

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion for Work and Learning in Higher Education

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Considering the fields of study and research

How people learn in and through participation in work that is mediated by higher education (h.e.) has been a topic for research and discussion for some time. While this area has supported great strides in social mobility and inclusion, how this h.e. area of practice relates more specifically to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) has taken on renewed focus for many practitioners and policy makers.

When considering work and learning areas of practice that support the introduction of EDI and champion change, we appreciate that it is time for practitioners to once again come together to deliberate and share practice about how change can be implemented within h.e. curriculum and pedagogies. We also draw from workplace learning, organisational studies and other fields but the key issues for this research are work and learning in h.e. and access to h.e from levels 3 to 8.

What do we mean by work and why is that important for EDI

The term 'work' refers to paid and unpaid work and can in many respects be thought of as all positive, productive endeavours, although this may be problematic and in need of further definition depending on the context / situation of the 'work' being discussed.

Within work and learning over the years there have been various definitions in use, but a key point for *work-based* and *work-integrated learning* is to think of the wider connotations of work when:

- a) preparing students for their life after higher education or
- b) developing people in a lifelong learning sense throughout their lives

People gain their knowledge to undertake work from both their life's experience and also from their studies. However, some work is recognised above other work in different societies, different communities and different contexts. For example, domestic work, community work, vocational and unpaid work are all relevant in the h.e. field, but often are not as valued, at time representing deep societal inequalities and endemic failures to address EDI issues.

This research set out to explore and contribute to themes surrounding equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Current practitioners in Work and Learning will now need to address the following questions:

- What does EDI look like in your current programme of studies or curriculum?
- How does this relate to work and learning practice from past decades?
- What does EDI look like in the workplace?
- Are there areas of synergy or dissonance between educational and work places?

Learning and teaching and EDI in the work and learning curriculum

There has been research in this field that addresses the potential of access to h.e. for people wishing to enhance their work practice through further study (Major, 2016). There are many

examples of work and learning practice areas that have been developed and delivered with strong foundations in the principles of EDI which has become increasingly important as younger generations enter the global workplace.

In an early study Costley (2000) addresses access and how the practice orientation of curricular are relevant and accessible to diverse communities who have work experience. In relation to apprenticeships and other work-based approaches “*contemporary work-based learning can provide excellent access routes to career progression, success and qualifications for many facing barriers to learning*” (Pedagogies Project, 2017). H.e. apprenticeships where the employer and education provider have a distinct relationship and collaboration towards initial learning have a training guide for EDI (Welsh Government, 2018). Middlesex University’s (2021) ‘Move on up’ project found that two thirds of their apprentices who came from nonprofessional and low HE participation backgrounds accessed professional careers. While many practitioners are working with similar issues in their programming, and have developed expertise in championing with EDI issues, this renewed emphasis on providing wider opportunities has implications for the research now being undertaken and published in work and learning.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

RPL is a key learning activity in work and learning studies and is a means by which successful practitioners have accessed and produced credit for their prior learning that is both certificated and uncertificated. Assessing and reassessing knowledge and experience has always been a critical part of advancement for adult professionals and has been routinely championed within this area of study. RPL and the consideration and transfer of credit have great significance for EDI.

Equally, RPL has been a valuable tool in the field of work and learning assisting for decades how individuals progress to a Higher Education pathway, without the additional anxiety that traditional means of assessment can cause for candidates. Since work and learning concerns holistically, learning that occurs in a *real* work environment, its potential to assist EDI’s mission through RPL is enormous: reducing skills’ mismatch, RPL helps learners to engage in lifelong learning and social inclusion through assisting learners to augment their existing

knowledge and experience, aiming to acquire qualifications that contribute to their prospects' betterment and thus an increase of their self-esteem.

