The ARU Inclusive Curriculum Framework: underpinning principles for an active and inclusive curriculum

Dr Linda Brown (Academic Developer, AL&T), Katie Potts (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Student Services), Dr Simon Pratt-Adams (Principal Lecturer in Academic Development, AL&T) and Dr Julian Priddle (Academic Lead for Learning Partnerships, AL&T).

Introduction

In common with most UK universities, Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) is undertaking significant work to improve inclusivity for our students. This effort is partially linked to curriculum enhancement, which in turn forms a core element in our programme of curriculum change as part of the Education Strategy. Inclusion within the curriculum also underpins our Access and Participation Plan to focus our attention on addressing ‘disadvantage gaps’ such as the BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) attainment gap.

Below we describe the six principles that support and drive our inclusive curriculum. Many of the principles have already been the subject of institutional enhancement, for instance inclusive assessment, and there is a firm foundation for implementing them in the current curriculum change programmes. Conversely, ARU has not yet addressed other areas in a comprehensive manner, such as diversification of the curriculum, and these require further work.

Inclusive assessment practice

Inclusive assessment practice requires careful examination of how students engage with assessment to ensure that all students have equality of opportunity. It enables all students to demonstrate their full potential. Its aims extend the GaIA approach (Good and Inclusive Assessment) designed at ARU to ensure the reduction or elimination of non-inclusive assessment practice.

- Use an updated GaIA tool to support inclusive assessment practice, with alignment of learning outcomes, assessment task, marking criteria and feedback.
- Foster assessment literacy, including the effective use of feedback.
- Examine, and improve where needed, the language of assessment descriptions and feedback/feed forward, ensuring that students are assessed on the task rather than their ability to understand what needs to be done.
• Use in-class activities to 'unpack' **assessment criteria**, therefore allowing ample opportunities for students to question, query and test their understanding of requirements.

• Examine the extent to which the conventions of assessment, such as expected writing style, represent a **fair and valid requirement** or an unfair obstacle that does not uphold the purpose of assessment.

• Reevaluate the **fairness and reliability of marking** to remove, as far as possible, any scope for inconsistency or bias.

**Inclusive use of technologies**

ARU has committed to a **digital strategy** in which technology can enable better learning and teaching, research and engagement. To ensure an inclusive approach, we must consider our own strategies in how we use, teach and incorporate digital resources.

• Use **university guidance** regarding **accessibility** in online content to increase student engagement with your resources.

• Choose digital tools as an **enhancement** to, not a distraction from, teaching and learning. For example, consider the best polling/quizzing tools which meet student needs. Agree with students/other users how often to use them.

• Solicit and act on feedback from users regarding **digital resources within your Canvas space** regarding their appearance, organization, effectiveness and relevance.

• Provide an appropriate space for students to work and interact through online forums and discussion boards. Highlight their role in higher education and co-create a **set of respectful guidelines** (e.g. how do we debate and disagree as opposed to common practice in social media) to promote healthy interactions and meaningful engagement.

• Utilise Canvas collaborative areas (e.g. Groups, Conferences and Collaborations) to foster and support a **sense of belonging** within the module/course.

**Diversification of the curriculum**

Diversification of the curriculum offers students a wider approach to their learning, incorporating opportunities to explore key themes from diverse perspectives. It is based on the methodologies of ‘decolonising’ or ‘liberating’ the curriculum. Whereas ‘decolonisation’ broadens the scope of curricula influences to incorporate more diverse ethnic, cultural and national perspectives, ‘liberation’ embeds a wider spectrum of influences (e.g. themes of disability, sexual orientation, gender or religion and belief).
Diversification can thus be approached in various ways, including through an examination of reading lists, academic sources, class resources, language and biases.

