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Summary: Fostering Inclusive Learning Communities Together

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Fostering Inclusive Learning Communities Together

1. Introduction

1.1. [FOSTERING INCLUSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES TOGETHER: INTERSECTIONALITY, BELONGINGNESS, AND OPENNESS](#)

Vincent C. H. Tong

In this Special Issue, we present a collection of 27 short contributions from our institution-wide project aimed at advancing inclusive education through student-led collaborative scholarship. A group of 21 undergraduate and graduate students from diverse personal and disciplinary backgrounds at Northumbria University offer their perspectives on ‘student success’ and other contemporary issues on equality, diversity, inclusion, and sustainability (including those aligned with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)). The students worked both individually and collaboratively to develop a collection of creative writing, visuals, artwork, reflective essays, and scholarly opinion pieces. Taking on board their personal and professional experiences, seven academic and professional service colleagues provided their responses to the students’ contributions in a series of short articles. Using our project as an example, I here highlight the importance of involving students, academics, *and* professional service staff members—all from diverse backgrounds—in collaborative scholarship initiatives, and the significance of intersectionality, belongingness, and openness as key elements in fostering inclusive learning communities together.

1.2. [AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT ON STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH THE LENSES OF OUR DIVERSE STUDENTS](#)

Emily Parkin

The Accessibility & Inclusion Team at Northumbria University exists to improve student success for underrepresented groups. This includes providing financial support, specialist one-to-one support, and group support, some of which is tailored for specific student groups, such as students estranged from their families. To achieve this effectively, we aim to avoid making assumptions about our diverse students’ expectations or experiences, and therefore embed student voice mechanisms throughout our service. One such mechanism is working in partnership with our underrepresented students to address gaps in student success in line with our Access and Participation Plan (APP). This introduction provides a background of how the scholarship project—of which this Special Issue forms a part—was initiated, and how it aims to contribute to improving student success both within and beyond our institution.

2. Creative writing and artwork with academic commentaries

2.1. [THE LABYRINTH](#)

J. Alexandria

The story I present here is designed to give an impression of what it's like to be trans in 2021, and what 'succeeding' means to people like me. The conclusion reached here is that the current environment is so overwhelmingly hostile towards trans people that just staying alive and being able to help others to do the same is a success, and that this is in large part due to the way that we're deliberately isolated from people who aren't trans. It also examines the way that the attacks levelled against trans people are simply the grisly remains of other long-debunked excuses to attack different minorities, reheated and given a different spin to appear relevant again.

2.2. [THE LIBERAL POLITICS OF DIVERSITY: BEHIND THE BLACK SQUARE](#)

Anish Chhibber

Inspired by scholars such as Stefanie Boulila, Sara Ahmed, and Alana Lentin, the image I created draws on Boulila's *Race in Post-racial Europe*. The piece, *Behind the Black Square*, attempts to illustrate that liberal diversity paradigms are disconnected from anti-racist, feminist, and queer political traditions; act as a shield to avoid accountability for complicity in the oppression of marginalized identities; denigrate claims for social justice; and thus perpetuate the status quo rather than being counter-hegemonic.

2.3. [WATER](#)

Nicola Cook

I present a poem that attempts to unearth productive tensions between normative expectations and the life one lives, between articulating experience and claiming voice. It aims to deal with the overwhelm of coming to terms with multiple crises, like the breakdown of climate, health and relationships, and the impact that has on our ability to even vision futures both personal and universal. The poem highlights physical experience with our world and how this impacts our relationships with others and our work, but also the connections between these and the personal barriers faced to succeeding in and beyond university. I attempt to connect an inner and outer world to see how we might literally (physically) inhabit it while narrating our differences.

2.4. [RED LITTLE PAPER BOOKS](#)

Megan Marie Doherty

Red Little Paper Books captures snapshots of a protagonist's life. It focuses on what it means to want to write from an early age and how this can develop into goals within a

young career when presented with obstacles. A snapshot poem creates a collage of the protagonist's life and the different moments that have changed their attitudes and outlooks. Strands of different memories detail the different steps that have taken the protagonist through disappointment and the reality of work, into somewhere where they feel comfortable and happy.

2.5. THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK: THE NEED FOR ADULT EDUCATION

Anastasia Karampela

My art pieces were inspired by the street artist, Banksy. The title of the first piece, *revolution*, describes education as revolution. In the picture, there is a woman, representing me, throwing a book as a bomb to my past, using education to change my future. With no fear, I am looking in front at 'new' me. The second piece, *CANCELED (Follow your dreams)*, is me erasing the word 'CANCELED' from the top of my dreams. My dreams are not cancelled, just staying on hold, and are now revived again.

