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FACE

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"Ultimately proved to be an invaluable learning experience": the development of inclusive student partnerships at the University of Leicester

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Abstract

The University of Leicester's 'Curriculum Consultants' initiative aims to make our students' academic experiences more inclusive, representative and relevant to the lives of those from marginalised backgrounds, through working with current students. The Initiative has taken different forms since its initial pilot in 2019, and there have been challenges within each phase in making it work and in proving success.

Now in our fourth phase, we have a consistent structure that has evaluation built in throughout the process. This article summarises the different structures and challenges we faced in trying to make this a balanced collaboration between staff and students, and have our students' voices truly shaping changes within their curricula, teaching, and other aspects of student support. While our current structure is working for us, this article is not to suggest this format will work for everyone, but to share our learning process and contribute to the conversation on student staff partnerships.

Key words: student partnership, inclusive curriculum, student experience.

Introduction

The University of Leicester has been running the Curriculum Consultants Initiative since its pilot in academic year 2019/20, paying students to work with staff to identify opportunities for more inclusive and representative practice. The format of the initiative has changed through the years, with us taking influence from Kingston University's Inclusive Curriculum Consultants (Kingston University, no date) and their Inclusive Curriculum Framework throughout each phase. However, it was a challenge to figure out an approach that worked for us.

It is important to note that the University of Leicester has a 'superdiverse' student body, with no single ethnicity representing more than half of our students (Canagarajah, 2023). This is reflective of the city of Leicester, which was officially considered a superdiverse city following the 2021 Census, though it was only 1% short of being considered superdiverse in the 2011 Census (Office for National Statistics, 2023). However, as proud as we are of this diversity, it makes matters like awarding gaps feel much more urgent and pressing.

Like many other UK higher education institutions, the University of Leicester is currently working to reduce the awarding gaps experienced by our historically minoritised student groups. For clarity, Leicester follows the use of the term 'awarding' gap in place of 'attainment' gap. Both terms refer to the difference between undergraduate student groups graduating with a first or upper-second class degree, but 'awarding' does not

identify students as the underlying cause of the issue, instead suggesting systemic barriers are creating an imbalanced outcome in degree awarding. There are, of course, awarding gaps between other student groups, but the awarding gap between Black and white students is the most substantial for us. We have managed to reduce this and other gaps such as the gaps between students with and without declared disabilities, and mature and young students, but there is still a way to go. The Curriculum Consultants Initiative sits within a wider inclusive education framework at Leicester, as we are working to correct imbalances that cause awarding gaps rather than simply target numbers, and we will not succeed without students helping us to identify opportunities for change.

The Curriculum Consultant Initiative at Leicester has transformed from a group collaboration to student-led investigations, to students being paired with members of staff, to its current phase of staff identifying projects or needs for the Consultants to shape and lead. With this article, we want to contribute to the conversation other colleagues before us have shaped. We continue to benefit from external students and colleagues sharing their ideas and experiences, and hopefully, if any readers are going through a challenging journey with making their student partnership programme work, they might benefit from our contribution.

Theoretical context: wellbeing and awarding

The initial pilot in 2019/20 was funded by the Centre for Ethnic Health Research (known as the Centre for Black and Minority Ethnic Health at the time), which was looking to fund a project that contributed towards reducing the race awarding gap. This was taken as an opportunity to support a project that considered a link between structural inequality in the curriculum and mental wellbeing.

This was not the first initiative at Leicester that focused on students' mental wellbeing and the impact of operating within a university environment. It was a development influenced by other student support projects and external research taking place. Preceding this project, the department of Modern Languages ran a programme relating to wellbeing which had expanded into a broader support programme. This later influenced a university-wide programme of 'student support workshops' to address issues of students feeling disconnected from their cohort community, and not necessarily knowing where or how to access support for their studies. The pilot phase did not focus as much on mental wellbeing in the project activities, but this background underpinned the intentions behind the changes the pilot would influence.

In running this pilot, we were conscious about resisting assumptions made around the awarding gap, or more specifically, the 'attainment' gap. Using the term 'attainment' implies that the student is seen as the fault or cause of not attaining the same degree outcome as a peer from another demographic. Consequently, assumptions are made about students' abilities and preparedness when it comes to studying at university. There are many issues with these expectations, one of which is how awarding outcomes are not exclusively influenced by skills. Multiple factors affect students' understanding, engagement and success, which may be exacerbated by systemic barriers, such as availability and access to support, economic disadvantage, and implicit bias, that students may have encountered long before arriving at university (Department for Education, 2022). Our longer-term aim from the pilot was to create changes in the curriculum and other aspects of their course that recognised students' skills, backgrounds and interests. We theorised that in embedding this recognition, students' sense of community, empowerment and purpose within the university would increase, which would then translate into reduced awarding gaps.

