University of East London

Co-creating with Students in Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity: A Lessons-Learned Toolkit

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Background

On July 8th 2020, a symposium was held entitled ‘Eradicating the Degree Awarding Gap in the Creative Arts’. This symposium was a collaboration between Student Equity Champions at the University of East London (Jasz Brown, Nesmie Constantine, Talyaan Pambou and Louize Williams), Project Intern Terri Foreman, Dr Martin Heaney of the School of Arts and the Creative Industries and Community Facilitator Jay Patel.

The project began as a teacher-led enquiry into improving classroom practice through more inclusive pedagogies, with particular regard to students racialised as Black or Brown. Goals changed through dialogue with colleagues, in particular creating more student-led input. This saw the project moving from a ‘conventional’ conference led by academics to one with more input from student and alumni. This led further to a strand of training for students as ‘Equity Champions’ and a conference. In this sense, the development of the project was ‘iterative’ with some recommendations made through inclusive dialogue to shape the event and outcomes which were not envisaged at the start of the project. Planning restraints (with short budget timelines) and restrictions imposed through Covid also altered the methods of training for students and dialogue between staff and students to an online model.

More information about the project is listed on UEL’s intranet pages here.

Due to the equity-focused nature of the project, and the increasing importance of collaborations between the University and its students to positively impact student outcomes, this toolkit was proposed to collate best practice on how to do this in order to support colleagues engaging in this work. While the toolkit draws on the experiences of those within the symposium, it is not a reflection of what occurred in the symposium, nor is it intended as a critique. Rather the toolkit aims to demystify the process of co-creating with students to allow others to replicate such meaningful work.
This toolkit will particularly explore staff members collaborating with minoritised students, with an enhanced focus on students who are racially minoritised (Black and Brown students).

1. Project Planning

This section details practices that should be considered at the project planning stage.

Defining the Project

As with any project, it is useful to have a clear understanding of what you are hoping to achieve and how you intend to do that.

When leading projects in areas related to equality, diversity and inclusion, you will quickly find that a project can spiral due to the overlapping nature of this work. For instance, a project that was intended to review the diversity of reading lists could quickly grow in size and attempt to address too many areas at once. For this reason, focus is crucial.

Where possible, it is useful to involve the full project team in these planning stages or to have an informal pre-planning meeting where the project plan can be examined. This will allow you to explore the project from the perspective of groups with a stake in the work: For example, minoritised students. The project can also be audited for potential risks, for instance by the Office for Institutional Equity. These risks include such things as language choice, theory relied on and the appropriateness of the project structure. This meeting will also provide you with an opportunity to explain to those involved the starting point of the project and make clear what the project is, and is not, intending to be. This can help to avoid miscommunication down the line. This will also provide you with an opportunity to delineate, and communicate, the limits of different parts of the project: For example, you can identify which parts of the project do and do not involve co-creation.

While planning for early consultation with students is important, it can be sometimes be difficult to achieve due to time constraints, such as deadlines for internal and external funding. If this is the case, consider additional ways to build in more consultation and initial dialogue within these constraints. This might include speaking to existing student representatives or liaising with the Students' Union.

Agreements and Contracts

As with any project, the use of agreements and contracts are an effective way of ensuring that all parties involved in the project clearly understand what the project is and their role in relation to it.

Written agreements and contracts are best.

They can be used to achieve several things:

Establishing Consent

Consent is permission or an agreement for something to happen.

Within a project, consent is applicable to a range of areas including:

- Use of participant contributions. This includes in future projects but also in the distribution of the information: For instance, information being shared on the intranet or with colleagues.

- To fulfil a specific role. It is important that people understand which role they are expected to fulfil within a project and that they are comfortable doing this.

- The distribution of information about them to other groups. This could refer to personal information, such as emails, or other information that they have shared with you as a result of this project.

Where possible, consent to explicit outcomes is preferable. This is because it ensures that those agreeing to the contract are able to consider in advance what they are agreeing to. This is especially important when collaborating with students, because while the outcomes listed in the agreement and/or ethics application form (and their implications) might be clear to you as a member of staff, it might be less clear to them. Therefore, clearly explaining what these outcomes entail is good practice that allows the student to fully assess the situation. Additionally, it is useful to outline possible outcomes, however, unlikely. These possible outcomes include further use of the participant's contributions, including in the form of a research paper, a conference presentation or poster. Within a creative and dialogic process, it is of course possible that not all outcomes can be foreseen. In this case, it should be made clear to participants that further consent will be sought for use of any material generated that is intended to be shared publicly.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is crucial in a project like this. This is because those involved in the project will often be sharing deeply personal stories in relation to the area being explored and it is important that they are able to do this without fear of their experiences being disseminated in a way that is beyond their control. When confidentiality is broken, it can breach the trust between the parties and impede on the development of a genuine dialogue. It can also harm pre-existing relationships and make those involved unwittingly a party to situations that are not their concern.

