Institutional wide implementation of key advice for socially inclusive teaching in higher education. A Practice Report

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Abstract

Government policy and institutional initiatives have influenced increases in enrolment of non-traditional students to Australian universities. For these students, university culture is often incongruent with their own, making it difficult to understand the tacit requirements for participation and success. Academic teaching staff are important in creating socially inclusive learning experiences, particularly in first year subjects. This paper presents an institution-wide approach to enhancing socially inclusive teaching at one Australian university. Underpinned by a framework of "bridging social-incongruity" the initiative was guided by six principles of socially inclusive teaching to support practice as proposed in the 2012 "Effective support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in higher education" report commissioned by the Australian Office of Learning and Teaching. Feedback from 150 academic teaching staff from various disciplines and campus locations, suggests this initiative was effective in increasing understanding of socially inclusive teaching practices with many participants indicating the teaching enhancements were applicable for their teaching context.

Introduction

The findings of the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) encouraged a national commitment to expand access to higher education (HE) in Australia (Australian Government, 2009). There is institutional and sector-wide interest in initiatives to improve: access to undergraduate courses, participation and engagement in HE, and also empowered success for students from non-traditional backgrounds in HE (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler & Bereded-Samuel, 2010). As a result, the university student demographic is diversifying from the traditionally homogenous population.

Since the Bradley review, the number of students from non-traditional backgrounds attending Australian universities has seen a steady increase. Recent reports show the following commencement statistics for particular equity groups between 2011 and 2012:

- low socio-economic students increased by 10.4% (based on geocoded SA1 data from the 2011 SEIFA Education and Occupation index);
- regional students increased by 6.4%;
- remote students increased by 7.0%;
- indigenous students increased by 8.4%;
- domestic students from a non-English speaking background increased by 13.7%;
- students with a disability increased by 15.5% (Australian Government, 2013).

The notion of a *non-traditional* student encompasses a range of characteristics often defined in these equity groups. However, many students qualify for more than one of these groups and therefore represent multiple identities of a non-traditional student (Morgan, 2013a). With greater inclusion of non-traditional students in HE, the challenge for universities is to ensure a high-quality student learning experience that caters for the diversification of the student body.

Critical to the retention and success of non-traditional students is the first year experience. Upon entering, university students are challenged with having to learn how to adapt to a unique culture at the same time as learning the content and skills within the discipline they have chosen (Tinto, 2008). This can impact on their ability to engage with all aspects of university and inevitably affect opportunity for completion and success. Kift and Nelson (2005) argue the importance of a *transition pedagogy* that is intentionally designed to support diverse cohorts of students within the first year curriculum. This is supported by Tinto's (2008, para. 24) claim that "access without effective support is not opportunity".

Teaching staff are often the first and most consistent point of contact for students upon commencing university study. For students who are first in their family or community to attend university, academic teaching staff play an important role in exposing the institutional habitus of university life (Lawrence, 2005). A high-quality teaching and learning experience can make a significant contribution to student engagement and success, especially for students from non-traditional backgrounds (Thomas, 2013). Academic teaching staff and the teaching and learning context they create are therefore an important function of successful social inclusion in higher education, particularly in first year subjects.

There are great challenges for academics to effectively meet the needs of a diverse range of students. Academics need to be well prepared for catering beyond a one size fits all model of teaching. Institutions cannot assume that staff can go unsupported in this endeavour. For effective socially inclusive teaching to take place practitioners must be involved in relevant and targeted training (Morgan, 2013b). The initiative in this report is one approach implemented by an Australian university to address support for academic development in socially inclusive teaching.

This practice report presents the theoretical underpinnings and contextual elements that contributed to the design and delivery of resources and workshops to support teaching staff in creating socially inclusive learning environments. It also reports on an evaluation of the initiative and outlines directions for future work in this area.

Theoretical underpinnings

Universities have traditionally catered for the higher socio-economic classes. Therefore the cultures within universities often reflect the values and practices of these groups. For students from a lower socio-economic background, this can lead to feelings of discomfort and intimidation (Chrisite, Tett, Cree, Hounsell & McCune, 2008). Furthermore, a lack of understanding of the tacit requirements within the university culture can hinder one's ability to effectively demonstrate capacity in this context (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Devlin (2013) presents a concept of *socio-cultural incongruence* to describe the gap between the culture of higher education and the cultures within which non-traditional students are more familiar. The notion of "bridging socio-cultural incongruity" (Devlin, 2013) offers opportunities to institutions to address social inclusion and better enable non-traditional students to understand and master their role and succeed in higher education.