2.6. THE ONLY

Nkumbu Mutambo

Throughout my life there have been many moments and spaces where the words 'the only' aptly described my positionality relative to others. Being 'the only' comes with a weight felt not only in stares and looks but also in tactless questions and the assumptions which these thinly veil. It is a weight felt not only in the violence of abuse but also in the unquestioned quiet of sameness. Being the only, the other, the exception, leaves one empty, voiceless, breathless. The piece aims to capture and convey some of the entangled and complicated feelings which come with finding oneself in the position of 'the only.' Specifically, as a Black, African woman, it is a situation which has become a defining aspect of my experience the further I have progressed in academia.

2.7. EDUCATION CREATES CONFIDENCE AND EMPOWERMENT; CONFIDENCE AND EMPOWERMENT CREATE OPPORTUNITIES; OPPORTUNITIES BREED SUCCESS

Siobhan Walker

Coming from a low socio-economic background, leaving school with no GCSEs or any desire whatsoever to be academic, both my family and I believed that I would amount to absolutely nothing. However, after the birth of my daughter 11 years ago, I was inspired to fall in love with education. This gave me new confidence, a sense of empowerment, and a whole lot of opportunities, including the revelation of my dyslexia. It has been a rocky path, and one that has shown me the importance of inclusivity. This piece is my insight into being a mature, single-parent, and dyslexic student. With no academic background, this is how I became empowered.

3. Reflective essays

3.1. THE POWER OF UNIVERSITY

Zaynah Aftab

Despite the pandemic, the rise and uptake of the ‘class of 2021’ has been incredible, showing dedication and commitment throughout university education. Students have graduated with degrees, representing a massive stepping-stone to their futures and careers. Universities have put students’ health and well-being at the forefront to keep them safe, while some students are living at home and others are not. However, online learning has not been effective for all students, mainly those from ethnic minorities. As a result, in this creation task, equality, diversity, and inclusion have been observed and how this has affected education and mental health. This piece comments on two published artworks: *The Aesthetics of Nature* (Luadthong, 2020) and a drawing of a young man smiling, while inside his mind a boy sits alone crying (author and title unknown, n.d.).

3.2. INCLUSIVITY OF UNIVERSITY FROM A MINORITY STUDENT’S PERSPECTIVE

Jasmin Brown

‘Inclusivity’ in the Oxford English Dictionary is defined as “the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized.” When asking whether a university is inclusive to its students, it is easy to say “yes.” However, this is not entirely the case. The expectations and needs of minority students are always changing and the education sector’s policies may only be suitable to those students without any physical or mental needs. In regard to Northumbria University, it is apparent that the staff actively seek new ways to change and improve how they reach minority students, and to ensure those students are provided with equal opportunities and quality of learning. Overall, universities are inclusive only to an extent. It is important that staff are provided with ways to ensure that any educational policy they are implementing can be tailored to meet the needs of all minority students.

3.3. GENDER INEQUALITY IS PREVENTING FEMALE STUDENTS FROM SUCCESS

Emily Cain

In this piece, I focus on fundamental issues surrounding gender equality. This is an issue present in all areas of contemporary society and institutions, and heightened in the university setting. As a result, a barrier exists for many female students to achieve success. Undeniably, there is a gendered balance of undergraduates within higher education, with more females attending university now than ever. However, by no means does this mean that gender equality has adequately and effectively been achieved. The hegemonic and misogynistic masculinity and patriarchy is pervasively

embedded and reinforced throughout university and ‘university life’, which leads to damaging consequences for the overall success of female students.

3.4. DETERMINATION WITH RESPECT, TRUST AND SHARING

Nesrin Elmarakbi

We are all different in gender, race, age, disability, religion, and belief. As such, we need to have learning and work environments that are fair, safe, socially just, and without discrimination. We need to promote equality, diversity, inclusion, and sustainability (EDIS) in the learning and work environment in UK universities. We need to: enhance faith and world-view equality (i.e., all members of the university community have a responsibility to respect people’s freedom to express their convictions and religious beliefs, as long as this does not impact on the freedoms and rights of others); enhance disability equality (i.e., I believe the learning environment is the place that students and staff can work and study free from discrimination and harassment); enhance gender equality (i.e., I believe the working environment should be one that promotes and embeds gender equality); and enhance race equality (i.e., I believe the working environment should be one that tackles all forms of racial discrimination and harassment). We must create a better environment for learning and working together in a happy and healthy work–life balance by understanding the cultural differences of our students.

3.5. THE TRUE DIFFICULTY OF AUTISM: WHY ACCEPTANCE MATTERS SO MUCH

Lois Havert

There is a lack of awareness of autism in non-autistic people, and many people have a negative perception of autism or are not aware of what autism can look like. This lack of awareness and acceptance can be a barrier to autistic people’s success both at university and afterwards. It can mean that neurotypical (non-autistic) people discriminate against autistic people due to their negative perception of autism or because they do not understand how to be inclusive of autistic people. University students and staff members can assist in removing these barriers by ensuring that their practice is inclusive and by actively promoting autism acceptance and awareness.