- Utilise opportunities to explore **diverse cultural, national and ethnic perspectives** on key themes throughout the course, including the use of case studies, classroom discussions, slides, lecture content and assessment options.
- Offer reading lists, core readings, in-class resources and study content from- and representing- a **diverse range** of images, sources, authors, cultures and ethnicities as opposed to an overwhelmingly white, male, westernised focus.
- Encourage opportunities for students to develop an understanding of **how their identities are formed** and influenced from a variety of factors such as culture, socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender roles, sexual orientation, disability etc. and how these and other aspects intersect.
- Build in learning which draws on ‘**other’ cultural and historical examples** and accompanying critical comparison exercises.
- Encourage students to undertake groupwork and discussion activities with students from different backgrounds whilst emphasising that **all perspectives are valid**.

**Inclusive classroom practice**

Our commitment to inclusivity encompasses a vast range of experiences for students, staff and the wider community. As we develop and support initiatives designed to inform and embed an inclusive approach, our goal is to encourage excellence in learning and teaching across the board for all students. Good classroom practice involves engaging with digital learning spaces as well as physical ones and utilising the tools and resources available to us as educators in order to offer a truly inclusive classroom experience.

- Monitor for **clarity of language** to encourage student engagement with oral, written and visual communication and resources.
- **Utilise learning outcomes** to tie module elements together. Integrate transparent and open communication opportunities to encourage students to recognise and benefit from this alignment.
- Inclusive practice will benefit all students; however, some students have specific needs which are communicated via the internal **SoRA (Statement/Summary of Reasonable Adjustment)** process. Ensure you are aware of any **specific needs** which will need to be accommodated.
- Use **accessibility guidelines** consistently. Additionally experiment with making learning and teaching resources inviting and usable.
• Adapt to less-than-perfect teaching spaces by manipulating—when possible—lighting levels, background noise, distance between you and your students, length of time students sit, etc.
• Use techniques such as pace-changing, chunking activities and movement around the classroom to hold your students’ attention and encourage their engagement with learning.

An academic culture for inclusive learning

Our University works within a scholarly framework in which students and staff are partners in a learning community. The framework has various conventions that embody a learning culture – ‘how we do things’. This learning culture may be hard to penetrate for some students, requiring us to do two things to minimise disadvantages. First, we need to communicate our requirements with clarity, and support students to meet them. Second, we need to ensure that our scholarly framework does not impose standards that lack practical-or academic- validity, thereby unintentionally creating obstacles for some students. The following suggested areas seek balance between establishing expectations and supporting all students while maintaining academic standards:

• Clarify and incentivise pre- and post-class tasks, highlighting the student’s responsibility for their own learning. It may be unfamiliar to many students who are new to UK higher education to engage in independent (self-directed) learning.
• Encourage students to become partners in the learning community and establish positive learning relationships to enhance their sense of belonging.
• Agree clear expectations with your students regarding respectful discourse in class, group work and online, and model it for them.
• Provide examples of (and explore topics surrounding) online discussion, email, and peer feedback to ensure students know how to communicate in written form with you and each other.
• Scrutinise teaching resources, assessments and marking criteria to ensure clarity, validity and authenticity within them.

Personalised learning

Personalised learning requires interventions based on a mixture of targeted support to address conditions such as low social capital and behaviours such as low engagement. Effective use of analytics data on engagement and academic attainment can potentially effect a personalised approach to address the specific needs of individuals, rather than targeting/emphasising/focussing on a student’s backgrounds or characteristics. ‘Self-help’
tools such as the engagement dashboard can be effective if students fully understand their data and can access appropriate support.

- Design and implement a data collection process to ensure that data on students are collected and held in a way that makes it possible to build a **useful individual profile**.
- Identify specific needs early: design an effective and meaningful assessment of each student on entry, including formative assessment on induction (or pre-arrival), to **target relevant support and interventions**.
- Utilise the Personal Development Tutorial (PDT) process to provide a **strong personal review process**, and incorporate a rolling action plan as part of each student’s portfolio.
- Ensure, via an **upgrade of analytics**, access for both students and staff to data that support students in achieving their full potential.
- Integrate study and other skills **within the curriculum**, for instance by linking focused online resources to assessment tasks in Canvas.

For more information contact Anglia Learning & Teaching.