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Lessons from Covid: The small steps taken in the matrix of inclusion in Higher Education by hearing the Voice of the Student with disabilities.

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Abstract.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to report on a university's internally funded research that was set up to examine the success of assessing learning within inclusion strategies across business studies courses. It also presents on the responses that needed were highlighted as a result of the disruption to students' learning by the impact of COVID-19.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Within the social mobility model of disability, people are disabled by the *barriers* they face, not their impairment. A multi-method, qualitative approach, was undertaken, with our discussion framed from within a reflective critical, conceptualised, sociological perspective.

Findings

While the findings revealed how the researched university had made considerable progress in many aspects of its inclusion strategies, the research also revealed some further barriers to inclusion. Some of the barriers were shown to be 'cracks in the digital curriculum' that affected not just disabled, but all students, whereby students were unintentionally excluded. In this article, we report on how the university had responded to students' requests and through a series of small steps, we discuss the positive impact of these actions. Although the changes instigated did help to improve inclusion, the small steps taken also highlighted the need for much more work to be undertaken on the journey to a fully inclusive university. The recent impact of the Covid pandemic forced/accelerated the implementation of digital learning. This in turn, instigated a rise in the awareness of mental illness and the effects of social isolation which is now much higher than pre-covid.

Research limitations/implications

The main limitation of the study was that the sample was small, however, the in-depth qualitative approach showed how the issues that had been problematic had been resolved and illuminated the further areas for future research.

Practical implications

The research reported here presents the practical steps that were taken in response to the students' inclusion requests. The students' requests were addressed, where practical and/or possible for students to have assessment choice, further support from the wellbeing team, and a further strengthening of local partnerships with the National Health Service and local charities.

Social implications

The research supports inclusion initiatives in higher education and society.

Originality/value

This study strengthens/builds upon the existing literature on the impact of COVID-19 on the teaching and learning of all students and specifically those with invisible disabilities, by presenting the small steps in changes to the curriculum that can improve inclusion practices.

Key words: covid, inclusion, disability, curriculum, diversity, higher education

Introduction

In this article, we draw upon recent research (2019-2024) into issues in learning and teaching in inclusion strategies and the impact COVID-19 in these strategies, in a post-1992 university in the United Kingdom. The article is structured as follows. First, we show the importance of reflection and explain the reasons for conceptually framing the reflective discussion on Barnett's (2011) three metaphysical voices of the role of the university of the future. Second, we discuss the background and context of the study and third, we explain the aims, objectives and methodology, followed by a presentation of the findings from hearing and responding to the 'Students' with Disabilities' Voices.'

Reflection and Barnett's (2011) Three Metaphysical Voices

Reflection is an aspect of metacognition, a broad term that is used interchangeably in research fields within different disciplinary areas, but it can be defined as the process of organised thinking that is critical to successful learning (Dewey, 1933, Flavell, 1979). Dewey's (1933) research is frequently acknowledged as laying the foundation of research into how people learn, developed further by Schön's, (1992) studies of reflective learning. In his research on reflective practice, Author (removed for review 2018) argued that reflection is complex and challenging and that reflexivity is a critical process of all, individualised learning in inclusive practice.

Within reflective conceptualisation, therefore, we thus, frame the discussion on Barnett's (2011) three metaphysical voices of the role of the university of the future. In terms of what higher education is for, however, Hansen (2020) adds a fourth Voice, that of the '*Ethical Callings'* to Barnett's (2011) three metaphysical Voices of *Skill*, *Knowledge* and *Being*. Hansen (2020: 52) argues that future university teaching should allow the voices to develop through an "elaboration of the phenomenology of wonder" by addressing 'delicate problems' rather than 'wicked problems' as the challenges facing higher education are frequently termed (Hansen, 2020). Our research findings, however, also conversely illuminated the *wicked problem model* that we have termed the 'matrix of inclusion' and thus, alongside Hansen (2020), we add a fifth Voice to Barnett's (2011) metaphor. Whereby we add the *Students' Voice of Inclusion,* and it is the *unintended exclusion* during online learning that we sought to redress in the small steps that were undertaken.

In our paper, we use the term *exclusion* to mean *estrangement* from the curriculum. We use the term exclusion in this context to encompass the feelings the students used to describe how they felt during unintended 'cracks in the curriculum' that emerged during the forced enhancement of digital learning technologies during the Covid pandemic. These cracks were exposed during the Covid-19 global pandemic as universities scrambled to find alternatives to

face-to-face teaching. These alternatives included shifting to education online and enhancing the online learning presence. However, these online teaching practices were inconsistent and determined by the interaction of the teacher with learning technologies (Authors removed for review, 2021).

We now present our argument as follows. We start with the background to the research to support the reasons for the small steps around learning and teaching that were undertaken. We then offer an exploration of the issues the findings present in the extant literature and conclude with our recommendations and support for the continuation of the small steps to redress unintentionally, excluding students.

