Inclusive curriculum design in higher education

Considerations for effective practice across and within subject areas

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Overview

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) commissioned this guide to support the higher education sector to think creatively about inclusive curriculum design from a generic as well as subject or disciplinary perspective.

It is an imperative on institutions that they design their curriculum in such a way as to promote success among all students. An inclusive curriculum design approach is one 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. This practical guidance draws on a wide range of activity and innovation within the sector and offers examples of effective strategies and general resources to support the curriculum design process.

Although guidance materials exist to support the delivery of an inclusive curriculum in higher education, there is limited advice relating to curriculum design. By focusing on the design process it is possible to take a wider and more holistic view that is based on the recognition that all students are entitled to a quality learning experience, which means that they:

> … *don't want to stand out as different yet want to be recognised as individuals.* (Hockings, 2010)

Attention to curriculum design encourages pre-planning and allows staff involved in teaching in higher education (HE) to adopt a proactive anticipatory approach to their learning and teaching. Inclusive curriculum design benefits both staff and students when it is based on principles of equity, collaboration, flexibility and accountability.

The guide is written for all staff involved in learning and teaching and in particular the curriculum design process including:

— programme directors with responsibility for designing whole degrees or working with colleagues whose main interest may be their own module;
— experienced staff who recognise the need to extend their awareness of inclusion and address issues of entitlement and fulfilling anticipatory duties;
— staff new to teaching in higher education who may be participating in institutional teaching and development modules or preparing for HEA accreditation;
— staff involved in quality processes associated with the

validation of modules and programmes with responsibility for ensuring that new or revised modules meet equality legislation anticipatory requirements and address institutional goals relating to quality and effective use of resources;

— teaching and development staff whose role is to support, encourage and motivate all of the above.

The guide is divided into and published in four sections that move through underpinning principles, features of the curriculum design process, generic and subject considerations and resources.

— Section one: published as a separate guide, this section provides an overview of the features of an inclusive curriculum design, highlights the need to take account of student characteristics and the context for change, and provides a rationale for adopting an inclusive curriculum. It also covers underpinning principles and explains how different components of a course design might be approached to make the eventual teaching and learning experiences more inclusive in the classroom, laboratory, online or work-based learning environment.

— Section two: published as a separate guide, this section discusses some generic considerations of inclusive curriculum design that relate to the way curriculum designers approach the design process across all subjects.

— Section three: published as subject guides, this section consists of some subject-specific considerations that need to be addressed to ensure all students can access a particular subject. Subject-specific vignettes and examples collected from the sector show practically how an inclusive curriculum design process can be applied within a specific subject. Links are made to show how examples of particular considerations provided in one subject may be relevant to another.

— Section four: this section lists the generic and subject-specific resources referred to in the considerations. Many of these are available online. The resources are listed in a single document to make it easier to follow up resources from other subjects that may be of relevance.

The guide can be read as a whole or selectively. Inevitably the list of considerations for each subject is not exhaustive and may not be relevant to all subjects within a group of cognate subjects currently supported by the HEA. However, it encourages readers to look beyond their own subject summary at the solutions from other subjects because many examples and ideas are suitable for adaptation in other subjects or subject areas.

Inclusive curriculum design

An inclusive curriculum is one where all students' entitlement to access and participate in a course is anticipated, acknowledged and taken into account. Croucher and Romer's definition states that an inclusive approach:

> *… does not place groups in opposition to each other. It respects diversity but does not imply a lack of commonality it supports the concept of widening participation, but does not imply an externally imposed value judgment; it values equality of opportunity, but encourages all to feel that this relates to them, and that the issues are not just projected as being relevant to groups more commonly defined as disenfranchised, and translated into universities' targets for equality.*
> (Croucher and Romer, 2007: 3)

Traditional approaches to disadvantage that focused on integrating individuals into an existing context and minimising difference between individuals have been acknowledged as a contributory factor in creating and perpetuating disadvantage (Bagihole, 1997; Grace and Gravestock, 2009; May and Bridger, 2010). Viewing disadvantage as the result of individual or group difference locates the problem in the individual, focused on identifying and reacting to their 'deficits'. This has resulted in individualised, reactive responses to students' circumstances and apparent 'need'. This approach has the potential to stigmatise and further marginalise students whose profile, experience or expectations deviated from perceived norms. Thus, policies and practices that intend to ameliorate disadvantage were weakened due to misunderstanding the 'problem'.