It should be determined in advance how confidentiality will be maintained, and between who, as different levels of confidentiality will likely be required by different participants in the group. For instance, if safe spaces are used, the rules governing them should be communicated in advance. This includes how discussions should operate and whether the discussions will be recorded and if so, how?

Depending on the nature of the work you are engaging in, you might be required to break or extend confidentiality for safeguarding reasons - for instance, where there is the possibility of harm to that person or where they pose a threat to the safety of someone else. Where possible, it should be communicated in advance why this might happen and the steps that will be followed if it does.

More information on how to navigate confidentiality can be found below:

- Chatham House Rule
- Guidelines for Creating a Safe Space for Discussion
- Safeguarding adults: sharing information

Assigning Credit

At this point, it is useful to determine how credit will be attributed. Credit is defined in many ways but key features include recognising the source of an idea or a piece of work in a way that is meaningful. Credit can extend to how work will be attributed and how ownership over various parts of the project will be determined, especially if material is produced as part of the process. It is important to decide this in advance and, where possible, include it within any agreements and contracts that are agreed.

Conversations around credit and confidentiality are often linked and therefore over the course of the project, it is important that credit remains an active conversation as opposed to something achieved via a blanket approach. This ensures that assigning credit is not done at the expense of confidentiality and vice versa, by enabling participants to clearly state their wishes.

Some ways of assigning credit include:

- Recognising the contributions of different groups by name. This includes in post-project use of any outcomes and in marketing copy.

- Referencing all contributors when project praise is occurring, and draw attention to specific contributions.

- Asking the individuals how they would like to be recognised for their contributions.

When in doubt about whether something requires you to give credit, ask the person who is the source of the contribution.

Conflict Resolution

The existence of conflict, especially in projects related to equality, diversity and inclusion, are in some ways inevitable. This area requires individuals to address sensitive issues around their identity, privilege and their space within the wider world. For this reason, it is a personally challenging endeavour. In addition to this, there are a myriad range of views and beliefs in relation to this, contributing to work in this area being a breeding ground for conflict.

It is useful therefore at the outset to define the process that will be used to manage conflicts. Though no one enters a project hoping to require this, establishing a mutually agreeable method at the start can help to simplify the situation when conflicts do arise. There are several ways this can be achieved:

- Agreeing on the use of a third party to mediate and act as an impartial party in discussions.

- A mechanism for organising informal conversations between parties to discuss issues.

- Group check ins where people can anonymously flag issues to the group to be discussed.

Depending on the severity of the conflict, the above methods may not be appropriate. For instance, in a situation where a University policy has been breached, such as UEL's Dignity at Work and Study Policy, (UEL internal link) an individual is not bound to the outlined conflict management process. Rather, they can initiate the University methods for resolving conflicts. These include:

- Mediation. (UEL internal link)
- Disciplinary process for staff. (UEL internal link)
- Disciplinary process for students. (UEL internal link)

There are many ways that conflict can be avoided. These include:

- Ensuring that all parties are clear on the project's goals and are equally invested.

- Implementing mechanisms to allow those within the project to feedback on the project plans and structure.

- Ensuring there is mutual agreement on key decisions.

- Supporting the team to bond ahead of time. This is particularly important when the group does not know each other.

- Having an understanding of the personalities within the group and their preferred ways of working. For instance, completing a personality test can be one way of initiating conversation about people's preferences when collaborating with one another. This can also help you to foresee potential conflicts and put into place any necessary measures.

Additional Resources

- Stages of Team Development
- Four Strategies for Healthy Team Conflict
- Group Cohesion Strategies
- Conflict Management Examples and Tips
- How Great Leaders Manage Team Conflict

Renumeration

Another important element of any contract or agreement is outlining any renumeration that will occur. When partnering with students, best practice is that they are paid for their work. At UEL, this is normally done through Adecco (a Human Resources company). This requires students to register with Adecco and a purchase order to be raised. As renumeration involves the students passing their details on to a third party, it is important that students are made aware of this in advance as they may not be comfortable with renumeration taking place in this way.

Ethics

Prior to the commencement of a project, it is useful to outline and address any ethical considerations. Standard ethics guidelines, such as those for research, are unlikely to consider equality, diversity and inclusion within their criteria. However, projects in these areas raise several ethical considerations that should be examined. These include:

- Power imbalances between members of staff and their students.
- Power and privilege where work on an area that affects a minoritised group is led by someone who is not minoritised in that way.
- EDI work about a minoritised group being used to advance the career of a non-minoritised person.
- Emotional labour for minoritised groups participating in the project.

Guidance on how to address these issues can be found in section two and three of the toolkit.

Project Outcomes

It should be made clear in advance to all participants what the anticipated project outcomes will be and how they will be used. For instance, if the project's outcome involved student's writing research papers, it should be made clear to the students how these papers will be disseminated after the fact and other intentions for their use. This will allow the participants to determine the extent to which they would like to be involved in the project, if at all. It will also enable you to garner feedback on these anticipated outcomes and review them in light of the knowledge and perspective of others. As stated, it is crucial that consent is received for this. If the anticipated use of these outcomes differs from, or adds to, what was outlined in the contract/agreement, it is important that new and clear consent is sought out, and any necessary releases are signed.

