What makes an inclusive learning environment? An exploration in how students define the assets they think support an inclusive learning environment

1. Introduction

Higher Education has long been thought of as a meritocratic space, a place that affords everybody who enters it, the equal opportunity to achieve their potential. However, increasingly we are being presented with evidence that suggests this is not necessarily the case. Reports on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) highlight differences in outcomes and experiences for students from low socio-economic groups, disabled students, and those from black and minority ethnic groups (Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015). Robust analysis further demonstrates these groups achieve lower rates of attainment and progression even after controlling for other potential influencing factors (HEFCE 2015/21). As is the case across the sector, these differences are evident here at Manchester, with students from low socio-economic groups, and those from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups, both home and international, experiencing differential outcomes (Swain, 2013). The University of Manchester is committed to ensuring that all students are able to thrive regardless of their background. This is evidenced within the University's Manchester 2020 strategic objectives, where action on differential outcomes has been identified as a priority in goals related to teaching and learning and social responsibility.

This collaborative project between the Universities' Equality and Diversity Team, the Centre for Higher Education Research, Innovation and Learning (CHERIL) and the Student's Union responded directly to HEFCE's 2015 research on differential student outcomes (including attainment gaps for different ethnicities), particularly recommendations to involve students in tackling these issues (Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015). It took place between December 2015 and December 2016 and aimed to examine understanding of an 'inclusive learning environment' from a students' perspective.

2. Methodology and Findings

In contrast to a deficit model the project focused on capacity and used a co-production model to:
- Reframe attitudes to inclusive learning environments towards an asset based co-production model (New Economic Foundation, 2008).
- Map the individual, community and organisational assets that support inclusive learning environments (Krezmann & McKnight, 1993)
- Analyse the experiences and attitudes of participants to further understand narrative on assets (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).
- Mobilise assets to further develop, maintain and sustain inclusive learning environments (Hopkins and Rippon, 2015).

Reframe

In February 2016, the Project Manager worked with the Students Union and the School of Social Sciences and Arts Languages and Cultures to recruit one PHD student and eight undergraduate students onto the project team as peer researchers. Using the employment model identified by Roche, et al (2010) it was decided that peer researchers would be brought on board and paid to work on different elements of the project. Of the nine members of the final project team five self-defined as BAME, four as white, two as disabled, three as overseas and two as coming from a low-socio-economic group.

All peer researchers received a series of development sessions; they were introduced to the issues underpinning the need to take action, a session on unconscious bias, and the broad methodological approach being taken and effective facilitation skills. Following this the project team worked together during four development sessions to design a participatory asset mapping session, which the peer researchers would facilitate with a group of their peers at a Student Think Tank event.

The Think Tank Event was held on the 9th March 2016 at the Academy 2 in the Students Union. The event was advertised to all students within the School of Social Sciences and Arts Languages and Cultures. Over one hundred students expressed an interest and forty-five attended. 5% of those who attended did not provide any equality information; of those that did 70% were from a BAME background, 40% were from overseas, 65% were female and 2% declared a disability.

The session was split into two main parts, in the first session there were a selection of speakers including Malia Bouattia the then president of the National Union of Students (NUS) on 'why inclusive environments are important'; Paddy Turner senior lecturer at Sheffield Hallam on 'Environmental Impact and Inclusive Practice' and an interview style session on 'Higher Education and Beyond' between Erinma Ochu, Social Responsibility Fellow Innovative Public Engagement and Jessica Creighton a journalist from the BBC and co-founder of Rainbow Noir, an LGBT group for people of colour.

Feedback from the event was very positive and all of the sessions were well received. The majority of students enjoyed the interactive elements of the day and appreciated the opportunity to discuss the issues, one student said *'I really enjoyed the chance to share ideas with my group and everyone got involved'*. It was clear from the feedback that a number of the students would have like to have had academic staff from their Schools in attendance so that they could discuss the issues with them and feedback on some of these issues directly, *'the only way this could have been better was if we had some lecturers from different backgrounds, that way we could talk about these issues with them'*. Another theme from the feedback was that students wanted to act on their ideas and take them forward, *'what we need now is another event where we arrange to do some of this'* and another noted *'please let me know how I can be involved in doing something like this'*. The feedback forms also provided some constructive views on the structure of the day and ideas on how to engage more students.

