PROFESSIONAL SERVICE TEAMS' ROLE IN SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

Report produced by the Teaching and Learning Academy based on work undertaken by an LJMU student intern, Courtney Atkins.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to identify how professional services can contribute further to inclusive practices in LJMU. The focus is on the inclusive curriculum in its broadest sense but with acknowledgement of an institutional drive towards the decolonisation of the curriculum. Decolonisation is accomplished through uncovering unconscious biases, restructuring reading lists and course material, and changing the way in which teaching is delivered. Consequently, decolonisation can be seen as a feature of an 'Inclusive Curriculum' with the principles, processes and outcomes serving a wider inclusion agenda. A key steer for this project was discussion in the LJMU Attainment Gap Council. This recognised a role for professional services in decolonising the curriculum, but noted that most of the support (and associated responsibility) for work in this area was aimed at Faculties and academic staff. It is acknowledged that professional service teams will have different levels of engagement with students. Some may have little direct contact with the student body. However, this report is based on the assumption that all professional services staff should recognise the importance of inclusive practice.

The research approach

To understand the potential for professional services to contribute to curriculum decolonisation and wider inclusive practice, a literature review was commissioned to scrutinise both academic and 'grey' literature in this area. Much of the latter focused on university websites and publicly available Access and Participation Plans. The review was supported by data gathered from a series of interviews with both LJMU and external professional service teams.

LJMU staff from across the organisation's professional services were interviewed. These focused on representatives from services that have most direct impact on students. The specific services involved included:

- Academic Registry
- Corporate Communications
- Estates
- Library Services
- Outreach
- Student Advice and Wellbeing
- Student Futures
- The Teaching & Learning Academy

A review of websites identified a few universities who were active in this space. These were approached to be interviewed, with three accepting - Keele, Westminster, and UWE Bristol. The University of Liverpool and SOAS were not approached as they had already been in discussion with colleagues from the Academy regarding curriculum decolonisation.

A post-graduate student intern, supervised in the Teaching & Learning Academy over a period of three months, undertook all research.

What is 'decolonising the curriculum'?

Decolonising education is the act of rethinking, reframing, and reconstructing courses and research to move away from a colonial lens. Decolonising the curriculum calls into question institutional hierarchy and knowledge, shifting from a Western framework to incorporate all cultures and knowledge. It also challenges the way information is taught and how it defines the world. Efforts to decolonise the curriculum have been noted across the Sector. Universities have adopted a variety of approaches including strengthening staff comprehension of the concept (Keele University, 2018), engaging all staff in decolonising activity (DeMontfort University, 2021) and developing collaborations between academic staff and students (University of Brighton, 2020). Hence, decolonisation has become a cornerstone of inclusive practice in many universities. It is argued that curriculum decolonisation benefits universities as it not only supports the development of curricula that are more representative, but also challenges how providers think about education. It empowers people to make changes, resulting in a more inclusive, egalitarian, and diverse learning environment. Conversely, conventional curricula may leave students and staff feeling unrepresented and less able to connect with their peers, which can inhibit outcomes. An inclusive approach can benefit all of those involved, as individuals respecting differences can enrich the lives and learning of everyone (Hockings, 2010).

Many universities have explicitly championed curriculum decolonisation. A variety of initiatives have flourished. A common feature of these is the development of decolonisation toolkits. These have been established across the Sector. Notably, the *Decolonising SOAS Toolkit* (SOAS, 2018) appears to have been adopted or adapted for use in several institutions. A common feature of these toolkits is that they offer a set of suggestions on how to decolonise teaching and learning, at both individual and organisational level.

Many universities also have Equality, Diversity, and Inclusivity (EDI) teams and strategies to ensure that they build environments in which everyone feels comfortable and valued. In some organisations, the development of EDI strategies involved significant consultation with students and staff (e.g. University of Nottingham, 2021).

Despite the growth in decolonising the curriculum initiatives aimed at academic staff, it is evident from the research undertaken for this project that there appears to have been little interrogation of the role that professional services currently play and could play in the future. Notwithstanding the diversity in the structure and function of professional service

teams across the sector, their role in supporting students, alumni, and academic staff would suggest that this is a considerable opportunity.