The context of the claims made require evidence of *how* learners have already worked (and at what level) relating to their area of expertise. The work and learning context is usually including complex and specialised areas of working. The opportunity that the RPL offers is a major cross-referencing between the learner's claim(s) and the evidence that exists to support these claim(s). The absence of recognised qualifications can disadvantage people severely and prevent individuals from getting jobs that are worthy of the level of their intellectual and professional value and capacity.

Employability, mobility and social inclusion, all depend on a fair assessment for a just participation in today's ever intricate labour market. Currently, there is an increasing recognition of the learning that occurs *outside* the formal classroom, especially learning that occurs in an *implicit* manner (through paid/unpaid/voluntary employment), rather than through formal qualifications that remain 'untested' against the demands of the workplace.

Established RPL systems are globally needed to assist EDI's mission. The work and learning curriculum is one of the approaches that demonstrate that continuous professional and lifelong development can further a holistic progression and fairness, within the context of adults' professional advancement in today's competitive labour market.

Practice-oriented approaches facilitate greater opportunities

The focus on practice found in curricular and pedagogic practices in work-based and work-integrated learning are more conducive to successful learning and attainment for a diverse group of people as well as having greater relevance to work situations. There is evidence, for example from students that have gained access to university with BTEC qualifications rather than A levels in the UK that they have better learning experiences if they learn through more practice-based and vocational means. Further, many universities are now developing placement activities and other practice-based activities such as digital certificates for project work simulated work activities and so on, which are evaluated by students as helpful and easier to access. Those undertaking part time studies who are in full

time work, also have high levels of success through basing their learning on their work experience, work role and professional field. Work-based learning studies is a prominent example of this kind of learning, but programming can happen pan-university and within various programmes that focus on graduate and lifelong skills for all ages and within the local. Regional and international communities.

Academics and trainers who have developed these more practice-based approaches have not always noted that as well as progressing a more relevant learning route they have also been contributing to EDI. More explication of how such developments can enhance EDI will help develop EDI in work and learning further.

It is with this in mind that the following themes were raised to addressed as questions:

- How EDI issues are championed within learning and work studies e.g. work-integrated learning (WIL), apprenticeships, placements, internships, continuing education, doctoral studies, staff training, voluntary and community context, coaching, part-time and full-time work-based learning (note that work can be considered as paid or unpaid).
- Power and social justice – looking at EDI activism in today’s higher education setting.
- Organisational and partnership imperatives for EDI
- How do we align and reconcile older practices with newer practices in EDI?
- Decolonising the curriculum, what needs to happen?
- Ageism and working with various generations (mature students to apprenticeships).
- Policy and practice, realising social justice goals – case studies that champion change

A more accessible approach to learning is needed

Current learning, teaching and assessment strategies in higher education, can be seen as quite target driven. Whilst the pragmatic culture of work is sometimes more amenable to clear-cut outcomes it is also the case that learning in work situations and assessing that learning may not allow space for unanticipated learning, tacit learning and more humanistic characteristics of learning that contribute to successful work practices. Inclusive education

has long been a goal (Hockings, 2010). This is because most aspects of curricular have 'teaching and learning specifications' which state what is to be learned in advance with no emergent learning identifiable.

Many work and learning programmes and modules (like many aspects of Independent learning studies) recognise experiential learning and develop practice-based learning approaches and assessments have largely accounted for such emergent learning. Employee learning is an important strand of widening participation, and can address learning that is built around smaller awards (Walsh, 2011). These strategies have produced a compelling source of accessibility, confidence raising and understanding of tacit knowledge for students on part or full time work-integrated studies (e.g. degree apprenticeships), dedicated work-based awards or with full-time students on placements. Entry into h.e. and access, with an emphasis on skills, is once again a part of the growing emphasis on lifelong learning policy in a post-Covid era. Government policies are once again support for lifelong learning goals, but these aspirations, while supported, also need to be considered critically (OfS, 2021).