The reframing of disadvantage to discrimination and difference has much greater implications than mere semantics. It represents a wholesale shift in the collective understanding of what creates disadvantage. The call for equality with its challenge to discrimination and interest in inclusion breaks the causal link between individual *characteristics*, to use the language employed in the new equality legislation (see context for change), and disadvantage. Instead attitudes, barriers and other forms of discrimination are identified as the cause of disadvantage. This has shifted the focus from remedial interventions responding to the needs of individual or specific groups of students to an approach that anticipates and plans for the entitlements of the evolving student population. It also calls for changes to the system rather than the individual.

This underpinning ethos or value base has been articulated and employed as a driver for change in relation to specific

groups such as in the *social model of disability*. However, the basic principle that attitudes, barriers and other forms of discrimination rather than individual characteristics or deficits are the cause of disadvantage can and should be universally applied. This places responsibility on individual members of staff within institutions and the subjects to change and adapt their policies and practices not the student.

An inclusive curriculum will best be achieved by placing the work of individual curriculum designers within a context of change to policies and procedure across the institution. It is therefore the responsibility of the entire sector to respond to the imperatives placed on HEIs and their staff by the requirements of equality legislation and the funding councils' commitments to promote equity of access and embed inclusive policy and practice within higher education.

Taking account of student characteristics

An inclusive curriculum design recognises that students have multiple identities that are shaped by their previous experiences and that a diverse range of personal circumstances influence how they study. When considering inclusion and inclusive practice, the tendency is to focus on groups of students covered by equality legislation or to assume inclusion only relates to disabled students. The focus on addressing factors associated with this legislation is often driven by compliance and can be limiting either because it masks the complexity of students' multiple identities or leads to compartmentalised solutions that emphasise 'need' rather than the entitlement of all students. Achieving an inclusive design involves curriculum planning that:

> … *forge[s] … strong links between educational intentions, course content, teaching and learning methods, and the assessment of student learning while taking full account of student characteristics.* (Uniability, 2008, cited by Craig and Zinkiewicz, 2010: 11)

The particular combination of factors that influence students will be unique, so also are their response. Some factors will be visible and known in advance; other factors are hidden and may only emerge during a course of study. Students may respond to the same factor in different ways depending on their previous experience. Inclusive curriculum designers need to be mindful of the impact that their design decisions may have on all students.

Diversity dimensions	Examples
Educational	Level/type of entry qualifications; skills; ability; knowledge; educational experience; life and work experience; learning approaches.
Dispositional	Identity; self-esteem; confidence; motivation; aspirations; expectations; preferences; attitudes; assumptions; beliefs; emotional intelligence; maturity; learning styles perspectives; interests; self-awareness; gender; sexuality.
Circumstantial	Age; disability; paid/voluntary employment; caring responsibilities; geographical location; access to IT and transport services; flexibility; time available; entitlements; financial background and means; marital status.
Cultural	Language; values; cultural capital; religion and belief; country of origin/residence; ethnicity/race; social background.

Figure 1: Four-pronged typology from student diversity
(Source: Thomas and May, 2010)

The context for change

A number of drivers for change derived from legislation, policy, regulation and procedural requirements constitute a wider context for the inclusive design process. This section provides a brief overview of these drivers highlighting those with particular relevance for curriculum design. A more detailed discussion can be found in May and Bridger (2010).

Equality legislation places duties on HEIs with respect to all functions and services they provide for staff, students and others. The legislation covers the quality assurance/enhancement processes connected with developing, reviewing and revising the curriculum. Within the sector and individual HEIs, examples of effective practice exist often generated as a result of the development of institutional policies and action plans for disability, race and gender. Whereas previous equality legislation looked at equality groups separately, the Equality Act 2010 brings together and extends existing legislation to cover ten protected characteristics. The introduction of this new legislation is therefore an ideal time to think about the components, principles and considerations related to designing

an inclusive curriculum. A detailed briefing on the implications of the legislation for HEIs has been produced by Equality Challenge Unit (2010a).

