challenges they are faced with during their time studying. The rest of the participants were in between the differing opinions stating they did not feel the need to examine the students' background against outcomes.

Question 9, when asked if they thought the policy has reduced inequalities, the majority of participants agreed on how the equality is implemented by giving access to people that would otherwise not have been given opportunities before. They also said that because

the students receive student loans, they receive opportunities that are out of their reach financially and even though they have to pay back the loans, they are not in a situation where they have to be debt-ridden or failing to manage.

Question 10, When asked what else could the widening participation policy consider from what it already does? The participants showed that there is less intervention during the time they are studying and more could be done to include some form of interventions while they are actively studying. The recommendations also showed how maybe their student finance could include grants based on whether they are from a widening participation background. Interestingly, all participants from the pastoral team shared similar views on how other support such as Pastoral and additional academic support needs to be improved and implemented more as they felt is now needed more. They have said this is due to the increased numbers of people seeking and accessing this support. Apparently, the figure has more than doubled since the Covid-19 pandemic where most people suffered mental wellbeing issues as well and uncertainty and feeling unsupported. Ironically, all tutors also shared that they feel the need for support has increased, but not matched with attendance to additional support as most have families and have to rush to meet school runs and work commitments outside the classroom.

Question 11, When asked what inequalities they come across with some of their students? The participants showed that the most common is childcare as many of them said during the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, most parents isolating with their children would have struggled to engage due to not having enough devices in their households with their children also expected to attend their own learning online. This is a clear indication of socio-economic challenges. Another issue was also that some of the students would have struggled to keep up with costs to have access to the internet as it was required to access the Virtual teaching platforms. A further issue was concentration as some of them had very young children that would have required some form of childcare as the parents were expected to attend full-time. The students expressed how they struggled, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Question 12, When asked about what they thought of destination data available, all participants revealed that the data was much better than they perceived having seen some of the issues the students have been through. They also said the reasons behind is at the end of their degree, the students can now visualise their desired career. Because of the shortages in staffing in the health social care sector, they also said it works in their favour as they can go into jobs having completed placements in their work contexts. The student services reported that most of the WP students receive good feedback from employers while on placement.

Question 13, When asked what other challenges were faced by tutors and others working with students, participant S (director of HE) and T (director of students services) discussed the challenges they are faced with as curriculum and HE directors. A point of reference was during the Covid-19 pandemic as all teaching had to be adapted to the virtual platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. They showed that with vocational studies, most learning includes placement and demonstration of working within team contexts. However, adapting to digital learning means adjustments to these forms of delivery and that may change the context in which the students are assessed for their chosen vacation. For other staff such as Pastoral, they also showed how some of the challenges are having to change their timetables as most of the WP students cannot accommodate certain hours for support meaning they are left with options to complete sessions online, as they are engaged with collecting or transporting their children to school, or attending their places of work scheduled after class hours.

Discussion

The participants from the first question identified the organisation's work in promoting and exercising equality, diversity and inclusion. However, from a leadership point of view, there seems to be a lack of co-production with students as this is another strategy that has been seen to promote and improve participation as students carry a certain level of accountability and ownership if they had been involved in the planning processes of their curriculum. Mulinge, Arasa, and Wawire (2017) suggest that involving students in planning certain services they use or procedures of learning is a good idea for positive outcomes. In that case, there was not much of student voice considered. However, according to Chowdry et al. (2012), it seems the priority or primary concern is to ensure that the planning is designed to increase participation in higher education and increase the involvement of underrepresented groups. Holistic equality, diversity and inclusion could greatly improve by continuing to strategize how to involve students more once they are in the institutions as this will build their confidence and competence on job markets.

There is good practice as the organisation in this study has a policy of support where extra sessions are dedicated to support and ensuring all learners receive assignment building support and other areas they may need to work on such as referencing or writing skills. This policy has proved to be a success with attainment and retention of students in the organisation. Reiser (2008) also describes how the foundation of building trusting personal relationships with learners will support attainment and positive outcomes for learners in HE. Hunt (2012) also discusses how it is important for students to experience a learning environment where there is exchange as learning will always be traditionally linked to the sharing of knowledge.

Current procedures

The research has shown that there is a good policy in place. However, in special circumstances, these will then need to be reviewed and create a policy that caters for and considers learners with special circumstances as the group targeted by this study were clearly not given enough consideration. Even though the organisation is identified as providing inclusive and non-discriminatory practice, there is a need to adjust accordingly as there was limited support from what the study has found. Mittler (2000) says that inclusive practice should not only be based on ensuring it is in place, however, it should look at consulting the learners and ensuring they are happy with what is on offer, or at least be involved in designing some form of practice. Mittler's theory also shows how the students hinted on the need to have more ICT support as this has not been a great focus before. There is a level of support, but a dedicated session for ICT would benefit students. However, this organisation has a good record of student voice and in the case of the pandemic.