FINDINGS

Analysis of information from the literature and interviews has identified six core themes related to the professional service role in inclusive curricula. These are:

- The relative 'invisibility' of professional service teams.
- The student journey.
- Training and support.
- Tendency to view student engagement from a provider perspective.
- Staff/student communication.
- Responsibility of their role/identity.

THEMES

1. The relative invisibility of professional service teams

There is a likelihood students from underrepresented groups may not be part of networks that help them to navigate their university journey. In this case, it is beneficial for the university to make all its services as visible and accessible to students as is possible. However, the data indicated a strong sense that professional service staff can feel 'invisible' in their universities. This was identified in local and national interviews as well as the literature. There is a tangible example of this in LJMU: *whilst there is easy access to the profiles of academic staff, professional services staff have little or no presence on the institutional website*. This was mirrored in a review of organisational websites from across the sector. Professional services staff also commented on the challenges of meeting students, specifically in the induction week where there is an understandable focus on introduction to lecturers. It was acknowledged that induction week could be a stressful time, with little retention of the information provided. Hence, a better alternative might be for relevant professional services to meet with students after they have settled in. This would complement LJMU's online induction resources. As it stands, there are relatively few opportunities for students to meet staff from teams that they may benefit from engaging with.

2. The student journey

Understanding 'The Student Journey' has become a common mechanism used in universities to shape and target resources. The student journey method involves creating a student roadmap that explains the stages that students go through as they enter, progress and graduate. Options available to completing students, such as postgraduate study and employability, indicate a role for professional service teams to work with alumni or returning students. The Canterbury Christ Church '*Student Journey Map*' identifies relevant professional services contacts at each point of the university experience.

When it comes to the student journey, there will be specific students that may need help at different times. For example, Bunce et al (2021) found that black students are more likely than their white peers to face challenges such as isolation, lack of belonging, and financial issues. Therefore, targeting extra provision for BAME students in such areas may support academic success (Smith, 2017). However, it is widely acknowledged that targeting students can be problematic. Grouping students into categories such as 'BAME' treats individuals as a homogenous group. This may result in interventions and resources being misdirected, and those with specific needs being unsupported (Office for Students, 2019).

Another issue faced by many minority students in their student journey is the lack of representation in leadership and role models. At each student journey milestone, students should feel comfortable and relatable to those around them. In the absence of better representation, working with student advocates and the Student Union can be beneficial. That said, such work could result in an additional burden on specific students or members of staff who are members of under-represented groups.

To summarise, a student journey approach can help relevant professional service teams identify need and target resources (Oputa & Cross, 2021).

3. Training and support

The literature and interviews suggest that universities understand the importance of professional service teams in the student journey. However, in many instances, training and resources were seen to focus on academic staff. Training often fails to take into account the context of a professional service role. For example, the SEDA-sponsored training at Keele was designed specifically for academic staff, although it had elements that could be applied to professional services. In that apparent gap, members of professional services frequently report attending workshops, lectures etc. outside of their job role to better understand the needs of students. Toolkits designed to support inclusive practice are predominantly aimed at academic staff, and academic processes, and lack focus on professional service teams. The availability of such toolkits and checklists for professional service teams might support efforts in those areas to enhance inclusive practice.

Many universities provide inclusivity training. Yet there is a lack of evidence of how effective the training is. Most universities appear to offer some variation of unconscious bias training. In many instances, this is online. Such training may be seen as a 'tick box exercise', designed to demonstrate compliance without providing clear evidence of meeting equality requirements (Bhopal, 2020). Williamson & Foley (2018) argue that unconscious bias training is seen as "the silver bullet" but can lack effectiveness. Others suggests that it is effective when delivered in the right way. Nancie (2020), for example, found that face-to-face unconscious bias training sessions, specifically using role-play, were valuable in uncovering biases grounded in an individuals' everyday experiences. Training may also address an issue raised in interviews: that staff can feel uncomfortable asking questions for fear of potentially offending or upsetting someone. In some instances, this might discourage people from engaging in activities or taking the initiative on inclusion.