It is also important to consider how this work can continue once the project is done. Equality, diversity and inclusion work is broad and constantly evolving. However, a weakness of work done in this area is the tendency for large scale, singular events to occur, that do not then translate into systemic and everyday change within an institution. This significantly limits the impact of the event and, at times, can highlight the shallowness of the project that was implemented. Therefore, with any project it is crucial to consider what can be done in the aftermath to ensure that learning continues, and meaningful changes occur for students.

Examples include:

- Creating and hosting a group where individuals can come together to discuss the area of concern.

- Feeding this work into institutional projects, for instance, partnering with University Equity offices like the Equity Collective (UEL internal link), the Students' Union or a Staff Network (UEL internal link) to organise an event.

- Writing a blog post to be featured in staff newsletters or other publications talking about the area of concern and what people can do as allies.

- Working with your School or service area to embed related actions into your local EDI action plan.

- Students continuing in the role at the local level.

Roles and Responsibilities

Defining Roles and Responsibilities

It is advisable that all roles be clearly defined in advance. This is especially important when working with students to make clear to them the limits and boundaries of the roles of all people involved. This will enable all parties to understand their sphere of influence in relation to the project and avoid miscommunication about the proper responsibility of those involved. This is also important for communication reasons, to enable both those within the project and outside of it to be able to sign post effectively. These roles and their responsibilities should be outlined in any contract or agreement.

Depending on the nature of the project, some flexibility may be required in roles and responsibilities in order to better serve the projects and its aims. In these cases, flexibility can be built in by establishing a strong dialogue between participants, as well as collaborative spaces where participants have the freedom to challenge and experiment. It is important that this flexibility in roles and responsibilities is not used to increase labour for groups, for instance, participants providing time to the project above and beyond the projected hours and anticipated remuneration. This can occur accidentally, especially when participants are active and highly engaged. It is for the project leads to establish boundaries and ensure this does not occur.

It is important to ensure that all parties are well-equipped to do the roles that they have been assigned. When building your team, it is important to identify this in advance to ensure the project can proceed as planned. Being well-equipped can refer to a variety of traits, this includes ensuring they have the correct skills, access to the proper equipment and the right knowledge, such as a strong understanding of EDI issues. It is advisable to arrange for EDI training to be delivered to your team to ensure that all parties are operating with the same understanding of key concepts. The content of the training will vary depending on the nature of the project. For instance, a project that focuses on LGBTQ+ inclusivity would prioritise content on cis-heteronormativity, while a project on the degree awarding gap would have a heavier focus on anti-racism. Internally, training can be arranged in a variety of ways including by contacting the Office for Institutional Equity or liaising with other relevant groups, such as the Staff Networks and the Equity Collective.

Project Roles

Within a project such as this, there are several roles that you might consider including. These are outlined below:

- A project leader/director. This role can be shared between several co-leads. This person or group of people are responsible for the project's direction and have final responsibility for the project's success.

- Student project partners. This allows you to have direct access to the student experience, enabling you to co-create with groups who are actually affected.

- Broker/Mediator. It is useful to identify in advance a person who can operate as a broker or mediator for the project team. It is advisable that this person be independent of those within the project, and ideally have a limited pre-existing relationship. This will enable them to remain objective and for all parties to feel as though they can legitimately fulfil that role.

- OIE liaison. When working on a project such as this, it is useful to open dialogue with a member of the Office for Institutional Equity. This will allow you to have a named contact who you can seek advice from during the project's life. This person will also have an understanding of best practice and can share with you ideas on how to refine your project, or examples of similar projects taking place both within the University and in the wider sector.

- Student Union liaison. Depending on the nature of the project, it might be useful to involve the Union for their support or perspective.

- External partner. Depending on the nature of the project, you might need to collaborate with an external to deliver different aspects of the project.

Working with Externals

An external is any member of your project team who is not a student or employee of the University. It is important that the role of the external is clearly defined and agreed in advance by all parties. Prior to any agreement or contract being concluded, it can be useful to have a pre-meeting where they can highlight their intended approach and the values underpinning it. Provision of a written document outlining this can also be useful. This meeting will also enable both parties to determine whether this approach is compatible with the project and whether your styles of working, for instance their facilitation style or methodology, complement one another. Individuals often have their own styles of working – depending on the style and the person, this may not always coalesce.

Another advantage of a pre-meet is the opportunity for you and the external partner to discuss your previous experience (background), your expectations and boundaries. The breadth of their EDI knowledge can also be explored and you can determine whether you are in agreement on issues that would impact the project's progression. For instance, in a project about racial harassment in higher education, you might seek clarification on how the external party understands anti-racism and what they think is the rightful role of White people in this work. As this project is taking place within the higher education sector, it can also be useful to assess the external's knowledge and understanding of the scope and challenges of this work within a HEI.