The organisation has a vast set of skills from the tutors. Most of the staff come from an inclusive education background and are regularly trained to understand many characteristics of inclusion such as common disabilities. These skills however need to be put into practice and monitored regularly. Kuh et al (2007) on the other hand may argue this point. Their theory describes education not only being reliant on the classroom, and that a committed student or learner is supposed to have a high level of resilience. The theory suggests that the issues encountered should not hinder a focused student from attaining and achieving in their studies. Some issues encountered in life and during the study journey should not be supported and rather be learning opportunities. This can also be linked to professional abilities and resilience to adjust to many situations and changes that may happen such as changing teams in workplaces and colleagues leaving. O'Connor et al. (2021) would however arguably disagree as they discovered that most mental anxieties in education are driven by lack of support and therefore students would have performed poorly with less support.

Resources

In every walk of life or every professional discipline, success is often linked to the availability of resources to complete tasks. Resources may account for tangible physical materials as well as the support and expertise. During the pandemic, this balance was not an easy problem to solve. Gavigan and Kurtts (2010) identified that the best way to get the best out of students is to first identify who the at-risk students are and then devising the resources to meet their needs. These may be in the form of training to tutors to ensure they have the skills to navigate the different needs of learners. Even though pastoral support is available in the organisation, it is a matter of whether the resources were adequate to meet the needs of students at the high rate they were needed during the pandemic.

Another resource that was challenging for all learners to meet their needs was the actual computers and electric devices to be able to access their learning environment as and when they needed to. Mitchell (2009) states that the magic formula to meet diverse or inclusive needs of students is to ensure there are enough funds and resources. In the case of the organisation, the number of tutors to provide the required support per student would not have been met as desired. The result of the struggles of the pandemic are that not only the students from the targeted sample struggled, but almost every student would have met a different level of challenges studying at this time. Bates et al. (2012) also looks at the role of the government as they are the ones that have control over the design of curriculum. However, their design should also show inclusivity and the way the resources were distributed to the public does not show a lot of concerns. If there were no adequate resources, the sensible action would have been to either change the curriculum or provide funds for all learners to access education fairly.

Retention

Student retention has always been a priority and a strong point of this organisation. It is clear that there is a link between attendance and attainment. The matrix in the organisation has identified that and during the pandemic, one of the main support strategies was to ensure students are encouraged to attend more as that often reflects on the outcome of retention. As stated by Kuh et al. (2007), participation is the key to ensuring the continuation of the students' journey. The findings of this research show that the staff are well-trained and this plays a major role in ensuring students achieve their desired outcomes.

Conclusion and recommendations

From the responses in the research, the presence of mental health problems and the pressures faced by higher education students is evidently understood within the UK from the literature reviewed. However, it seems there are no further measures to meet the needs of support to specific groups of learners facing hardships due to their exceptional circumstances. Even though there is support and training, it seems the organisation and other institutions across the country have not considered adjusting support to meet these needs on a different level. The policymakers at government level are arguably not thinking along the lines of preparing for special circumstances of inclusion, and it seems all the plans and strategies in place are designed for normal circumstances. There needs to be more student involvement in the planning process of the curriculum and only then can the curriculum be seen as fully designed with equality, diversity and inclusion. Having said that, there is still a level of equality, diversity and inclusion in the planning process, though the organisation has to improve on training as there are measures taken with training and other processes that should not be overlooked.

Looking at different contexts across the world concerning widening participation, the point of creating a social justice of access to higher education has been achieved, but

arguably to a certain level. This is because there are still questions such as what level of support do these students need when they have started their journey and is it all monitory or is it really working for the education system and jobs market? It seems therefore the process was not thought through in terms of how the students will require support in order to complete and attain their targeted goals. There are always changes for the education system and for institutions to be sustainable, they need to be able to charge the correct fees to be able to continue providing healthcare and meeting quality requirements as well as ensuring the objectives of increasing participation to underrepresented groups is achieved, which often require more resources.

Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqi (2023) reported that despite the WP policy being in the UK educational policy agenda for the last 50 years, there are still disparities that need to be addressed to 'widen participation' further. The numbers of students from poorer backgrounds and other underrepresented groups are still lower in competitive institutions. Of all 93% of entrants to higher education to Russell group universities, those regarded as WP only make 23%. Therefore, the agenda is a direct drive for government's policies in place to address this social issue and not driven by the need to generate revenue.

Connell-Smith and Hubble (2018), on behalf of the house of parliament described how it is the duty of a responsible government to reduce barriers and discrimination of disadvantaged students in UK society. Therefore, the policy tasks institutions through the work of the Office of Fair Access (OFFA) which approves and monitors HEI's and ensures best practice. They also use the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) which funds activities and administers the National Collaborative Outreach Programme. Even though progress has been slow, the government's target was to double the proportion of pupils from disadvantaged pupils going into higher education and increase the number of black and Asian minorities (BAME) entering HE by 20%. These were targets set to be achieved by the year 2020. Therefore, the UK HE industry is on course to be sustainable going into the future and arguably, there are high levels of competence in equality, diversity and inclusion. It seems to be a hot topic that is widely considered in the UK higher education policy system.

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