Map

During the second part of the session, working in pairs the peer researchers facilitated four asset-mapping sessions with between ten and twelve fellow students. All participants were provided with information sheets, which outlined the purpose of the event and, in line with the projects ethics plan, were asked to sign their consent to take part. As part of the development process the project team had developed a session guidance sheet to act as a prompt and ensure a consistent approach in all the sessions. The peer researchers presented a series of definitions, which had been developed by the student team, to their groups.

An Inclusive Learning Environment has been defined as *'A community where everyone feels welcome and can come together to be inspired, learn, live and grow to their full potential'* and an asset as *'any attribute or resource that helps to create an inclusive environment where people from all backgrounds are supported to learn, grow and succeed with equal opportunity'*.

Participants were encouraged to discuss what inclusive environments meant to them and what individual, community, and organizational assets they considered could support such environments. They were also asked to identify what they considered to be potential assets and make any observations they thought relevant.

Analyse

Table 1 provides an overview of the mapping data collated at the event, the information has been grouped into categories and themes, and they provide a structure to the more detailed narrative on inclusive learning environments.

The analysis process was undertaken in four key stages, using an adapted version of the strategy identified by Ryan and Bernard (2003). It uses an inductive approach involving thematic content analysis of data collected. The first stage of the process began with peer researchers facilitating discussions that allowed the participants to reflect on what assets had been identified, adding to them, and identifying some emerging key themes. The second stage further developed these themes and identified sub categories in a session between all members of the project team. Thirdly an inductive approach was used to identify codes from the narrative, which spanned across all of the categories. Fourthly these codes were then linked to the asset based theoretical framework developed by Krezmann & McKnight (1993)

Mobilise

The purpose of these activities had been to examine understanding of an 'inclusive learning environment' from a students' perspective, so that we could identify actions which could help develop, maintain and sustain inclusive learning environments.

To do this, members of the project team and student peer researchers considered the thematic analysis and associated narrative from the mapping exercise and feedback from participants at the think tank. The conceptual framework identified in the HEFCE's report *'The Causes of differences in student outcomes'* (2015) was used to identify the areas where actual or potential assets could be used to take action on inclusive learning environments. Listed below are the actions for consideration by the Schools, the Students Union, Peer Support, and the University Residences. Appendix 1 provides further detail and extracts from the associated narrative.

Table 1 : What makes an inclusive learning environment? University of Manchester student asset based assessment March 2016, thematic analysis categories, and coding framework

Themes	Assets		(Krezmann & McKnight, 1993).
	Individual	Community	Organization

Support
    Peer Support
    Academic Advisors / Tutors
    Family & Friends
    Lectures
    Study Spaces
	-Sense of belonging
	
	-Sense of purpose
		-Networks
		
		-Affinity groups
			-Safe spaces
			
			-Participation

Engagement
    Students Union
    Events
    Volunteering
    Feedback
	-Resilience
	
	-Creativity
		-Safety
		
		-Tolerance
			-Promoting equality
			
			-Resources

Accommodation
    Security
    Events
	-Sense of contribution	-Inclusion	

Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

- The Schools to consider the possibility of recording all lectures for podcasts or some other similar method
- The Schools to ensure the location of all safe study spaces are communicated to students in a variety of ways, paying attention to those spaces that are available in Schools
- The Schools to consider what action is taken as a result of feedback through the student satisfaction surveys and how this action is communicated to students
- The Schools to consider creating safe spaces to work with students to develop action plans on improvements to teaching, learning, assessment, and feedback and identify how action taken can be communicated to students in a timely way

Social and Cultural Capital

- The Peer Support within the Schools to consider the diversity of their peer mentors in relation to their student profiles and if necessary identify positive action initiatives to recruit a representative pool
- The Peer Support within the Schools to consider how mentors are matched with mentees, potentially identifying simple profiles on mentors and requirements of mentees based around the intended outcomes of the peer support programme.
- The University Peer Support Team to consider the training provided to mentors on diversity and inclusive practices, in particular inclusive events
- The UMSU Student Societies to consider the training provided to members on diversity and inclusive practices, in particular inclusive events
- The UMSU Student Societies to consider targeted advertising in Schools based on student profiles and to provide more regular opportunity to join throughout the year
- The UMSU Executive Team to examine the systems in place that support engagement with all students and ensure the quieter student voice is heard.