The conceptual framework of "bridging socio-cultural incongruence" draws together the responsibilities of the student and the institution in achieving social inclusion goals. A framework to bridge the incongruity adopts the idea that adjustments to ensure success of non-traditional students must be a "joint venture" (Devlin, 2013). This framework underpins an Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) project titled *Effective support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in higher education* (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012) that offers advice for policy makers and leaders, as well as practical guidelines for academic staff to address social inclusion. The six elements of key advice for university teaching staff proposed include: know and respect your students; offer your students flexibility, variety and choice; make expectations clear by using accessible language; scaffold your students' learning; be available and approachable to guide student learning; be a reflective practitioner. These six elements were used as the framework upon which resources and workshops were designed and delivered for academic teaching staff across all discipline areas within the institution.

Contextual framework

The design and delivery of an institution-wide approach to teaching and learning can be a challenging task. Faculty academics are known to identify themselves as members of a particular

disciplinary "tribe" (Becher & Trowler, 2001) with disciplinary differences in their approaches to teaching (Neumann, 2001). Furthermore, when faced with pressures of research and scholarship, faculty academics can overlook teaching as a priority to the detriment of students and student learning (Light & Calkins, 2008). To increase value and participation, academic development initiatives must be well considered to ensure that they meets the need of academic staff and their students, relevant to their specific context (Quinn, 2012).

A focus on context framed the design and delivery of this initiative to enhance socially inclusive teaching. Guided by the theoretical underpinnings, and focussed on the above described six elements of key advice offered to academic teaching staff (Devlin, et al., 2012), considerations for each of the various discipline areas, and the institution context itself, were a priority. The following sections describe the design and delivery of a website and workshops and how they were informed by theoretical and contextual frameworks. A further section outlines the evaluation of this approach to present the feedback received from academic teaching staff in the different discipline areas.

Socially Inclusive Teaching Website

A website was developed as a resource to support socially inclusive teaching at the university (http://www.uow.edu.au/asd/socialinclusion/inclusiveteaching/index.html). The focus of the website design is to offer practical generic and discipline specific advice based on theoretical and contextual considerations.

Academic input from a range of discipline areas was sought in the development of the website. Associate Deans - Education (or their equivalent) suggested teaching staff who had demonstrated capacity for inclusive teaching practices. This included sessional, fixed term and permanent teaching staff. The recommended teaching staff were contacted by email and asked to respond to any or all of stimulus questions. Examples of questions asked are:

1. Know and respect your students
   - What are some strategies you use to get to know your students?
   - How do you enable and make use of student contributions as learning experiences in class?
2. Offer your students flexibility, variety and choice
   - How do you use technology to promote inclusive practices?
   - How do you offer variety in assessment modes to promote inclusivity?
3. Make expectations clear by using accessible language
   - How do you communicate in a way that is accessible to all?
4. Scaffold your students' learning
   - What do you do to help students understand "how things are done" at university?
   - How do you support your students to perform well in assessment tasks?
5. Be available and approachable to guide student learning
   - What are your strategies for making yourself available to students?
   - How do you provide feedback in a way that students can learn from it and apply it to their future studies and lives?

6. Be a reflective practitioner
   - What are some strategies you use to receive feedback on your teaching?

Approximately 50 staff were invited to respond to the questions and 14 responses were received. A representation from various discipline areas was received including Sciences, Education, Law, Mathematics, Engineering, Management, The Arts and Journalism. Each respondent is represented on the website, though not necessarily in response to each question.

Teaching staff also feature in videos on the website. Six teachers, from various discipline areas, were asked to share their views on the importance of each of the six elements of key advice for teachers. The videos were professionally produced and embedded into the website.

External links to other websites offer more practical ideas to enhance inclusive teaching practice. The external links were chosen as they offered clear practical advice that reflected the six elements of socially inclusive teaching.

The website was developed as a resource for teaching staff and the website also became the primary resource in a workshop that was offered to all staff within the institution.

Workshops

A socially inclusive teaching workshop was designed and delivered to staff in sessions according to faculty or campus location. This enabled discussion and practice sharing within the workshops to maintain contextual relevance to the participants. Participant attendance was voluntary and all staff within faculties received an email invitation to attend. The institution-wide implementation recognised the high proportion of sessional teaching staff in first year subjects and deliberately included them in the invitation. Sessional staff members were paid to attend the workshops. The workshop was designed in two modules that were delivered in a two hour face-to-face format.