3.6. ODD ONE OUT: THE BARRIERS FACED AS A FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT

Charlotte Hudspeth

In this scholarly opinion piece, I explore the most important barriers faced by students who are the first in their family to attend higher education, including some of my own personal experiences as a first-generation student. First-generation students are often underrepresented by higher education institutions. The barriers they face range from a lack of information within their household about accessing higher education to personal feelings of unbelonging. The piece explores how these barriers impact a

student's likelihood of academic success, and offers suggestions on how these issues could be addressed.

3.7. IDENTITY-FIRST EDUCATION

Annabel Lee

I am a disabled student, a transgender non-binary student, a queer student, a carer student. Identity-first vs person-first language is an intense topic with no real correct answer as it will always depend on the individual. However, in higher education you very quickly notice that your identity as a student completely overrules any other identities you may have, both within the institution and outside. You're a student—never a person who studies. Within education, the language moves from person vs identity to student vs identity. I want to not only recognize this change but also call for identity-first education over student-first education.

3.8. DO NOT DISREGARD THE MATURE STUDENT; WITH AGE COMES MUCH MORE THAN JUST WISDOM

June Scott

In the academic year 2019/20, mature students accounted for 39% of undergraduate entrants at degree level in England (Hubble & Bolton, 2021). Despite this significant percentage of students who are starting their undergraduate studies aged 21 or over, there are still assumptions being made around the mature student which may be causing unnecessary barriers to them completing—or even starting—their degree. This piece will examine my university experience as a mature student and explore whether and how the age difference between myself and 'traditional' students impacted me.

4. Scholarly opinion pieces

4.1. 'SEEDS OF SUCCESS:' SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM SUCCESS, AND THE BARRIERS THAT UNIVERSITY STUDENTS MAY FACE

Huzayfah Ali

We all want to be successful. The problem is that we stay focused on what others do, including the grades they get, instead of caring for ourselves. For university students, this can have a negative impact on their ability to be successful—as every student is different, the idea that they all want to, or can, attain the same goal is ridiculous. Real success, however, is about making your own goals and measuring your progress against yourself, so that you can aim towards the best possible outcome for yourself. Outside of university, it is important for students to work towards their own goals for success and think about how that will help them to grow and improve in the future. UK higher education institutions (HEIs) need to acknowledge this and find new ways

to engage and encourage the ever-changing student body so that they can achieve success. This piece examines what HEIs can do to ensure students can succeed, irrespective of their circumstances, and how representing differences in students' success can improve the university experience for all.

4.2. NOT FITTING IN, BUT NOT WANTING TO: A COMMUTER STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Emily Bellerby

Expecting all students to want, or be able to have, the same higher education experience is derogatory. Widening participation needs to acknowledge this, and find new ways to engage the ever-changing student body within UK higher education institutions (HEIs). This student body is diversifying rapidly, with more students choosing not to leave home, and to retain part-time jobs during their studies. Experiential research has termed remaining at home rather than moving away an “inferior model of participation in higher education.” In this opinion piece, I evaluate this statement. It aims to underpin the reasons why students may feel this way. It also examines how HEIs can move forward to ensure that commuting, rather than being an inferior experience to living away from home, represents a unique way of working—one which is valuable because, not in spite, of its difference.

4.3. “EVERYONE WILL REALIZE I DON’T BELONG HERE:” ON THE SUPPORT OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

Nicola Dawn Cowley

Impostor syndrome, or the feeling of fraudulence and not belonging in one’s role, is commonly experienced by university students. Despite the term ‘syndrome’ to describe this psychological phenomenon, external environment can play a contributory role, such as a student fearing they will face unconscious bias later in academic life. It is my opinion that a supportive relationship, with open communication, between lecturer (or doctoral supervisor) and student can significantly mitigate these distressing feelings and enable the student to feel comfortably integrated into their academic environment.

4.4. SUSTAINABLE CITIES DEPEND ON SUPPORTING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

Stuart Haw

Across England, many cities face the challenge of how to retain their young talent—particularly the talent offered by first-generation students. For these cities, having first-generation students remain in, or return to, the locations they come from relies on support from universities. Such institutions can support students by helping them to shape their lived experience and educating them on how they can create opportunities in their hometowns and cities—and therefore not contribute to ‘brain drains’ or human capital flights. The example of Peterborough is provided to show how such

support can contribute to the growth of cities, in ways that work towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

4.5. THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSIVITY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS: THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Amy Kingston

The inclusion of students at university is widely studied and highly important. The significance of staff being educated in this field is vital, as this structures the overall inclusivity of the university (Beacham & Rouse, 2011). The aim of this piece is to highlight my experiences as a higher education student and communicate some potential obstacles that university students may face. I aim to establish what my long-term and short-term goals are, and explain some of the barriers I may come across during my studies, which would then highlight the importance of being successful in more generalized terms. This piece aims to reach a wider audience by suggesting why different types of support would be beneficial for students who have different backgrounds.