Other issues that may be discussed at this point include:

- Determining how their role will relate with the wider group, and with any students in particular.

- Determining how communication will proceed. For instance, it might be appropriate to create a University email account for them.

- Confidentiality. For instance, if they are party to sensitive information, it is important to outline who is aware of this information and the spaces where this information can be raised.

- How to build trust and ensure that communication between staff and externals, such as facilitators, works towards the project goal.

- Identifying areas where differentiation may be needed in delivery, e.g. in creating spaces exclusively for people racialised as Black or Brown and to think about ways that transition between different discussion 'spaces' is managed so that communication runs effectively, even where there are points of disagreement.

In some cases, receiving references or testimonials in advance can be a useful additional vetting stage, and possibly a demonstration of their way of working where relevant.

It is important to be part of a project team that you can trust when doing this work; tensions due to conflicting styles of working or miscommunication risks the project being side-tracked or undermined. A pre-meeting is therefore an effective way of managing these risks ahead of time.

During the project, if the role evolves with mutual agreement, it is advisable to review the original role and update the document to ensure there is clarity. If you find that the external partner is deviating from their role unexpectedly, it is crucial that this is addressed at the earliest opportunity. This will allow any miscommunication about the role and its responsibilities to be addressed and you can remind the partner of the value that their defined role brings to the project. It will also enable them to highlight any reasons for the deviation in their behaviour, for instance, project pressures that you may be unaware of.

Similarly, as the ‘internal’ in the relationship, it is important that you also adhere to the agreements. The external, in joining this project, does so with an understanding that you outlined to them ahead of time; it is unfair if you change this without consulting them or if you deviate from any other expectations. As the external, they are particularly vulnerable in that they are not part of the University network and are unlikely to have others within the University to speak to in the event that any issues arise. In worst case scenarios, this can lead to an external exiting a project ahead of time. This is an imbalance in power that must be recognised. Ways of addressing this include ensuring that the external is embedded in the project team and forms meaningful relationships with the other members. You can also provide them with a point of contact within the University that they can speak to confidentially about issues that may arise. This includes making them aware of reporting processes, such as those outlined in UEL’s Dignity at Work and Study Policy.

As an external, they also bring different, and sometimes challenging viewpoints. This can be beneficial, especially when working in project teams that largely consist of internal people, as they can shed light on best practice currently not being embodied and offer constructive criticism that is directly relevant to your area of concern. This allows for deeper personal learning, as well as providing you with greater insight into the challenges of the context that you are working in. While it can be uncomfortable to have this perspective shared, this insight also provides a unique learning opportunity and chance for you to reflect. It can also allow you to amend your project with this learning in mind to allow for better project outcomes. When working in the area of equality, diversity and inclusion, we do so with the knowledge that we are socialised with particular biases and beliefs that we participate in and perpetuate consciously and unconsciously. Therefore, it is important to remember that learning can come from anywhere and from anyone and be open to this.

Training

Training on a project like this can be useful to ensure that all parties have the relevant knowledge and skills to perform their role. As noted, EDI training is important, however, other training or guidance that might be useful includes:

- Microsoft Teams training (or training on any other team/project management tool you are using).
- Data protection training.
- Managing conflicts.
- Managing relationships with diverse groups.

This training does not always have to be officially done. For instance, even a discussion between all project members ahead of time or the dissemination of guidance and information is still enough to make an impact.

Language

It is important when engaging in EDI work to be mindful of the language that the project chooses to adopt. Being deliberate in the language that you use is a powerful way of signifying the project's values. For instance, there is a difference between a project that aims to explore the experience of disabled people and one that aims to explore the experience of people with disabilities. In the latter, their personhood is central, as opposed to the former where their disability is prioritised and becomes their defining characteristic.

This also increases the integrity of the project and allows it to operate as an effective mechanism for educating other. This also ensures that it conforms with best practice.

It can be hard to know which language is appropriate. EDI is full of ever-changing terminology. Some starting points include the Office for Institutional Equity's intranet page, where they try to model best practice in the language they use or by contacting a member of the team for advice.

Additional Resources:

- The Language of Antiracism
- Disability Language Style Guide
- An Ally's Guide to Terminology (LGBTQ+ Inclusive Language)

Resourcing the Project

As with any project, there are often resource constraints. This might be on your time or available funding. It is important to consider whether the project you would like to lead can be done effectively and sensitively with your available time and budget. This is because without considering this, it can lead to several harmful outcomes including relying on minoritised colleagues to support your project or asking students to work for free. This is not to discourage you from leading projects such as this, but rather to consider the scale of the project that you would like to lead in situations where you are under resourced in time and finances.

1) While it is not always possible to know prior to the University's planning period that you would like to lead a project, it is useful to keep in mind when these key dates are and to build in time in advance to consider possible projects that align with these funding dates.

2) Cross-department and cross-school collaboration. By sharing funds in this way, it can help you to spread the cost for different sections of the project.