Relationships

- Schools to identify and share good practice on student engagement from academic advisors / tutors within the Schools and externally and share, what it takes to be an effective academic advisor
- Schools to consider training and / or a communications campaign on the importance of inclusive student engagement for academic advisors / tutors.

- Schools to consider a communications campaign on the importance of engaging with your academic advisors / tutors for students
- The University and the UMSU to consider a cultural celebration of diversity, employing students to work alongside staff to organize an event that brings the University and the local community together.
- The Schools to consider local student led and staff supported, small scale events that brings students and staff together to socialise and celebrate diversity and inclusion
- The University Residences to consider more locally based events throughout the academic year that bring people together to connect and form network of support with each other.
- The University Residences to consider ways to identify and discuss if students do not feel safe or connected in their accommodation

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Discussion

In considering to original project deliverables we have:
- Developed a co-production participatory asset mapping and evaluation methodology, which can be used by others in the sector. A toolkit has been developed that includes hints and tips on inclusive recruitment practices for students, including a positive action intervention to ensure representation of all groups. Induction and training sessions and resources for student researchers on how to facilitate an asset based mapping exercise to identify activity that supports inclusive learning environments. These resources will be used as part of a HEFCE funded student ambassador programme, led by the University in collaboration with Manchester Met, the University of Birmingham, and all of our respective Student Unions.
- Held a think tank that brought staff and students together to introduce the key issues and concepts and inclusive learning environment and held a series of asset mapping session. Forty-Five students attended the event and four mapping sessions took place. In addition a video was made to help communicate and present the work.
- Provided a series of considerations for the Schools involved, the Students Union, Peer Support, and the University Residences.
- Staff and student peer researchers presented the activity undertaken as part of the project to colleagues from other institutions across the sector, including those from the HEFCE, the OFFA and the ECU, at the Higher Education Race Action Group annual conference in London. In addition the project has been included in the HEFCE report on 'Sector Leading and Innovative Practice in Advancing Equality and Diversity' (HEFCE, 2017).

To what extent this approach has instigated change has been considered by utlising the model developed by Hopkins and Rippon (2015). The project has brought staff and students together in a variety of ways to reframe attitudes to inclusive learning environments, map the individual, community and organisational assets; analyse feedback and identify ways in which potential or actual assets can be mobilized.

One of the major challenges of the project has been timescales. The CHERIL funding decision was announced in November 2015 and due to the student timetable (Christmas and Exams) we were unable to recruit student peer researchers before February 2016. This really set the project back considerably and made the developmental process a real challenge. Due to the limited opportunity to effectively engage with the student population I would suggest that future projects begin in July, to give enough lead in time to allow staff to set up the project and get buy in from colleagues and be ready to start recruiting students at the beginning of the academic year.   I would also suggest that projects require such involvements from students be allowed to span two academic years. This would ensure that students remain involved in all elements of the project.

We had hoped to invite a selection of student participants to present the findings to the Faculty of Humanities Equality and Diversity Committee, however due to tight timescales and the limited availability of the students in has not been possible. Further we had hoped to bring students and staff together to hold a dissemination event, where this information could be shared and understanding of these issues discussed. However as the timescales had slipped so considerably and students have moved on to their third year, in most cases, they are all too busy with their academic studies.

That said the feedback from the student peer researchers and the students involved in the think tank have been incredibly positive. The students who had the opportunity to attend and present at the HERAG conference in London found in very rewarding and one said *'this is one of the best experiences I have had on my course so far'*.