Although there is some evidence of the value of unconscious bias training, it is not always mandatory. Alternatively, it is required at the outset of employment but not repeated or developed. For the training to be effective, it needs to continually refresh as inclusivity is a dynamic concept that changes over time (Noon, 2018).

Inclusivity is relevant to all levels of the academic ecosystem. In light of this, it is notable that many organisations rely on external players to develop and deliver training. This could send a confused message relating to ownership of the concept. The literature suggests that there is no valid explanation for universities bringing in external organisations to train their own staff (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018).

4. Tendency to view student engagement from a provider perspective

The research suggests that teams often respond to under-utilisation of services by addressing perceived limitations of students from less advantaged backgrounds. Recognition that minority students tend to underutilise the careers services, for example, has led to a range of initiatives to encourage minority students to use these services. These included activities to increase students' confidence (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017). Simpson & Ferguson (2013) found that offering more flexible provision helped. In addition, making services more visible on social media improved uptake (Kettunen et al., 2015). Whilst these are potentially useful changes, they suggest an approach that is focused on adaptations to existing delivery, without addressing broader structural and cultural reasons why some groups appear less inclined to engage (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017).

5. Staff/student communication

The literature reflects the importance of staff-student partnerships, especially in relation to inclusivity. Most universities seem to offer some form of staff-student partnership in this area. This is demonstrated in, for example, collaborative work with student unions, student internships, volunteering opportunities, societies, or mentoring. Such partnerships are beneficial to staff, students, and the wider organisation. They provide opportunities for learning and reflection on the opportunities for, and challenges of, inclusive practice. Whilst a lot of this work is aimed at academic staff, there are examples of such partnerships involving professional services teams. Direct work with professional services can provide significant insights. For example, at the University of Surrey, a staff-student partnership with library staff forged links between the service and students that is not a feature of conventional academic practice (Stephen et al., 2020). In LJMU, senior staff and young black students were involved in a reciprocal mentoring scheme. The aim of this was for both parties to discuss concerns and challenges faced by black students. It supported the development of senior leaders' understanding of the issues they faced.

The risk of NOT working in partnership with students is that inclusive practices, such as decolonialisation, may become tokenistic gestures that fail to authentically challenge the hierarchies in knowledge creation/access to services that they were designed to address. Yet, partnerships are not without limitations. They should be based around articulated

principles of co-creation to reduce the risk of staff teams driving the agenda (Bovil et al., 2016). Furthermore, without the support of university leadership, partnerships may not be sustainable.

6. Role responsibility / identity

'Professional services' is an umbrella term for a wide range of roles and responsibilities that exist to support academic teams in the delivery of a university's strategic agenda. Therefore, university success does not just rely on academic staff (Karp, 2011). It follows that responsibility for inclusive practice is not the preserve of academic teams. Non-academic staff facilitate performance outcomes and have an important role in the students' journey. It is important to ensure that professional service staff accept this responsibility in their role (Baltaru, 2019). This can challenge some professional service teams, particularly in roles that seem 'removed' from students. Many professional services are student-facing, but equally there are 'backroom' services that are not immediately specific to universities and arguably exist in any similar large scale corporate organisation. Staff in these areas can feel disconnected from the student experience. At issue is how all university staff recognise their role and responsibility to be inclusive. In interviews, many respondents suggested that a proportion of their colleagues did not see this as part of their role. There were reports of members of professional service teams being reluctant to engage with ideas such as decolonisation. They did not see this as relevant to their profession and pertinent to their institutional responsibilities. This raised questions as to whether inclusive practice should be explicit in institutional job descriptions.

There was also a perception that the university did not facilitate a sense of collective responsibility. The development and dissemination of initiatives could overlook professional services staff. This was exacerbated by the lack of an obvious route of communication to and between professional services teams. An outcome of this was that team members struggled to develop or maintain collaboration with other professional service teams. As a result, exchanging ideas, developing best practice, and identifying areas for improvement may be stymied.

In addition, it can be difficult to understand the responsibilities of the professional services due to the titles given to some roles, compounded by the aforementioned invisibility of those roles on the LJMU website. This aligns with an argument put forward by Melling (2019) that job titles in professional services are important, but that a combination of vagueness in the title and misunderstanding of the audience can frustrate and demoralise staff.