3) External funding. Throughout the year there are several opportunities to apply for grant funding for EDI projects. For instance, every year Newham Council provides funding for those wishing to organise events for Black History Month, while Arts Council England provides funding for events focused on the arts. This is also an opportunity to be creative in forging relationships with groups in the sector, such as the staff networks of commercial organisations (banks and law firms) to partner on projects.

2. Relationships

During a project, there are many relationships that will have to be navigated and managed.

Working with Students

When co-creating with students, the purpose is generally to improve student outcomes or another part of the student experience. This means that the students are directly affected by the project's intended results and therefore it is crucial that the student voice is centred and amplified throughout. This is important to avoid their participation becoming symbolic and shallow. A failure to do this will also mean that authentic dialogue would not have been created which means that key issues will not be examined, thus limiting the impact of the work.

When project planning, it is important to plan in advance how you intend to co-create with students. There are several ways of doing this, for example, the students may create material, such as videos or they may act as quality check, for instance, reviewing policies or research questions. While it is for you to decide at which stage of the project you would like to involve students and which parts of the project will be created, it can be helpful to involve students as early as possible. This will allow you to refine the project at the earliest point with suggestions that more accurately reflect their lived experiences as students. You will also have the opportunity to share information about the impetus for the project and gain insight into the depth of the issue. This can be achieved through the use of an informal meeting. Another benefit of an informal meeting at the start of the project is that it will allow students to raise their own concerns and clarify their understanding of the project. For instance, they may be concerned about the time required or about having the necessary skill set. This enables you to make any required adjustments.

Additional Resources:

- An Introduction to Student and Staff Co-creation of the Curriculum
- Making the Road while Walking: Co-creation, Teaching Excellence and University Leadership
- Engagement through Partnership: Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

When partnering with students in projects such as this, a key decision to make early on is whether you plan to partner with your own students or students who are not known to you.

There are benefits and challenges with both approaches.

Working with your own students

This refers to any student that you work with in any capacity. This can include students that you currently teach, have previously taught or who you are an academic advisor to.

A benefit of working with your own students is that you can examine your own practice in real time and understand with greater accuracy the needs and concerns of students in your own programme. As these students are within your sphere of influence, this will equip you with knowledge that you can use to shape the outcomes of future students on your programme, thus creating a direct link between your project's existence and student outcomes. It will also allow you to identify best practice that can be rolled out to other colleagues locally, such as those on your programme or in your department.

This pre-existing relationship therefore has the potential to give you greater and more critical insight than if you were working with students you do not know.

However, there are also several challenges. For instance, when working with your own students, there exists an inevitable power dynamic that arises from the fact that as the academic, you have the ability to determine their grades. This power dynamic is explored in greater detail later in the toolkit. Another challenge is the difficulty in creating a space where both staff and students are able to speak freely. For instance, the students may want to share personal stories that implicate either you or your colleagues. Similarly, you may be unable to speak about past issues while maintaining the anonymity of the parties involved. There is also the risk of favouritism and bias when recruiting the students and in their treatment during the project. This risks damaging relationships between you, them and the other students.

Working with students who are not known to you

A benefit of working with students who are not known to you is that there is no pre-existing relationship that could be affected as a result of the work. This can allow the parties involved to respond in a way that is more objective as neither party would have experienced the other beforehand. This also makes it easier to create spaces where the parties are able to speak freely about their experiences as there is a reduced chance of the project participants identifying the individuals that are referenced in the story. This can allow for deeper reflection as parties can be truly honest about their experiences due to not having to censor themselves out of fear of breaking the anonymity of those involved. This increased objectivity also means that project outcomes are less likely to be influenced by a bias towards colleagues and a desire to protect them. For instance, the project outcomes may be more radical or punitive than they would otherwise be in a situation where you knew the people who would be affected by them.

A challenge of working with students who are not known to you is that you have no personal knowledge of their strengths and abilities in the way that you would when working with your own students. This puts greater pressure on the recruitment process and on you to have a clear understanding of what you want students to bring to the role. Additionally, you must ensure that your method of recruitment is robust enough to guarantee that you are able to recruit the correct number of students with the right skills in a good amount of time. When you are working with students who are known to you, in a situation where applications are low, you know students that you can directly encourage to apply. This is not possible when working with students who are not known to you, therefore, you must rely more heavily on accurately identifying effective student communication methods in order to publicise roles more widely.

The approach you take ultimately depends on personal preference and your project goals.

Managing Pre-existing Relationships

If you do to choose to work with your students, there are many ways this pre-existing relationship can be managed.

- Protecting pre-existing relationships is an important goal when engaging in work with students, and it is important that all parties involved are clear about this. This includes parties understanding what is and is not appropriate to voice. It should be noted that protecting these relationships should not be conflated with allowing actions to go unchecked, rather it is about recognising that these relationships will continue in another context and need to be able to so effectively. For instance, failure to protect the relationship between an academic and their student can impede the confidence of the student to reach out to that teacher for help and support in their education. Such a result would contribute to the existence of the degree awarding gap. Additionally, it would see minoritised students bearing the brunt of any fall out all because of their willingness to participate in this work.

