

Introduction To Special Edition: Access and Inclusion in Work and Learning

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In a recent colloquium that took place in June of 2021

(<https://www.workandlearningnetwork.org/2021-edi-colloquium>) the Work and Learning Network set out to explore and contribute to themes surrounding equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). The aim was to gauge the current practices and the ideas of colleagues in the broad field of Work and Learning. The response from the network made it clear that innovative practice and engagement with inclusive areas of practice were actively being pursued and that these examples could act as models for further inquiry for the network.

Key speakers (Jenny Rodriguez, University of Manchester and Carol Costley, Middlesex University) brought EDI into focus followed by a series of highly illuminating presentations and concluded with a panel discussion that addressed 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 workplaces?

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This special edition, which examines Access and Inclusion in Work and Learning, starts with the abstracts and extended abstracts of the speakers from the colloquium that bring forward some key points, not least, the opportunities provided by experience of work in almost any form to engage people in learning. The power of these practitioner-led approaches speaks to the benefits that a more inclusive experience can bring, especially when guided by the scaffolding of higher education designed for this purpose.

Paula Nottingham introduced the colloquium with a call to action for change, not only to address the network's passion for social justice, but with the need to listen to new voices to find out how network practitioners could add criticality (after Saini, 2021) to research and practice and how to make greater use of personal narratives (after Santos, 2021) to break down barriers and encourage others to share their stories. The speakers considered both the introduction of new ways of working and the role of practitioner led critique to address issues surrounding inclusion.

In this section, we have speaker contributions from Dr Anastasia Christou, who introduces the use of social justice for framing learning in 'Affordances Of 'Unhoming Pedagogies': Reflecting On Two Decades Of Activating Learning And Teaching For Social Justice In UK Universities'. Dr Glenis Wade presents a 'Focus On The Poetry: Exploring BAME Learner Engagement With New Work-Based Learning Reading' exploring the use of alternative sources to make a real difference in thinking about practice. Mary Makinde and Professor Claire Thurgate demonstrate what making progress looks like with 'Closing Our Gap: How a School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work is Improving the Experience of Black, Asian, Mixed Heritage and Minority Ethnic students'. Prof Margaret Linehan in her 'Let's Talk Menopause' makes it abundantly clear that more needs to be done to rebalance the consideration of gender equality in our thinking and 'Creating an Age Friendly University' discusses university wide models of change. Dr Iro Konstantinou and Dr Elizabeth Miller discuss the benefits and challenges of working with a more diverse range of students in 'Understanding The Experience Of Mature Students Completing A Degree Apprenticeship'. Finally, Marty Wright considers the complexity of providing international programming for a diverse range of students during the pandemic in 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Is at The Heart of Everything We Do'.

The next item from Costley, Nikolou-Walker and Nottingham, gives an overview of some of the key issues especially as they relate to experiential learning as a gateway to access higher education. It is recognised that the concept of EDI (Equality, Diversity, Inclusion) has become an important and often mandatory consideration in Higher Education Institutions. The various initiatives have concluded over the last decade in a number of reports, articles and media programmes debating and often contesting the existing nature and function of these terms in the Universities. However, the prominence of EDI though welcomed by both the professional and educational world, is hardly an unproblematic territory – instead its definition and overall function has been severely questioned by both academics and practitioners. EDI continues meaning different things to different people and while this diversity is generally a healthy trait amongst society it can, in this case, become a ‘stumbling block’, which at worse can prevent coherence and progress, unless the points of reference are pragmatic and clear.

This briefing paper represents the views of the authors while attempting to decipher these challenging concepts, we have also tried to look with ‘fresh eyes’ into the intricate and intermingling relationships of practice and education. This also led us to question the exact definitions of ‘Equality’, ‘Diversity’ and ‘Inclusion’, in a number of areas, in both education and practice. We hope that this will be developed further, in order to assist the ongoing and developmental nature of this work find a ‘shared’ voice amongst the different communities who avail of education and practice. This is followed with a piece that defines the different forms of Work and Learning in higher education that can be included in this overview of access and inclusion in the broader field. As we now engage with new ways of developing work and learning practice, a redefining of practice and terms offers a gateway to new practice solutions and pathways.

We send our thanks to all those who took part in the colloquium and the avenues it opened for the network in terms of new practice. We would like to thank the authors presented in this edition for providing these glimpses of what is yet to come in further research and practice. While working in challenging times during Covid-19, the chance to come together to exchange knowledge and experience was a pleasure as well as a call to action.