New equality legislation requirements are an important driver for embedding inclusive practice into curriculum design. However, other external factors continue to influence students, their reasons to study and the context in which higher education operates. Within the past decade Government policies relating to widening access, economic success, skills development and quality in a global educational context have influenced who, what, why and how we teach in higher education.

The access and inclusion agenda has incentivised the students recruited, the type of qualifications they hold and how the curriculum is taught. For example, in England current Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funding has incentivised activities to increase recruitment of students from socio-economic groups 4–7 and disabled students based on students' home postcode, parental occupation or disability. Collaboration with employers to develop foundation degrees has also been encouraged.

There is increased interest in graduate employability resulting from this becoming a key indicator for institutional comparison. Employability is more than getting a job. Yorke and Knight define employability as:

> … *a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.* (Yorke and Knight, 2006: 3).

Like inclusion, "employability is not something static but something that a person can develop throughout life" (Yorke and Knight, 2006: 4). Both inclusive curriculum design and the process of embedding employability are intended to promote effective teaching and learning. Yorke and Knight describe four variables that influence how employability is integrated within the curriculum "context, student recruitment patterns [reflecting student identity], envisaged labour markets and traditions" (2006: 14). An inclusive design for employability involves thinking about the diversity of ways students manage self, others, information and the task (Yorke and Knight, 2006: 4) and ensures that all students are enabled to develop their own set of achievements.

The internationalisation of higher education and increase in the numbers of international students is a key driver for changes to learning and teaching policy and practices. It influences

the student and staff profile and the previous educational and life experiences that they bring to the learning environment. The Bologna Process and/or institutional collaborations have increased the emphasis in the HE sector on developing international partnerships and interaction about the curriculum.

External drivers are not fixed or uniform in their influence of higher education students, staff who teach in the sector or what constitutes an inclusive approach. Some drivers can be anticipated such as the change in demographics and decline in the number of 18-year-olds, whereas others, for example funding for higher education, are less easy to predict. Since the external drivers are often outside the direct control of higher education, it is helpful to consider some benefits of adopting an inclusive approach to designing the curriculum.

Making the case for an inclusive curriculum design

Inclusive curriculum design is beneficial for students, staff and the institution because it places the student at the heart of the design process. This can involve:

— recognising students' multiple identities;
— avoiding compartmentalising solutions based on specific 'need';
— adopting a holistic approach to meeting students' entitlements.

There are several core benefits for HEIs of adopting inclusive curriculum design.

— Value position: an opportunity to demonstrate that core institutional values are inclusive. Embedding inclusive curriculum design indicates that the HEI is ethical, open, respectful and responsive.
— Business case: inclusive curriculum design supports HEIs to meet the equality legislation anticipatory duties thereby reducing the need for individual reasonable adjustments and reactive changes, which can be costly and disruptive. It is an opportunity to increase (and maintain) student numbers by building and marketing a good reputation as an inclusive institution.
— Shared ownership and partnership building: an opportunity to extend ownership and understanding of curriculum design and quality enhancement to all students and other stakeholders.
— Quality enhancement: anticipating the entitlements and aspirations of all students ensures quality enhancement processes benefit the whole student population.
— Student satisfaction surveys (e.g. the National Student Survey, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey

and the International Student Barometer): results of national surveys are increasingly important to institutions, particularly given the growing reliance on them by prospective students. Effort applied to curriculum design can impact upon students' perceptions and experiences.

— Student retention and success: developing a greater understanding of students and the factors that can support and hinder their learning experience, and responding to those factors may enhance achievement, progression and retention.

Adapted from May and Felsinger, 2010: 5–6.