The first hour of the workshop involved a module on understanding diversity in higher education. Participants were each given a written scenario describing a student from a non-traditional background. There were eight scenarios in total to demonstrate a range of equity groups. After reading through their assigned scenario, participants were asked take on the role of that student and silently respond to a set of questions about their feelings, attitudes and barriers upon beginning university. Questions guided the participants to think about the experiences for non-traditional students when starting university. The workshop facilitator led a discussion for participants to share the scenario that they were given and to discuss barriers to learning that can impact on student access, participation and success. This activity then led into the second hour of the workshop which focussed on strategies for creating a socially inclusive learning environment.

The website was the resource guiding activity in the second hour. Participants were provided with an overview of the six elements of socially inclusive teaching. The website was demonstrated to show the practical and contextual advice offered. Working in pairs, participants reviewed the website and noted practices that resonated with them and their teaching context. Participants then regrouped to discuss some of the items of interest they had discovered in the website. They were then asked to focus on one idea that interested

them and create a plan for how they might implement this into their teaching practice. Once again, participants were regrouped and asked to share the practice they chose, and detail how they planned to initiate amendments to teaching practice.

Workshop evaluation

Ethics approval to undertake workshop evaluation, analysis and publication was provided by the University of Wollongong ethics committee. Feedback surveys were
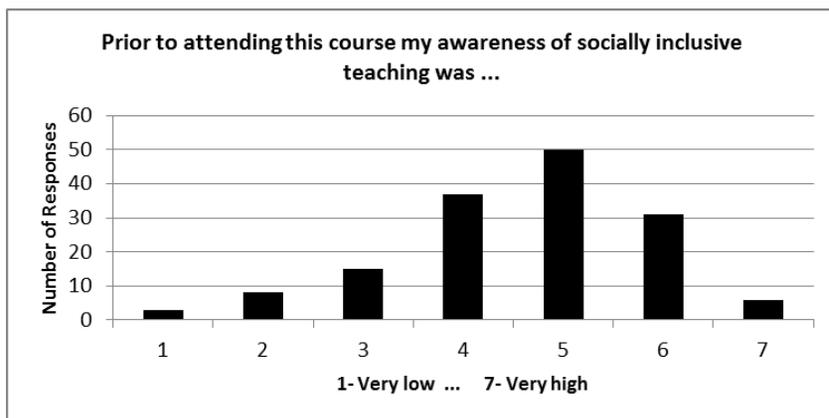
Figure 1: Prior participant awareness

Seventeen workshops took place between February and August 2013. Workshop evaluations offered insight into the participant perceptions of the value of the workshop to their teaching practice, as described in the next section.

collected at the completion of the workshop and participants were notified that the survey was completely unidentifiable and participation was optional.
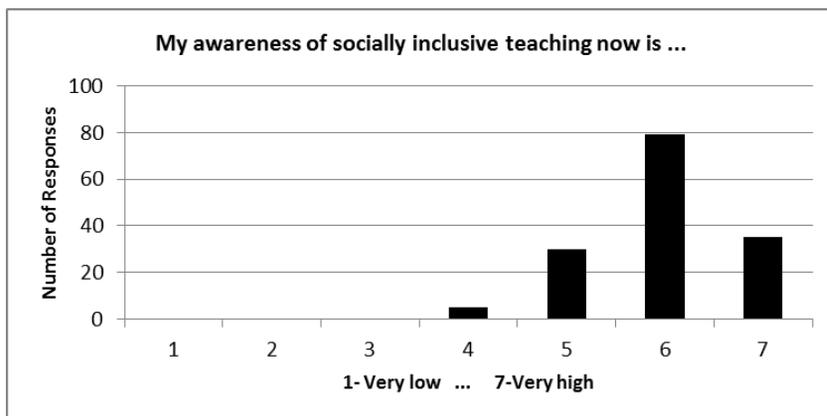
Figure 2: Post participant awareness

There were 165 workshop attendees and 150 feedback surveys were collected resulting in a 91% response rate. Figure 1 presents workshop participants responses to a stimulus question exploring the participant's prior knowledge of socially inclusive teaching matters. It is very encouraging to compare these results with Figure 2 which presents the participants perceptions of their understanding after completing the workshop.

applicability of the workshops to teaching practice, including:

- Great use of my time with tangible/practical examples to guide teaching/learning
- Valuable dialogue around teaching and learning and key ideas to enable teaching staff to implement.
- Excellent, we could have spent four hours and worked more on my own action plans for social inclusion.