- As discussed, the use of an objective third party through a pre-agree conflict resolution process.

- Outlining terms of engagement for all involved and the standards that each party will be held to.

- Boundaries should be communicated regarding the pre-existing relationship. For instance, if the student's role within the project includes holding you to account, it should be made clear to them that they are speaking to you as an equal and as people who have expertise to share.

Power Imbalances

When co-creating with students, it is inevitable that power imbalances will exist. This occurs when between two or more parties, one or more parties are in a position of power that is not equal to the others.

There are many factors that can exacerbate an imbalance including:

- Differences in experience.
- Differences in age.
- Differences in racialisations.
- Differences in gender.
- Differences in project roles.

Power imbalances can impact a project in several ways, including:

- Knowingly or unknowingly influencing project outcomes as people are discouraged from being honest about their experiences for fear of repercussions.

- Similarly, participants may seek the approval of the person (or people) with power and therefore only provide information that correlates with their desired outcome.

- Creating factions among the participants, leading to favouritism and resentment.

- Allowing problematic behaviours to go unchecked, and generally contributing to a lack of accountability.

How can this be mitigated?

- Recognising your own power in the situation. This power has many different sources, including your role within the University (e.g. due to being a member of staff) and your race (e.g. being White). This will help you to understand what needs to be balanced.

- Disseminating power and influence. There are many ways that this can be achieved including through delegating responsibility for key aspects of the project, e.g. having a student present at an event instead of yourself, allowing students full flexibility to fulfil their roles (as opposed to setting narrow criteria based on what you think should take place) and by creating autonomous spaces for the students. There are many ways of achieving the latter, including supporting the students to regularly meet without your presence and not requiring a full breakdown of discussions that are taking place in your absence. This demonstrates your trust in the students and enables them to engage in this work on a deeper level. More information about empowering students can be found later on in the toolkit.

- Building in accountability mechanisms. There are many this can be achieved. For instance, by having an accountability partner or implementing anonymous feedback mechanisms. Alternatively, by utilising check ins throughout the project, all participants have the opportunity to reflect on the project while the project is underway, allowing changes to be made accordingly.

Empowering Students

A key way of addressing power imbalances is by empowering students.

To empower someone is to ensure they have the power, knowledge and ability to achieve something. This is important in a project where you are partnering with students to ensure they have the freedom to create project outcomes that are meaningful, accurately reflect the student experience and will lead to tangible change.

There are many ways to approach achieving this.

Embedding clarity

It is unlikely that the students you partner with will have significant experience working on projects such as this. For many this will also be their first experience of engaging with EDI. One way of addressing this is to ensure that there is as much clarity as possible. This includes clarity of the parties involved, how parties will be working together (and the logic underpinning this), any boundaries and clarity about the project background, aims and outcomes. It would also be useful to highlight how the context this work is taking place in (higher education) impacts what is possible – this is everything from time restraints, reputational considerations to monetary constraints. This will enable the students to feel as though they have ownership of the project and are active participants, as opposed to secondary parties.

Ability to influence

It is important to ensure that students have the influence to impact the project in the expected way. This can be achieved by:

- Creating a dialogue with your students. At the simplest this means ensuring there is an open and effective line of communication with the students, one that is rooted in trust and honesty. This will make them feel comfortable to share any ideas, concerns and thoughts about the project with you. This is especially important for safe guarding reasons as the students will also feel able to communicate their needs with you – for instance, they may not be comfortable with certain behaviours they've witnessed in the group or they might require an extension deadline.

- Establishing a participatory dynamic. EDI work is most effective within a participatory dynamic, one that incorporates the efforts and knowledge of a range of groups. This co-production also deepens the understanding of all those involved by providing an opportunity to learn from one another.

- Creating ‘safe spaces’ for students. Information on how to do this can be found in section one in ‘Guidelines for Creating a Safe Space Discussion’.

- Training for students. As discussed, ensuring participants have the necessary training is important. However, this can be taken one step further by asking your students to identify training they would like. This can be phrased around helping them to explore areas of their skillset that they would particularly like to develop, for instance, public speaking or data analysis. This enhances their learning experience.

Raising difficult issues

Students should also feel able, and properly equipped, to raise challenging issues with their teacher. This may be around bias, concerns they have about how the project is operating or even relevant past experiences. For this to be the case, students must be informed that raising such issues is allowed. In order to reduce how uncomfortable this can be, in any training that occurs for the student, it would be useful to enable them to practice addressing an uncomfortable issue. A process for raising issues such as this should also be outlined in advance to students, for instance, raising them in any one to ones or via email. Depending on the nature of the issue, the student might prefer to have a third party in the room or the opportunity to discuss the issue with a third party in advance.

Following a conversation such as this, there is likely to be discomfort for all those involved. Therefore, it is useful to have methods in place to help parties overcome this discomfort. Ways of doing this include:

- A post conversation check-in. Here you can ensure that parties are okay and thank them for trusting in the process enough to raise an issue.