Principles of inclusive curriculum design

A key aim of this guide is to widen the use of the term within the sector and extend the scope of inclusive practice to recognise that effective practice for one group can and should be effective practice for all. It is therefore desirable to extend strategies that may originally have been designed to meet the entitlements of specific students to benefit the whole student population. An inclusive approach has its foundation in a commitment to promoting equality and diversity by embedding the following principles in the design process:

Anticipatory: it is proactive in considering the entitlements of all students in the design and delivery of all activity, considering prospective and existing students as well as the whole student life cycle, from admissions through induction, the course and beyond. Adopting an anticipatory approach reduces the need for reactive and individualised responses that can arise when inclusive issues have not been considered at the design phase.

Flexible: it is open, versatile and responsive to an evolving student population, and to changes in circumstances that may require adaptations to the timetable or delivery format to accommodate student availability, for instance blended learning.

Accountable: it encourages staff and students to be responsible for the progress they have made against equality objectives and actions agreed.

Collaborative: it builds on partnership between students, colleagues and other stakeholders including professional bodies, sector bodies, international partners and employers to enrich the curriculum content and relevance. It is important that staff are receptive to feedback recognising that developing inclusive provision is an ongoing process that benefits from the active involvement of all participants.

Transparent: it makes clear the reason for design decisions by increasing general awareness of the benefits for all and reduces the possibility of misunderstandings based on perceived preferential treatment.

Equitable: it ensures the processes and procedures used for students are the same and decisions are made in a fair, open and transparent way.

Curriculum design: producing a quality experience

Inclusive curriculum design is a process that is guided by inclusive principles and includes a review of and response to the context, students and wider stakeholders. The design process is ongoing and has several outputs notably: revision or completion of validation paperwork; approval by a range of individuals including staff and students (and sometimes stakeholders); and an array of ideas, plans or materials for use when the course is taught.

There should be a clear connection between the design process and the eventual module delivery. Arguably, an inclusive approach to design is necessary if inclusive delivery is to become not just possible, but inevitable. The interaction between delivery and ongoing changes to the design of a course is closely bound to quality assurance and enhancement procedures including annual and periodic reviews.

Quality procedures and how they operate within each institution will vary. Nevertheless they provide a framework in which curriculum design will take place and therefore inclusion can be addressed. For staff with responsibility for quality and inclusion, reviewing how quality processes can support inclusive curriculum design is one way of raising the profile of inclusive principles and considerations, a necessary step in beginning to bring about institutional change as well as change within their department or discipline.

Whereas an inclusive design process emphasises a proactive and anticipatory approach, inclusive delivery also requires responsiveness to students enrolled on the module. Quality procedures support the adoption of underpinning principles by ensuring that an inclusive design is based on:

— acknowledging all students are entitled to access the curriculum;
— engaging with past, present and prospective students whose module experience and expectations may support inclusive curriculum design decisions about the programme and its modules;

Principles of inclusive
curriculum design

Anticipatory
Flexible
Accountable
Collaborative
Transparent
Equitable

— gathering, reflecting and acting upon informal and formal feedback from students and colleagues as a continuous process;
— considering the impact of learning environment and teaching tools including e-learning mechanisms;
— working in partnership or collaboration with departmental, faculty and institutional and sector staff with specific areas of expertise and students;
— working with subject colleagues and with those from cognate groupings or networks to consider the subject-specific considerations and issues;
— consulting professional bodies, employers and other stakeholders about inclusion as well as subject-specific issues.

Inclusive curriculum design: components and questions

An inclusive curriculum design not only needs to think about how all students will access the curriculum but also needs to consider how inclusion can best be integrated into each component. This table provides examples of generic questions when designing the curriculum to help ensure that all students' entitlement to access and participate in a course are anticipated, acknowledged and taken into account.