4.6. SUCCESSFULLY FITTING IN

Jin Wang

In this piece, I share my personal experiences as an Asian student at a university. I start by explaining why it is important for Asian students to gain a sense of belonging, linking to the culture of their societies, then moves on to telling stories about what the student experienced and how she felt during incidents. I include references that link these incidents to current research, to build up arguments and depict perspectives upon which future improvements or academic research can draw. It may be valuable to consider it as a piece of evidence that depicts the difficulty of gaining a sense of belonging for Asian students at UK universities.

5. Responses from academic and professional service staff

5.1. HANDLE WITH CARE

Rima Patricia Hussein, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Business and Law

The late American writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde asked: where does our power lie and how do we school ourselves to use it in the service of what we believe? On reading these student pieces, I reflected on belonging and how it is to feel out of place—perhaps in our bodies, or in learning spaces where difference is not represented. I write as a Palestinian feminist academic. We look for something to recognize—a face, a voice, an image, a tangible connection to the setting. We may look for writing that we can identify with, from voices we recognize, from those that may not often be heard or seen in a university. We search for the ‘others’ like us, and

familiarity. Instead of finding them, we feel their absence: in exclusion and in the othering of our identity.

5.2. REFLECTING ON STORIES OF PITFALLS AND PERSISTENCE

Michael Hedley, Inclusion Practitioner

Emily Parkin, Student Experience & Enhancement Manager

As practitioners working in the ‘widening participation’ (WP) space, we regularly work with colleagues to define WP in their contexts. This often inspires sharing of their previous lived experience of being a student, with characteristics which would have categorized them as WP. Our stories are important. Many of us working in higher education have had bumps in the road when it comes to getting to where we are today. This piece encourages us to reflect on our own journeys and the role persistence played in getting us through them, whilst identifying how our roles as practitioners can be key to repairing dangerous pitfalls before students reach them. Persistence can only get us so far.

5.3. FAITH AT THE INTERSECTIONS

Andii Bowsher, Co-ordinating Faith Advisor and Anglican Chaplain

Chaplains often encounter diversity refracted through the intersections with religious identity, beliefs, usages of space, and concrete spiritual practices. All of this is further complicated for students by the need to find ways to process their own encounters with divergent opinions, practices, and indeed those things within their own faith community. It is important for us as chaplains to listen to the actual lived experience of students of all kinds so that the truths of their experience can be honored and not dismissed. Our role is often understood to be to interpret traditions to members of the university community. What is less understood is our role in interpreting sometimes uncomfortable experiences to our faith communities and advocating for humble hearing of them. These reflections enable us to begin to do that. In combination with our experiences, they challenge us to struggle and to wrestle with our received traditions as we seek to do well by the values of truth, compassion, humility, and justice. The reflections seek to hold together this wrestling with the challenges of university experience and the intersection of religious identities and perspectives.

5.4. NOT THE ONLY ONE

Maya Duncanson, Post Award Coordinator, Research and Innovation Services

My contribution is in the form of a letter written by an international support staff member to a student in a different university, where both are from a foreign background and have had to adapt to life in a less than racially diverse environment. It narrates the sharing of experience by the writer who is the only non-white person in her workplace, who empathizes with the student’s own experience of settling in and feeling foreign. The intention is to show that it is possible to be resilient and open to

experiences despite being the ‘only one’ in the group. It also includes a discussion around identities and cross-cultural communication.

5.5. LOST IN THE CLOUD: ADVANCING INCLUSIVE LEARNING AND TEACHING

Benjamin Ajibade, Assistant Professor, Department of Nursing, Midwifery and Health

In this piece, I explore my journey as an international student and academic tutor in UK higher education (HE). Feeling lonely and lost in a strange academic world can be daunting. Being a mature student complicates the issue even more, juggling work with academic studies, in a hostile UK educational environment that has failed to decolonize, or is merely making tokenistic gestures towards decolonization. Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) students beginning their studies suddenly find themselves in a peculiar HE environment filled with inequality, diversity, and non-inclusiveness.

5.6. CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE (UNIVERSITY EDITION)

Claire Sutherland, Professor of Politics, Department of Social Sciences

My contribution brings the meaning of success from one academic’s perspective into conversation with some of the other definitions included in this collection, before broadening the discussion to consider how students’ individual circumstances and struggles might be addressed in the current context of UK higher education. I briefly outline a decolonizing approach, among other possibilities, as a way of making university education more inclusive of students’ diverse experiences and interests. While this may require academics to step outside their established expertise and their ‘comfort zone’ as educators, it can be at least as rewarding an experience as undertaking academic research.