- Referring them to your third party or another relevant individual to work through any residual feelings and issues.

- A project team meeting where a temperature check can be taken for all individuals. This can also help to reignite passion for the project and remind those involved the stakes of the work that is taking place.

Ensuring the student perspective is centred

This involves ensuring that the project and its outcomes are done with full consideration of what students think and their experience of the area being explored. As discussed, this requires them to have space and freedom to contribute without being censored by your pre-existing beliefs. Ways of doing this include:

- Embedding flexibility in the project schedule to allow students to engage while being students. This means being considerate of their workload and planning projects at times of the year where they have greater capacity.

- When consulting with students, ensure there is opportunity to feedback beyond the scope of any initial questions and prompts as they may be aware of concerns that you are unaware of.

- Involving a range of students is another way of doing this, as it avoids a narrow perspective emerging as the student perspective. For instance, where possible, consider using students from different year groups, different programmes and different ages.

Collaborating with Minoritised Groups

When engaging in EDI work it is important to centre the voices of the affected marginalised group. However, the way you do this is important so as to avoid creating additional harm.

Emotional Labour

Emotional labour is the extra mental energy expended by minoritised groups to suppress their own emotions and feelings in order to engage in work about their experiences. This can relate to work they do to educate or placate others or can refer to engaging in such work in a hostile climate.

For instance, if you were leading a project that was focused on the degree awarding gap, it could be tempting to immediately involve your Black and Brown colleagues in the work – soliciting their advice and support on everything from language to holding space for Black and Brown students. While the support you seek might seem minor to you, when multiple groups are seeking the same support from your minoritised colleagues, in addition to them navigating the harms of the world in general, this builds over time, leading to the emotional labour eroding their wellbeing.

Therefore, a balance needs to be struck between utilising the knowledge and experience of Black and Brown colleagues in projects and safeguarding their mental health and wellbeing.

Ways of managing emotional labour include:

- Clear roles and boundaries. This ensures that those involved in the project have a clear understanding of their role and the standards that they are being held to. This can prevent them from working beyond these limits which is a risk with EDI work. These boundaries can relate to the type of work they are doing to the expected hours that they should be spending doing this work.

- Building rest into the project. This involves creating space within the project for the minoritised groups to step away from the work or to discuss the emotional impact it is having on them. This can also allow them to identify additional support that they require to continue engaging safely.

- Managing expectations. EDI work can be transformational. However, there is often a limit to how transformational. Managing the expectations of those involved about what can realistically be achieved through this project can help manage emotional labour by giving participants an understanding of the true scale of the work, which can deter them from going above and beyond in ways that are harmful to them. It can also help to avoid potential disappointment if they had greater expectations for the project. This is especially true if their higher expectations were not held by other participants.

Amplifying Voices

This is key to ensure that the right voices are the ones leading and shaping the project and its outcomes.

Ways of achieving this include:

- Deferring to the concerns and perspectives of the minoritised group. For instance, in discussions about appropriate language or literature, it can be easy to assume that you know best. However, it is crucial to show respect for the opinions of people whose lived experiences are the ones in focus and deference is one way of doing this.

- Stepping aside to allow them to speak. Depending on the project that you are leading, there will likely be times where you'll be asked to speak about the importance of the project and the need for work such as this. You can amplify their voices by stepping aside from the spotlight and allowing them to speak on the issue and its importance. This will also keep the focus on their experience and the fact that real people are the ones being affected.

- Embedding freedom within the project for them to bring their own experiences. This allows the project to truly be co-created.

- Ensuring that the literature relied on, where possible, is created by individuals from that community. That's not to say that you cannot rely on literature created by individuals outside of that community, just be conscious to ensure that they are writing with an awareness of this.

Effective Communication

Effective communication is important for several reasons including to avoid miscommunication, resolve conflict and ensure all individuals are equipped with the right knowledge at the right time.

This can be achieved by:

- Establishing clear methods of communication and sticking to them. For instance, this might be the use of emails or of communication / project management tools like Microsoft Teams. This is important as it ensures that there is a clear and accurate record of all communication that is taking place. Regardless of the method that is chosen, all participants must be comfortable with the decision.

- Building in review points around project milestones. This embeds within the project plan opportunities to reflect and feedback.

- Where possible, avoid conflict spilling out to the wider group by treating it as a need-to-know situation. For example, if there is an issue that needs to be addressed, in the first instance, try to address it in a private conversation between you, the relevant parties and your third party broker (if you have one).

3. Self Development

Personal Learning

The learning that occurs when engaging in equality, diversity and inclusion is never ending. However, it can still take us by surprise depending on what is revealed to us and how prepared we are for such unexpected, often painful, revelations. A key reason why such revelations are often hard to navigate is that they call into question our identities and understanding of ourselves in relation to the world. They are a painful reminder of the narrowness of our perspective and experiences, as well as the possible harm we may have caused others through exercising our privilege in ways that we were unaware of.

While it is impossible to avoid these learnings, there are several things that you can do to prepare yourself for them.