EDI has pervaded the work and learning field and needs more recognition to champion the fundamental principles within this practice

Recognition of the EDI focus for work and learning is now urgent as more and more curriculum add work and learning elements to their flagship university strategies. Many academics in the field of work and learning have developed curricular and pedagogies over the years that are more suitable to learning through a practice-oriented perspective, by developing curricular such as modules and learning strategies for planning, reflective and reflexive learning, work and learning enquiry approaches and work-based projects. With the more recent changes in h.e. to a more practice-based focus (Higgs et al, 2012), universities' 'access and participation plans' now seek to engage students from vocational educational backgrounds in a wider range of active learning opportunities that are practice-based. Innovative pedagogic practices can reduce differences in outcomes related to students' backgrounds and prior attainment which for example narrows the non-continuation and attainment gap between BTEC and A-level students as it is more inclusive of the prior knowledge and skills of students entering. While the new white paper has given impetus to

discussion and change for vocational and technical education (DfE, 2021), the relationship to universities and these new initiatives is still being formed.

Working models to advance EDI in Australia and in the UK have developed impressive approaches in this practice-oriented field.

In Australia the work integrated learning model (example ACEN) have developed learning and assessment approaches for students on placements that focus on the practice-related aspects of the particular subject discipline being studied. In the UK the work-based learning approach that developed in the early 1990s for part-time lifelong learners focussed on the generic and transdisciplinary work-based capabilities developing curricular that is responsive to the needs of work situations that bring academic scholarship to professional practice including experiential, reflective and authentic approaches.

There is much overlap between WIL and WBL which are largely indefinable, overall observations but nevertheless give food for thought on the topic. It remains constructive to consider these attributes/outcomes/ criteria in relation to EDI. In the field of work and learning curriculum areas in h.e. we recognise some threshold concepts for learning through practice, such as: Embodied, Experiential and participative, Co-constructed, Emergent, Situated and Engaged. Around these conceptual developments, practice theory in relation to work and learning in h.e. can take place. Embracing practice as a gateway to learning enables students that have not had a privileged background but learn well through experience and reflection. These approaches point to forms of social and educational participation and explore new challenging ways of confronting epistemic conformism, hierarchical thinking and class, racial and gender privilege.

Stakeholder perspectives

Partnerships are a key dimension in the field of work and learning. They are often identified as three-way tripartite agreements whereby a learning agreement or contract is negotiated between stakeholders usually an HEI, student and employer. These have been at the heart of the newer apprenticeship models. Each party understands and respects their roles, responsibilities and expectations in developing professional practice capabilities that are

underpinned by academic learning). The external organisation is a partner with the HEI and the student in the planning of learning activities. The curriculum is responsive to the needs of the workplace supported by academic knowledge. This, simplistic three-way arrangements is not without its complexities not least in the matter of power relations (Siebert and Costley, 2013).

A working definition of EDI from The University of Edinburgh (2021)

What does equality, diversity, and inclusion mean?

EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) ensures fair treatment and opportunity for all. It aims to eradicate prejudice and discrimination on the basis of an individual or group of individual's protected characteristics.

What is equality?

At its core, equality means fairness: we must ensure that individuals, or groups of individuals, are not treated less favourably because of their protected characteristics.

Equality also means equality of opportunity: we must also ensure that those who may be disadvantaged can get the tools they need to access the same, fair opportunities as their peers.

What is diversity?

Diversity is recognising, respecting and celebrating each other's differences. A diverse environment is one with a wide range of backgrounds and mindsets, which allows for an empowered culture of creativity and innovation.

What is Inclusion?

Inclusion means creating an environment where everyone feels welcome and valued. An inclusive environment can only be created once we are more aware of our unconscious biases, and have learned how to manage them.

What are the protected characteristics?

The following are the legal protected characteristics, under The Equality Act 2010:

Age

Disability

Gender reassignment

Marriage and civil partnership

Pregnancy and maternity

Race

Religion or belief

Sex

Sexual orientation

Discrimination on the grounds of any of these characteristics is illegal.

Discrimination can take many forms including direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, bullying, harassment and victimisation.

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