The research also mirrored findings from the literature that professional services staff from a minority background may find themselves more likely to be involved in supporting students from those backgrounds (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). This adds an additional, and often unrecognised, burden on their time. It reinforces the need for all staff to act as allies in the support of their peers and LJMU students. Interviewees in LJMU acknowledged that a relative lack of diversity in professional service teams made allyship an even more

important feature. However, these needed to be complemented by proactive attempts to employ and promote a more diverse workforce.

Finally, the literature has shown that leadership is an important aspect in any university, specifically having role models in authoritative positions. Those in leadership positions need to be dedicated to inclusivity and diversity. This reinforces top-down capacity for change and development.

WHAT LJMU IS ALREADY DOING?

There are a variety of inclusive practice initiatives in place in the University. The list below is not presented as comprehensive. It highlights those specifically identified in this research that may have most relevance to professional services

- Research
  - "Access to and Support from Counselling and Mental Health services for BAME students" aims to identify barriers to accessing mental health services and improving supportive delivery of mental health services. This is an internal research report being completed by the Student Advice and Wellbeing Services.
  - "The BAME Student Journey –Mentoring for Success", which aims to improve the progression, retention and attainment of BAME students.
  - The Attainment Gap Council have supported a large scale, cross-institutional project to scrutinise the student journey and assess barriers to success of student from minority backgrounds.
- Targeting white privilege
  - Involving student advocates and student union representatives from different backgrounds to provide a range of voices in decision-making.
- Reciprocal mentoring scheme
  - Responding to perspectives of black students and educates LJMU staff to identify change.
- Safe spaces
  - Addressing awkward and uncomfortable concerns involving race, ethnicity, gender, disability and any other concerns.
- EDI champions
  - Promote EDI related opportunities in each faculty and professional service departments.
- Staff-student partnerships
  - Creating internships for students and professional service teams
    - Including research on decolonisation of reading lists, introducing BAME students to enhanced employability skills, assessing existing careers resources to determine how inclusive they area
- Careers speakers
  - Speakers from minority backgrounds discussing employment experiences and success stories.

- What's my story?
  - Pictures around the university to reflect the student body and reflect the personal nature of education through the celebrating of individual stories.
- Academic skills providing a more inclusive approach
  - Incorporating academic skills into modules to build support into curricula.
- Student Advice and Well-being
  - Advisors embedded into each faculty
  - Online workshops to increase accessibility
- Outreach
  - Strives to close disparities in higher education for underrepresented groups
    - Including summers schools and reduced academic offer for ambassadors

WHAT OTHER UNIVERSITES ARE DOING?

Aside from interviews and email communication, many of the examples of work from other universities came from publicly available information, notably websites and Access & Participation Plans. The information provided in these is often limited and designed for an external audience. Consequently, it is more likely to celebrate than criticise. Hence, the activities outlined in this are presented as an indication of the range of initiatives in the sector with no claim to their efficacy.

Access and Participation Plans outlined a relatively standard range of practices associated with equality, diversity, and inclusion. Training, with a particular focus on unconscious bias, often online, was very common. Likewise, the provision of core EDI modules for staff and/or students were popular. These was very little discussion about the content of training or where responsibility for development lay.

Professional services that were most explicitly referred to in Access & Participation Plans were *careers* and *library services*. This is possibly due to the close association between these and student outcomes such as success and progression.

Some universities outline more distinctive activities and practices. These are listed below:

- DE MONFORT
  De Montfort University's strategy on decolonising the curriculum has a particular focus on the library. This included providing more representative printed and digital resources, as well as examining how the design of library spaces and services can be support BAME students. Another focus was increased opportunities for staff and student voices to be heard. This involved workshops on decolonisation, team talks and sharing good practice. It was noted that the latter were more specifically aimed at academic staff.

- KEELE
  Keele University won training and research funding from SEDA to identify and address barriers faced by students. Training was aimed at academic staff, but they

suggest that findings may also apply to professional service teams. Other training includes a 'white allies' programme, to challenge white privilege and Bystander training. Training is supported by provision of a "safe space" where both staff and students can ask potentially uncomfortable questions to educate themselves.