What I would do differently, is to build in a more robust evaluation method. We have been able to evaluate the outputs of the project and general feedback from students; however we have not been able to tie this to student outcomes in any statistical way.

In terms of impact, this project has, along with other work undertaken by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team, led directly to a successful funding bid the HEFCE Catalyst fund to ['Addressing Barriers to Student Success'](#).

The Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Student Ambassador project has been funded by the HEFCE to scale up and establish diversity related student ambassador programmes within the University of Manchester's (UoM), the University of Birmingham's (UoB) and Manchester Metropolitan University (Man Met).

All the programmes will aim to improve outcomes, specifically attainment and student experience, for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students. To meet this aim the project will:

- Increase student's sense of belonging and build meaningful relationships between students and between students and staff (academic and other) through the development of internal and external networks
- Create safe spaces to have a dialogue on inclusive learning and teaching environments, academic support and teaching on their course and wellbeing.
- Empower students to tackle the negative effects of stereotyping and micro-aggressions and safely challenge racism, sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination on campus.

This project will benefit from all of the resources and learning from the CHERIL project and includes a robust evaluation method.

Appendix 1

Teaching, learning and assessment:	
Consideration	Assets
• The Schools to consider the possibility of recording all lectures for podcasts or some other similar method	Support – Lectures – Inclusive - Resources
	Blackboard and lecture podcasts were mentioned on several occasions as an accessible way to either catch up on missed work to re-visit something at a later date. One student said '*English is my second language, lecture podcasts help with this*' another noted '*it should be compulsory that all lectures are up online*'.
• The Schools to ensure the location of all safe study spaces are communicated to students in a variety of ways, paying attention to those spaces that are available in Schools	Support - Study Spaces – Inclusion – Safe Spaces – Resources
	Many students identified the Alan Gilbert Learning Commons (AGLC) and the Libraries as assets. The AGLC was described by one as '*an inclusive easy to access space to meet and study*'. It was felt there should be more common areas in Schools and better information on what's currently available as one student noted '*I'm in my second year and I've just found out there's a common room in our School*'.
• The Schools to consider what action is taken as a result of	Engagement – Feedback – Sense of Contribution - - Sense of purpose - Participation

feedback through the student satisfaction surveys and how this action is communicated to students. • The Schools to consider creating safe spaces to work with students to develop action plans on improvements to teaching, learning, assessment, and feedback and identify how action taken can be communicated to students in a timely way	Several students noted student satisfaction surveys as *'an opportunity to highlight any current problems'* and give *'information about the course the authorities need to make change'.* Others seemed to feel frustrated that they could not see any action being taken *'they need to actually take action of feedback given in the surveys, not just take it'* another noted *'they ask for this feedback and then it's gone, where does it go, what happens, nothing'* another student suggested *'why can't we work with them [staff] on a plan to change things, make things better'*

Social and cultural capital	
• The Peer Support within the Schools to consider the diversity of their peer mentors in relation to their student profiles and if necessary identify positive action initiatives to recruit a representative pool • The Peer Support within the Schools to consider how mentors are matched with mentees, potentially identifying simple profiles on mentors and requirements of mentees based around the intended outcomes of the peer support programme. • The University Peer Support Team to consider the training provided to mentors on diversity and inclusive practices, in particular inclusive events.	Support – Peer Support – Resilience – Affinity Groups - Inclusion – Participation – Promoting Equality
	Peer Mentoring was highlighted by many of the students as a source of support, a way to *'help me achieve my goals'*, *'build my resilience'* and *'feel included in what's going on'.* However it seemed to work well for some and not others *'Peer mentors should organise events that are more accessible for everyone, not just about alcohol, and think about times when everyone can attend',* one student noted that when they had suggested this, they were told to *'get over it this is University people drink'.* One student said *'my mentor hadn't even done the same course as me, they had no idea what I was talking about'.* Another noted *'it's a good idea, but you should be able to have a say in the person who's your mentor'* another *'As someone from*