This interrelation between students' experience and identifying with curriculum content was explored in a separate project at Leicester around this time. The Racially Inclusive Curricula Toolkit was created to provide teaching staff with a resource for understanding how to make their course content more racially inclusive and relatable for students (Campbell et al, 2021). The students recruited for the pilot utilised the toolkit while reviewing module material, which was tested wider in academic year 2020/21. The toolkit was

later evaluated to show that using it helps to improve the course satisfaction for students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds (Campbell et al, 2022).

The approach of the pilot involved the recruited students working as a group to review programme materials and content. Their objective was to suggest revisions and approaches for more diverse representation, inclusive language, and ways for students to relate their interests to the content. Working with students in this format to identify these opportunities was crucial to ensure the development of a learning community that authentically considered students' experiences and interests in the curriculum design (Williams et al, 2021). The group and the overall pilot were led by Dr Emma Staniland, who had been involved in the Modern Languages student support programme mentioned earlier, and Dr Karol Valderrama Burgos. Emma and Karol worked with the students to understand the project's objective, utilise the toolkit, and develop recommendations for the departments that provided their programme content to be critiqued. While the students and staff found the group discussions to be engaging and insightful, the approach to upscaling was unclear. It was difficult to schedule group meetings suitable for everyone, and time was lost in each meeting to reiterating objectives and plans to the students who had not attended previously. There were also limited responses to the request to submit course material for critique. At this time, conversations around the awarding gap and racial inclusion felt new and unfamiliar to a lot of colleagues, so they may not have understood or felt confident about what the feedback could suggest. In considering how to move forward from the pilot, there were discussions of training colleagues within departments to lead a group of students within their own subjects in a similar format to the pilot group. Unfortunately, these conversations took place in early March 2020, and the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic affected our priorities, and we could not progress with the training.

The next phase: partnership and awarding

The second phase of the Initiative took a different approach to the pilot, under the management of a different team, and in partnership with the Students' Union. With the logistical challenges of larger group work in mind, the structure changed to the students, or Curriculum Consultants herein, working in smaller groups of two or three to identify opportunities within their departments. This format allowed the Consultants to engage with a much larger number of departments within one academic year, which was a great opportunity for student voice, and promoting students as partners in the matter of revising the curriculum (Hughes et al, 2019).

However, this format was not without its challenges either; while student voice was certainly at the centre of the approach, it lacked the organisation necessary to maximise the opportunity. As the Consultants were free to choose their focus, a lot of time was lost in defining the scope of their projects. Where projects concluded with a set of recommendations to the department, they were not always suitable. This was typically due to the Consultants making recommendations for provisions or materials that were already available that they had not been aware of. As a result, most of the recommendations had not been put in place, so it was not possible to evaluate the impact. This had the additional consequence of affecting confidence in colleagues who had unwittingly received their recommendations; most of the projects had been conducted by the Curriculum Consultants in isolation of staff members within the department. The intention behind this approach was likely to ensure the prioritisation of the student voice, but resulted in confusion and dismissal when staff were asked to embed these unexpected changes.

We learned this format was slightly more effective when the Consultants were paired with a member of staff who could anticipate their recommendations and advise on existing provisions. In 2021/22, the Initiative came under new management of the Student and Education Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team who worked closely with the Students' Union to try and bridge the gap between the Consultants and their departments. The format did not change too significantly, but this time Consultants were matched

with an academic colleague within the department who would act as their key contact throughout the project. Consultants met with their contacts at the start of their projects to discuss what they wanted to focus on. Staff provided suggestions where applicable, for instance, if they were aware of a significant awarding gap within a module or knew of an issue that received consistently negative feedback from students. This guidance led to the project scope being defined sooner, though there was still some delay while they settled on specific objectives, and as staff had not expected to become a key contact (essentially a project supervisor), they were not always available to support their Consultant, which caused some projects to end before they were completed as time simply ran out. It was exam season, and the Curriculum Consultants' contracts had ended.