Component of curriculum design	Brief description	Example questions
Aims	To cover the overall goals for a programme/module	What opportunities are there for engaging students (and other stakeholders) in devising and revisiting the overarching programme and/or module aims? Are the programme/module aims based on untested assumptions about the previous experience and aspirations of current and prospective students? Do the aims reflect an ethos of inclusion outlined in the principles of inclusive curriculum design?
Objectives	To cover the broad content and teaching intentions for the programme or module including experiences or opportunities students have to acquire new skills	What opportunities are there for engaging students and other stakeholders in devising and revisiting programme and module objectives? Are the objectives made transparent to students' pre- and post-entry to facilitate them to make effective decisions? Do the objectives enable all students to acquire the academic and employability skills aspirations set out in subject benchmarking statement?
Learning outcomes	To cover what students will be able to do at the end of the programme or module and demonstrate through formative and/or summative assessment	Are the learning outcomes closely linked to assessment methods? What opportunities are there for discussing the learning outcomes with students or employers and other stakeholders? How clear is the information, advice and guidance about learning outcomes related to competence standards? (See academic and competence standards below.) Can learning outcomes be adapted to enable students to follow other educational routes or pathways that do not include a specific competence standard?
Academic and competence standards	Standards set by or on behalf of an educational provider. This may include competence standards set by professional and/or accrediting bodies. They are usually explicitly stated in programme and module learning outcomes	How clear is the information, advice and guidance about learning outcomes related to competence standards? Have you ensured that the competence standards and their outcomes do not discriminate against any equality groupings? For an overview of see competence standards: www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/inclusion/ebulletin_1Competence_Standards.pdf
Syllabus	To cover the module content	When thinking about the curriculum content: Is there a broad range of content examples to which all students can relate? Do examples help raise awareness of equality and promote respect of individual difference? Does the syllabus take account of stakeholders' views, e.g. through the inclusion of real-life case studies? Are students invited to draw on their previous educational or life experience?

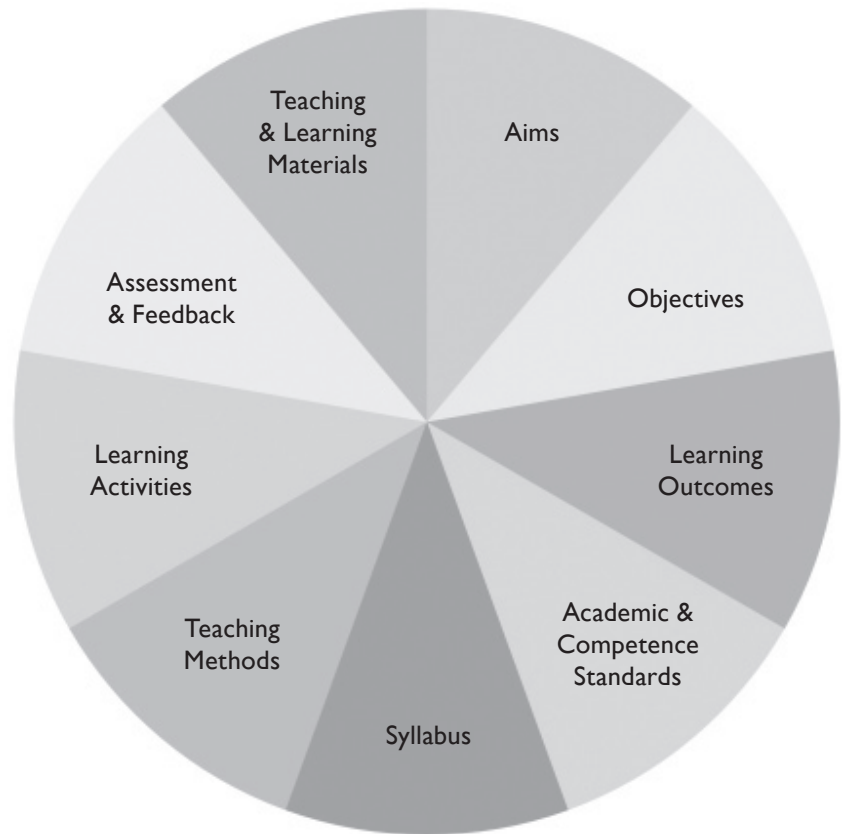| Component of curriculum design	Brief description	Example questions
Teaching methods	To cover activities developed and delivered by those who teach in face-to-face or online contexts	Is there a variety of teaching activities planned to take account of students' diverse preferred learning approaches and experiences? Do the teaching methods increase the ways students can engage with the content or materials? Are teaching methods used in such a way to enhance inclusion or might they inadvertently exclude? Do teaching methods support students to engage in different ways, e.g. use virtual learning environments to support delivery of material? Are teaching methods suitable for the learning environment? Is there a balance of individual, whole, small group and paired activities? Is the group's profile used to promote inclusion (for instance, mixing students from different countries to support cultural exchange, or allowing students to choose with whom they work)?
Learning activities	To cover activities that may be influenced by those who teach and involve students working independently either alone or in groups outside the learning environment	When asking students to work in groups outside the session are their personal circumstances taken into consideration? Is the purpose and outcome of independent tasks made clear to all students? Do the teaching activities (or entry requirements of a course) ensure students are equipped to undertake the learning activity? Is there time built into the design for students to ask questions or receive feedback on independent learning activities? Are learning activities reflected on to enable all students to recognise their learning and the value of any alternative approaches they adopted?
Assessment and feedback	To cover the different types of assessment undertaken by students, their peers or the tutor: — formative assessment that informs and supports future learning; — summative assessment that provides a grade	Is there a variety of assessment opportunities used throughout the programme or module? Can the need for compensatory or alternative assessments for specific students be reduced by alterations to the methods used to assess all students? Does the assessment give opportunities to develop graduate skills to aid employability of all students? How are students prepared for assessments? Are there marking criteria? Is the language free from jargon? How are the criteria shared with students? What feedback opportunities are there? Is this targeted at the individual or group? How timely is the feedback? How inclusive are the feedback methods used?
Teaching and learning materials	To cover the resources used to deliver the curriculum, provide relevance and promote access for all students	Are there sufficient resources available for students to complete the tasks set? (Thinking about resources at the design stage may ensure smoother delivery.) Has the need for alternative formats been considered when purchasing or developing new resources? Do the resources used in a module provide a wide range of examples that support a commitment to diversity of content and relevance?