	a less privileged backgrounds, I didn't feel like I fitted in and it wasn't compulsory so I didn't bother'.
• The UMSU Student Societies to consider the training provided to members on diversity and inclusive practices, in particular inclusive events • The UMSU Student Societies to consider targeted advertising in Schools based on student profiles and to provide more regular opportunity to join throughout the year	**Engagement - Students Union – Sense of Belonging – Affinity Groups** The Students Union was cited as a place that increased their sense of belonging by providing opportunity to participate in societies, groups, and activities and build networks with others that shared a common interest or goal. A number of the societies that worked to support and take action for students of colour were highlighted and students felt this provided opportunity to be around people *'in the same boat'.* A few students felt that there should be more opportunity to join societies and groups, *'the problem is if you don't join [a society] right at the start of the year, that's it you've missed your chance'.*
• The UMSU Executive Team to examine the systems in place that support engagement with all students and ensure the quieter student voice is heard.	**Support - Students Union – Tolerance – Social Justice - Promoting Equality)** The way in which the Union created an *'international atmosphere, which promotes equality and respect'* was also important to many. A number of the participants felt that the students union was not accessible to everyone, with *'hierarchical systems in the union'* another felt *'it takes the views of a few students with loud voices'* another noted *'The SU need to make sure the Exec team are more accountable on how they engage all students'.*

Relationships	
• To identify and share good practice on student engagement from academic advisors / tutors within the Schools and externally and share	Support - Academic Advisors / Tutors – Sense of Belonging – Inclusion – Participation
	Support from tutors was seen by many of the students as important; one noted *'when tutors have time to speak with me and make me feel like I'm important'.* It was felt that the engagement from tutors in the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures and specifically those in history *'helped students achieve their full potential'.*
• To consider training and / or a communications campaign on the importance of inclusive student engagement for academic advisors / tutors.	
• To consider a communications campaign on the importance of engaging with your academic advisors / tutors for students	It seems the support and encouragement provided from tutors can be patchy, one student noted *'the majority of students and staff on my course are middle class and privately educated … I find it hard to know what they are talking about half the time.*
	As a working class student, I don't enjoy my course due to this hierarchy'
	Another noted *'all academic advisors and tutors should undergo training that strongly encourages getting more involved with students and being less indifferent'.*
• The University and the UMSU to consider a cultural celebration of diversity, employing students to work alongside staff to organize an event that brings the University and the local community together.	Engagement – Events – Volunteering - Sense of Belonging – Sense of Purpose – Inclusion – Networks – Promoting Equality
	Social events held by the Students Union were also seen as an opportunity to meet new people and build meaningful relationships. Social events in Schools such as the School ball were also seen as important.
• The Schools to consider local student led and staff supported, small scale events that brings students and staff together to socialise and celebrate diversity and inclusion	There was a very strong feeling that the University should employee students to work with staff to organise cultural

	events that celebrate diversity, *'cultural celebration event that includes students, locals & non-locals to help integrate communities'* *One student noted 'Hire students to put on and organise events. Many of them struggle to find part-time paid work'* and another *'A place for students to put on live shows music performances, comedy gigs, art exhibitions etc and should be accessible to all, not just society members - not everyone want to be part of the student union'.* A number of students also wanted to organise more events that celebrate diversity and provide an opportunity for people to come together and make friendships on their course. One noted *'Sometimes it's hard to make friends with people on your course'* and another noted *'we should be able to plan events based in Schools not just the Student Union'.*
• The University Residences to consider more locally based events throughout the academic year that bring people together to connect and form network of support with each other. • The University Residences to consider ways to identify and discuss if students do not feel safe or connected in their accommodation	Accommodation – Security – Events – Sense of Belonging – Safety – Networks – Inclusion - The security that University halls provided was highlighted by a number of students as helping them feel comfortable and able to concentrate. Others felt the community feeling and friendships also helped with belonging, *'it's my friends I live with in halls, they're not on my course, it's good to meet other people'.* Yet other students didn't feel as connected and some felt there should be more opportunity to organise social activity.

	One noted, *'there should be more social events organsied in halls, things that bring people together'* and another *'the University should find some way to connect people together in accommodation. A lot of people feel lonely / conflicted and left out due to things such as extent of social life and interests'*.