1) Reflecting on your biases and privileges in relation to the area that you are leading work on.

2) Re-familiarising yourself with useful and relevant literature. This can include literature on foundational theories as well as practical guides on how we can

navigate feeling uncomfortable and how to be an effective ally. Not only does this humble us by reminding us of the stakes of the work that we are engaging in, it will also equip us by making sure that our work is grounded in best practice.

3) Identifying revelations that may occur in this area and challenges that you are likely to face. Following this, you can think through appropriate ways of mitigating them. For instance, if you have chosen to partner with your own students, you might be aware of concerns they may have raised previously. Or you may remember previous experiences where you have poorly responded or felt deeply uncomfortable in the face of certain revelations.

Another issue to be conscious of when engaging in EDI work is how it can be used to amplify you and your career. While recognition for work is important, there is a balance that needs to be struck, especially in a situation where you (as a non-minoritised person) find yourself advancing and being uplifted as a result of the work and struggles of minoritised groups. It is important to be considerate of the real people whose lives are affected by these issues, and whose lives will continue to be affected long after the completion of your project.

These learnings can also happen for the students, so it is important to equip them as much as possible with an awareness of these things going in. For instance, a student who is racially minoritised but cisgender and heterosexual might be confronted with an understanding of their privilege as a result of cis-heteronormativity.

Making Mistakes

Mistakes are an inevitable part of EDI work. The important thing is how we respond when this occurs.

1) Taking accountability. When concerns are brought to your attention, it is important that you take accountability for your actions and acknowledge what has taken place.

2) Rectifying harm. Though this may not always be possible, it is important to speak to the affected party to understand what you can do to minimise or rectify the harm caused by your mistake.

3) Implementing learning as a result of this experience, to ensure that you do not repeat.

A fear of making mistakes should not be a reason to not engage in this work. Only those with privilege are able to disengage like this as they are unaffected by whether this work is done or not. Below is an excerpt from 'Nothing to Add' which addresses this from the perspective of someone with privilege:

> "my need to speak, to address what she had said, despite the probability that I would mess it up, was greater than my guilt or my shame or my desire to remain quiet. I realized that the notion that I can make it worse—that I do have that power— requires that I speak. I realized that, in our silence, we are complicit. In my silence for the past four weeks of this course—and for a lifetime before it—I have been complicit. I no longer feel comfortable letting my silence speak for me—it is inarticulate and offensive. **I would rather blunder along than stay silent. I hope the people around me, who witness my blundering, can see beyond the errors ... because remaining silent— maintaining my complicity—is no longer conscionable** (Student Journal, July 5, 2009)."

At UEL, there is a mostly White staff and a student body that is mostly Black and Brown. For this reason, to not engage in work for fear of making mistakes, will see you putting your desire for comfort ahead of their need for a more equitable educational outcome.

Information on how to be an effective White Ally can be found below.

- An Introduction to Allyship
- An Open Letter to White Allies
- Guidelines for Being Strong White Allies
- White Women: We Are Amy Cooper

Additionally, it is recommended that you participate in the relevant White Anti-Racism Group (UEL internal link). Useful intranet pages include 'Race' and 'Navigating Whiteness' (UEL internal links).

4. Collaborating Online

As a result of COVID-19, online collaborations are the norm for the foreseeable future. Things to be conscious of when working this way include:

- Ensuring all individuals can access any necessary software, such as Microsoft Teams, and that they are trained on this software. For instance, if you were hosting a conference on Microsoft Teams, it would be important for those involved to know how to share their screen or how to be listed as presenters.

- There are less water-cooler opportunities, compared to in person meetings, that could reduce tensions that exist. While this has the benefit of focusing minds, it can result in situations that are more intense and see emotions being heightened. To mitigate this, include planned breaks. They do not have to be taken if not need.

- When facilitating online, to enable individuals to contribute, make use of the ‘hands up’ sign and the chat function. This prevents one person from speaking for the majority of the time and allows individuals to contribute in the way that is most comfortable for them.

5. Concluding the Project

Following the successful completion of your project, here are some recommendations about what you can do to wrap up the project as well as possible.

- End of project meeting. This is a chance to remind project participants of next steps and to solicit recommendations about other possible actions that can be taken.

- Evaluations for all contributors provide a useful learning point especially if you intend to co-create again.

- Identifying project impact. While it is not always possible to quantitatively measure the impact of a project, qualitative measures do exist. For instance, testimonials from project participants outlining how this project has shaped them as people or highlighting why this work is important.

It is important to remember that with every project that is focused on equality, diversity and inclusion that there is always more to do after it is done. For instance, a project on the degree awarding gap will inevitably raise questions about decolonising the curriculum. A project on how accessible materials and education is to students will force us to examine the accessibility of physical classrooms. This is an expected part of the process as all these issues interlink with one another and can serve as the impetus for your next project.

As highlighted earlier in the toolkit, it is important to ensure that the project translates into actual and tangible change. Only through this will the work meaningfully shape the student experience and change our (your) University.

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