The University also has an e-learning programme called KIITE-E that focuses on inclusive practice-related staff development. This is aimed at teaching staff.

Keele's EDI strategy (2018-2022) calls for inclusive practice at all levels of the organisation, along with an active move to become an anti-racist institution. Work in this area includes a BAME staff network with an associated student society.

Other initiatives in the university include:
- A social media campaign to improve understanding of certain topics, such as Ramadan.
- A BAME role model network.
- Collaborations between estates and the EDI team to make the university a more inclusive physical space.
- The creation of a dedicated professional service EDI team to increase engagement with EDI initiatives.
- The creation of an anonymous reporting tool.

Last year, Keele reported a large reduction in their attainment gaps. Work is underway to establish the extent to which these initiatives have supported this reduction.

- UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER
  Toolkits have been created in each subject area to support decolonisation of the curriculum. The University has a focus on 'othering' that examines how HR and managers engage with non-white workers and how they can prevent micro-aggressions through unconscious bias training. An internship scheme provides opportunities for student interns to decolonise the reading lists. A steering group of academic and professional service team members, with external membership, manages the project.

- UWE BRISTOL
  The University's Advance HE accredited postgraduate certificate in academic professional practice aims to increase inclusive practice for staff, although only 10 out of 120 course members were from professional services. Inclusive practice workshops have been available to all staff, including the professional service teams.

- MANCHESTER
  Voluntary in-person and online training packages are provided, with additional external training that can be taken up by the staff.

- KENT

  An EDI forum on WhatsApp where staff and students can openly discuss any current issues regarding EDI. The forum also offers a space to share best practice from other universities.

- LANCASTER

  Mandatory diversity training for all staff within their first 3 months of working at the University. Additional support is provided through further training, an EDI network and online resources.

- SURREY

  Unconscious bias training has to be completed prior to recruitment of any staff. A 'SEED' network provided a place where ethnic diversity is discussed, issues raised, and good practice shared.

- ST ANDREWS

  Inclusivity and Decolonisation Toolkits are used across the university. This includes an admissions toolkit to support inclusive practice in the admissions teams. Human resources have an equivalent inclusive recruitment guide.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Appraise practice and establishing an evidence-base for enhancement.

1. Whilst toolkits and checklists can be seen as reductive, they offer a quick way to review activity. Toolkits for curriculum design exist, and are being used. However, there are no specific toolkits targeted at professional services. Consideration could be given to developing or adapting toolkits for use with professional services to support inclusive activity.
2. Inclusive practice can be understood through inclusion-focused research that assesses the organisation, activities and perceptions of staff and teams related to diversity (Lister et al., 2020). This can show areas of strength and weakness in service delivery. Individual professional service teams could undertake such a research as part of an institution-wide interrogation of its commitment to EDI.
3. Evaluate student engagement with, and perceptions of, professional services. Ongoing evaluation of all professional services will help the organisation to identify areas for service improvement.

Refine institutional processes

4. Comprehensive student journey mapping to identify where need lies, whether in academic or professional services.   Importantly, examining this journey in terms of the experiences of students from diverse background can help target resources, as well as reviewing the suitability of existing resources.

5. To ensure that major policy developments reflect institutional priorities associated with inclusive practice.

Raise profile of professional services.

6. The creation of a professional service team directory, with staff profiles, to raise awareness of the relevant service, what they offer and who staff are. This will support efforts to demystify the role of various teams in supporting the student experience.
7. Mechanisms to introduce relevant professional services staff to students, this could include opportunities for more staff from professional services to engage with the student body through, for example, clearing, induction and graduation.
8. Review EDI network and membership to increase representation from professional services.

Encourage greater understanding of the student experience.

9. Expand reciprocal mentoring scheme to include staff in non-management, professional service roles, and involve students from other underrepresented groups.
10. Increased opportunities for students to undertake in-house internships/placements in professional service teams. In this way, professional services staff can gain greater understanding of student concerns.

Student: staff partnership and the student voice.

11. Provide opportunities for students to interrogate and inform professional service delivery.
12. Identify inclusive practice projects where students and professional service staff can work together to enhance practice.

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