Figure 2: Elements of curriculum design

The diagram above captures various components in the curriculum design process. It is rare that they will be considered in a linear form, addressing each in turn, unless a programme and its components are being created from scratch. It is possible that the opportunity to address components may be piecemeal and sometimes opportunistic (triggered by a particular event, process or change in student profile) rather than planned.

Effective consideration of inclusion does not necessarily happen at defined points in the design process, although this may happen, for example, through responding to specific questions in the validation or quality assurance processes. It is possible to think about inclusion at any point in the design process and frequently decisions made in one component will have implications for other areas. It is important to recognise the implications that changes may have for the overall goal of an inclusive curriculum design and the alignment of the components within a module and programme. For example:

— changes to the type of assessment should result in changes to the learning outcomes of the module;
— changes in the institutional ICT provision might support inclusive curriculum design developments with respect to different teaching methods, such as being able to build group work outside teaching sessions that would not have been practical in the past.

The way in which validation and quality assurance processes and particularly paperwork are structured can determine the sequence in which design components are discussed and considered. Although this may be helpful as a way of structuring and making consideration of design components more routine, it also has the potential to inhibit more creative thinking. Considering the different components in a more fluid manner can result in some innovative solutions and support more gradual or phased change when resources are constrained.

Appendix 1: Glossary

Although individuals, institutions and disciplines may use the following terminology in different ways, within the guide we will use:

Aims – to cover the overall goals for a programme or module.

Assessment – to cover the different types of assessment undertaken by the student, their peers or the tutor:
— formative assessment that informs and supports future learning;
— summative assessment that provides a grade.

Objectives – to cover the broad content and teaching intentions for a programme or module including experiences or opportunities provided for students to acquire new skills.

Learning activities – to cover activities that may be influenced by the teacher and involve students working independently, either alone or in groups, outside the learning environment.

Learning outcomes – to cover what students will be able to do at the end of the programme or module and demonstrate in formative or summative assessment.

Module – sometimes referred to as a course or unit, it contributes to a wider programme or programmes of study.

Programme – the overall structure for a qualification that is made up of modules, courses or units of study.

Syllabus – to cover the module's content.

Teaching and learning materials – to cover the resources used to deliver the curriculum, provide relevance and ensure access for all students.

Teaching methods – to cover activities developed and delivered by the teacher undertaken in face-to-face or online contexts.

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