Figure 3: Participant feedback on applicability of workshop material
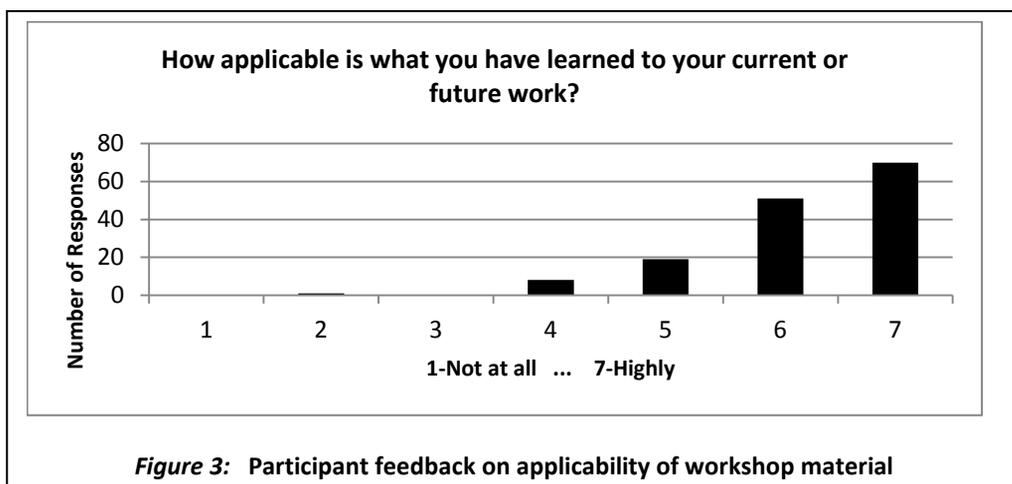
Across the evaluations there is a clear shift towards better awareness of the socially inclusive teaching matters discussed in workshops. Feedback from the workshop participants was very positive regarding the applicability of the workshop material in their current or future work as presented in Figure 3.

This is a very positive outcome that indicates the University has effectively taken the foundation theoretical underpinnings as described by Devlin and colleagues (2012) and assisted academic staff in actioning the core six recommendations.

Qualitative feedback was also gathered via the evaluation instrument and some of these comments re-enforced the

Beyond the evaluation of the workshops, monthly Google Analytics reports summarise traffic to the website. Table 1 reports current year activity.

It is pleasing to note that page views continue to occur in the months where workshops were not being conducted indicating that the website continued to be used by staff beyond use during workshop activities. Ongoing observation of the website traffic will help to determine the sustainability of this initiative to support socially inclusive teaching.

Table 1: *Google Analytics report of website traffic*		
Reporting period	**Number of page views**	**Number of workshops**
4th Feb. 2013 – 3rd Mar. 2013	953	3
4th Mar. 2013 – 3rd Apr. 2013	927	8
4th Apr. 2013 – 3rd May 2013	402	1
4th May 2013 – 3rd June 2013	180	0
4th June 2013 – 3rd July 2013	184	0
4th July 2013 – 3rd Aug. 2013	293	0
4th Aug. 2013 – 3rd Sept. 2013	1072	5

Future direction and conclusion

This report presents the design and delivery of an initiative to enhance socially inclusive teaching in HE. The future direction for this project aims to ensure ongoing relevance and sustainability through two future additions. Firstly, the website will continue to be updated to include practical advice for those who teach in an online context. Secondly, work is currently underway to develop a self-sustaining online learning module that will be available to all academic teaching staff in Moodle. By participating in the online module, staff will have the opportunity to share ideas with colleagues in a discussion forum.

This Practice Report presents an institution-wide approach to enhancing socially inclusive teaching in HE. The design and development include online resources and socially inclusive teaching workshops for academic teaching staff. An evaluation of the initiative indicates that workshops increased staff knowledge of socially inclusive teaching practices with

knowledge immediately applicable within current teaching contexts. This can be viewed as positive feedback on the underlying principles that were drawn from the recent influential research conducted by Devlin et al. (2012).

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