We took stock at the end of the 2021/22 phase and reflected on the challenges of each iteration to inform our approach for 2022/23, though the shift truly began in February 2022, before the projects had ended. Tamara Reid, Kingston's Inclusive Curriculum Consultant Programme Lead, presented on lessons learned from student partnership during an online seminar hosted by the University of Westminster's Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation. Reid discussed the training Kingston's Consultants receive, partnership agreements with departments which included a project plan, and working to shift students' mindsets from 'student' to 'project partner' through utilising their experiences (Westminster Students as Co-Creators, 2022). In learning about this structured and consistent approach, the seeds of change were planted for revitalising Leicester's Curriculum Consultants.

Current approach

The first step in the 2022/23 overhaul was to tackle the main difficulties: sufficient support and delayed projects. Previous Consultants had suggested a need for help or training in areas they may not have developed as part of their course and so they did not know what to expect. We started delivering training throughout their roles, starting with what inclusivity in the curriculum and wider university can look like, and moving to more practical training at relevant stages in data collection, data analysis, and reporting requirements. We also needed to mitigate the inconsistent support from staff who had not previously planned the project into their workload. Support from staff within the department was essential for accessing resources and learning what already existed, to result in more suitable and relevant recommendations. For this, we revised our planning approach, which had the additional benefit of reducing the time lost to scoping project objectives; staff who were interested in engaging with the initiative were to submit project proposals ahead of the Consultants being recruited. The proposals provided an outline of a priority concern or area for exploration, which was then fully developed and delivered in partnership with a Consultant.

With this change, projects were now determined by where the proposals came from, rather than the Consultants simply working with the department they were based in. To support this change, recruited Consultants (a total of 12) were 'pooled' and then assigned to projects that were most relevant to them. We understand that awarding outcomes are affected by more than the taught curriculum, so we actively welcomed projects that were not tied directly to the curriculum but other aspects of their academic lives. As a result, we received proposals from professional services teams, and so the department could no longer be the primary criteria for assigning Consultants. Assigning was based on a hierarchy of components: projects aligning with existing research or experience, personal interests the Consultants shared, existing skills, and then the subject in which they are based. For a few examples, a Consultant interested in neurodiversity from their experience as a young carer investigated potential barriers and support needs for participating in seminars. A PhD student with teaching experience investigated engaging teaching practices to inform materials for the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice programme for new academics. A humanities-based Consultant already engaged in promoting equity for Black students worked in a technical subject to identify gaps in support for ethnically minoritised students. The final key change to this

makeover was to approach an issue that had been present since the pilot phase: an evaluation framework for the Curriculum Consultants initiative.

Evaluating student partnerships

Over the past few years, there have been countless in-person and online conferences and seminars where colleagues across the UK higher education sector have come together, shared best practice and discussed challenges focused on inclusive practice and student partnerships. Many of the partnerships had varied names for their student roles, such as Consultants, Advocates, Champions, Partners, though they share the same principles. Many of them also share the concern of how to evaluate; a sentiment reflected by the audience, always keenly listening and ready to ask the same question about how the presenter evaluates it. The answer is more often than not a hesitant admission of how difficult it is to evaluate small pieces of work within the bigger picture of other changes made to the curriculum, teaching style, skill support or other aspects of student life. Similar to the matter of the awarding gap, these issues and activities do not occur in a vacuum. There are other factors within a students' environment that will influence the level of success, and so it is difficult to attribute results to any one factor. There may even be intangible, indirect impacts from changes, where a student does not directly benefit but it makes them aware of some other form of help.

While it certainly is a genuine challenge to evaluate the outcomes of student partnerships, it may be that we are starting with the wrong question and losing confidence at the first hurdle. Here, we are asking 'how' we can evaluate Curriculum Consultants, or similar programmes. But there is another question, which could be more challenging, that should be asked first - 'why?' If you know why you are evaluating (what you want to find out), you will know what you are looking for, and you can then consider the best method of collecting the evidence. As the Initiative changed format and management multiple times, there had not been a formal reflection on what the Initiative was intended to achieve and therefore we had not effectively evaluated whether it was successful. In order to revise the approach ahead of the 2022/23 cycle, we produced the Theory of Change behind the Curriculum Consultants Initiative.

For anyone unfamiliar with the Theory of Change, it is important to clarify that it is not '*a*' theory you can define through a Google search. It is *your* theory of what will happen as a result of your changes. Producing a Theory of Change involves specifying the intended outcomes, and the activities that will theoretically deliver that change (United Nations, 2018). It requires clarifying assumptions and justifying actions, which should be based on existing evidence. In the case of curriculum or university-based projects, evidence can include feedback, previous work, or research. A robust Theory of Change should lead to the development of an evaluation plan, detailing how the success of the outcomes will be proved.

The issue of insufficient evaluation is not unique to student partnership work, but widespread across the higher education sector, despite ongoing investments in projects (Blake, 2022). The Office for Students (2023) hopes to change this by requiring higher education providers to use the Theory of Change in Access and Participation Plans submitted in 2023-24, to build evidence of effective practices. At Leicester, we have embedded Theory of Change-based planning into all activities that will be reported in our Access and Participation Plan, which includes the Curriculum Consultant Initiative.

Ideally, a Theory of Change would be completed ahead of an initiative: when a need (objective) has been identified, a team can consider what success will look like, to inform the best approach to take. However, producing a Theory of Change for an established project is still beneficial for informing planning activities (Andrews et al., 2024); the process is instrumental for challenging and articulating the logic between activities, intended impacts, and the overall objective. Consequently, we produced an evaluation plan documenting where we will look, and our chosen methodologies, to demonstrate the impact of the

Initiative. Having the Theory of Change and evaluation plan offers the added advantage of facilitating informed decision-making and avoiding irrelevant process changes.

Developing a Theory of Change does not have to be a difficult process, unless you have an identity crisis on behalf of the project, asking the room 'but what are we actually *trying* to do?'. After a long and challenging day with our Evaluation Analyst, we now have a Theory of Change, so we can answer why we are looking to evaluate the Initiative (what we want to learn from evaluating), and therefore how we can go about it.

Our Theory of Change

In creating our Theory of Change, it was important to clarify that our evaluation plan looks at the broader Initiative, rather than the individual projects taking place underneath it, which will come later. Having this clear view of the Initiative's purpose helps to ensure we are developing a more inclusive environment, and helps to maintain focus when assigning Consultants to projects that contribute towards this aim. Our Theory of Change is summarised below:

Situation

Across the university, our most substantial awarding gap exists between white and Black undergraduate students. We believe partnering with students to explore ways to make the curriculum and other aspects of their academic environment more inclusive and representative will contribute towards reducing the awarding gap.

Aim

By creating a more inclusive academic environment in collaboration with the student community, we aim to make students feel represented and recognised, and make staff more aware of limited diversity and inclusion in their practice.

For this, we invite students of all levels (from Foundation Year to Postgraduate Researchers, campus-based and distance-learning) to apply for one of 12 paid roles, earning National Living Wage for up to six hours per week. They will collaborate with a member of staff to research specific inclusion issues or execute a project to improve the inclusion within a teaching or professional service department.

We will evaluate continuously with data collection being executed at key stages of the project lifespan, with reports due every year to the appropriate committee.

Outputs

The evidence of our activities will be identified through the numbers of applicants, submitted projects, training sessions delivered and attended, completed projects and their executed recommendations (or reasons for any non-executed recommendations).

Outcomes (medium-term success)

We will look for changes through qualitative investigations on how gaining skills, experience and knowledge impacts individual Consultants' confidence in their academic and professional pursuits, identifying the impact of the executed recommendations, and an increase in submitted project proposals as more staff see the benefits of involvement.

Impact (long-term success)

Through qualitative investigations and quantitative measures, we expect to show that involvement in the Curriculum Consultant Initiative partnership has led to diversified curricula, increased employment skills

for the Consultants, and increased staff confidence in student partnerships and developing inclusive curricula representative of their students.

Evaluation to date

At the time of writing, we are in our second year of operating within our current approach. We are striving for consistency to ensure an effective evaluation, so we have only made small changes to our 2023/24 processes in response to feedback, lessons learned, and for process efficiencies. From 2022/23, we embedded pre-, mid- and post-process evaluation points, combining Likert scale and qualitative questioning. Early analysis suggests we can already see benefits from our more structured approach and it appears to be the most successful format for Leicester's Curriculum Consultants so far.

Having better defined processes has enabled smoother operation. The job description was revised to better reflect the role with examples, which increased the number of student applicants. Defining objectives early meant project activity started sooner. The training provided throughout the projects meant Consultants understood what was expected of them. Clear reporting processes and supervisions ensured Consultants raised issues early. Formal staff and Consultant partnerships led to regular communication and informed decisions. This has resulted in a higher number of recommendations from Consultants, though more importantly, recommendations that were accepted or required slight amendment increased from 59% (13 of 22) in 2021/22, to 85% (56 of 66) in 2022/23.

Due to the cyclical nature of university, at least one semester or academic year needs to pass before students experience many of the changes, so only then we can evaluate the individual changes recommended by the Consultants. The Initiative's Theory of Change does not list specific projects as they have varied goals and differ each year, though the broad delivery of recommendations and subsequent changes are considered long-term measures of success. To support the evaluation of individual projects, the project proposal form for staff and final report template for Consultants were designed with Theory of Change-based questions. These tools help track the original purpose of the project, and relate recommendations to the intended impact, which can be evaluated against longer-term.

Staff experience

Early staff involvement has improved their workload planning and their support of Consultants. It also had the unintended benefit of better student engagement in projects that involved working with current cohorts to learn about their experiences, as the involved members of staff were able to promote these opportunities and encourage participants.

More staff are becoming aware of the Initiative through the promotion of completed projects and colleague discussions. In 2023/24, our evaluation plan will assess staff experiences of support, communication, impact on practice, and confidence in student partnerships. For 2022/23, we received feedback about positive experiences, which led to additional project proposals and interest in publishing articles about their projects in relevant journals.

> *There's no other way we'd have been able to do it and get student perspective. (professional services colleague)*
> *Really appreciate that [the Initiative] gave us the opportunity to work on this kind of project. (academic colleague)*
> *Really valuable experience. (academic colleague)*

Self-reported impact on consultants

We conducted semi-structured, informal interviews with the Curriculum Consultants at the end of their roles to find what they gained through being involved in their projects. The Consultants were overall happy

with the organisation of the Initiative. Most mentioned learning new skills, or applying research skills to real-world scenarios for the first time; this was less typical for postgraduate and mature student Consultants who referred more to strengthening existing skills. A few Consultants mentioned the initial challenge of independence and leadership, though they felt it increased their drive to learn and explore different experiences. They appreciated the opportunity to have an insight into how the university works, and getting to work with staff members as peers, with one commenting on how they felt staff were truly invested in their students' opinions and success. The Curriculum Consultant experience resulted in a couple of Consultants looking for further opportunities for involvement and personal development beyond their projects. We were grateful to hear about their positive experiences with us:

> *Through this project, I feel more integrated to the [department] community (taught postgraduate international student)*
>
> *I really enjoyed the independent working and flexibility… this allowed me to work on the projects and fit it in my schedule (undergraduate Home student)*
>
> *This experience has sparked a desire to pursue this area further and integrate it into my future professional pursuits (undergraduate international student)*
>
> *This was one of the things that kept me going… It ultimately proved to be an invaluable learning experience (undergraduate international student)*

Conclusion

Throughout the different phases, we prioritised making students' voices central to our work, though without a supportive structure managing the activity, we struggled to identify what we were trying to achieve beyond an insubstantial reference to the race awarding gap. We have regained clarity on purpose and method through developing a Theory of Change; the process itself required reflection on what we really wanted to see from the Curriculum Consultants Initiative, and in recognising that, considering whether our plans supported those goals. Now, this framework will keep us centred so if a decision is made to change direction, it will be with purpose.

It is problematic to suggest one project or piece of work will impact on an issue as systemic as the race awarding gap; systemic issues change when the system changes. That is why our more abstract aim is to see Curriculum Consultants, and consequently other students, contribute towards cultural change. We want to see more staff engaging in student partnerships to achieve goals, and learning from students and each other about engaging and inclusive practices. We will start to see it in module-level awarding gaps reducing, more students benefitting from available support, and fewer students feeling out of place in university, instead knowing their department wants them to succeed. Staff buy-in to student partnerships is essential to ensure longevity in the changes, embedding the change to make a difference, even after the student graduates or the member of staff leaves.

It is not our intention to suggest we have found *the* answer to student partnerships or race awarding gaps when we present our progress with the Curriculum Consultants Initiative, least of all because there is no single approach to take. We are optimistic about the current set up and upcoming evaluation of recommendations, though we know it was not a smooth or linear progression to this position and we still have improvements to make. It can be inspiring to watch presentations on creative and successful initiatives, though it seems less common to share when things do not go as well as intended. There is just as much to learn from the less glamorous in-between stages too, so we hope in sharing our journey, we have provided a few ideas to others, and contributed to this ongoing discussion on collaborating with students.

Acknowledgements

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