The background and context of the research

We highlight and showcase the small steps in assessment in curriculum change that can lead to a strong, positive, impact. The research reported here was conducted in response to initiatives that were introduced to address the findings of a study that examined students' feelings of being *included* at two post-1992 universities, termed Universities 'A' and 'B' in the research (Authors, removed for review, 2020). In response to the students' inclusion concerns, the changes thus instigated addressed students' requests. The requests were, where practical and/or possible for students to have assessment choice, further support from the wellbeing team, and working to strengthening local partnerships with the National Health Service and local charities. Responding to these requests resulted in recommendation for further staff development training for personal academic tutors to help raise awareness of when/how students may require help and support (Authors, removed for review, 2020).

The follow-up study reported forthwith, was therefore conducted to both reflect on the adjustments, but also to investigate the strength of the development and improvements that were made. In 2020, however, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic spread throughout the world and governments attempted to halt the virulent spread of the virus by closing all non-essential institutions and universities had to move to online teaching and learning (Gov. UK, 2023). The findings from this study contribute to the emerging literature on how the emergency remote teaching and virtual learning impacted on all students, especially students with visible and non-visible disabilities (please see *inter-alia* Sutton, 2021; J.-F., Pullen, Bown, Siang-See, Nelson, Heywood, Doa, Yang, Winberg and Reck, 2024**).**

Although the developments noted above had been put in place, the impact of COVID-19 that resulted in a move to online study, however, unearthed a much deeper problem for inclusion, that is, when utilising digital technologies as a learning tool.

Literature Review

The research into inclusion policies, therefore, reported in this article started in early 2019 and continued throughout the changes put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and into the revised return to class-room based teaching up to and including 2024. At the time of writing up in 2024, the impact on health of COVID-19 continued with many people suffering from episodic illnesses, similar to invisible disabilities (Anderson et al 2024).

The negative impact on health suffered by people with long-term COVID, is similar to people with invisible or episodic disabilities. To understand the impact on lives of fluctuating good health, due to periods of illness, the episodic disability framework was designed in 2008 by O'Brien, Bayoumi, Strike, Young, and Davis, when they researched the impact on lives of people with HIV/AIDs. Since 2008, this framework has been utilised by research to

understand the experiences of people with other episodic illnesses such as depression and anxiety and chronic pain (Sutton, 2020,Campbell et al 2022).

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, (Gov.UK, 2020) universities had to explore how best to move their teaching online. The impact of COVID-19 meant that universities, in response to government legislation, moved to 'lockdown' and all buildings were closed, with face-to-face on campus teaching forced to move to online provision. The university, given the pseudonym *University of Lockdown-Hybrid* has always fully understood its responsibilities and capacity to respond to supporting students and quickly provided online teaching. Governments released advice pages, for example, in the UK, the Government produced the document 'Guidance for the public on the mental health and wellbeing aspects of coronavirus (COVID-19)'. This document offers guidance and links to supportive organisations at the time of the crises (Gov.UK, 2020, 2023). Despite the robust response from the University, the move to digital teaching therefore, highlighted 'cracks in the curriculum' such as lack of acknowledgement for space to learn, unequal access to digital technology and difficulties some students, not just disabled students, experienced without the structure provided by physically attending the University. The contradictions and tensions have engulfed HE leading to a romantic notion of returning to an idealised version of HE which does not embrace the learner who has invisible disabilities or is classed as 'neuro-divergent' (Hillier, Goldstein, Murphy, Trietsch, Keeves, Mendes and Queenan, 2018).

By introducing policies on equality, diversity and inclusion, universities have responded well to students' demographic changes; the relationship to intersectionality has perhaps, not been fully acknowledged. Therefore, this *unintended exclusion* is, in part, related to the woven fabric of intersectionality theory, whereby the complexity of the inter-related relationship of multiculturalism and social justice crosses complex cultural identities (e.g. social class, gender, race, hidden disabilities). Students with disabilities, therefore, may also share the detrimental experiences of oppressed identities which may lead to anxiety through the experience of discrimination (Smooth, 2013; Harpur, Szucs and Willox, 2023).

This has led to frustrations and isolation for those who are not neuro-typical. We argue this has been amplified during the Covid-19 global pandemic and the mixed messages from the Office for Students. Academic staff with invisible disabilities share the students' frustrations of not being heard (Alexander 2024). Invisible disabilities such as depression and chronic pain were amplified during the pandemic (Campbell et al, 2022, Anderson et al 2024).

It is within this context that we sought the views of staff and students. The empirical data was gathered in two ways, firstly by inviting students to share their personal histories of feeling 'included' and secondly working with students and staff in focus groups alongside formal digital integration projects. The digital learning/curriculum review projects involved all students not just those with a disability. The methodology purposely avoided talking *about* students, but sought their voice through consultation and collaboration. We wanted to find out what they felt about their experiences and what systems had been put in place to address areas of concern to them and their colleagues/peers. Obtaining their views would help to explore what small steps could be implemented to positively impact on the student experience. In the next section we present the context of the study.

Since the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2010 and further amendments in the Equality Act 2010, the current research literature on inclusive education practice stresses the importance of anti-discriminatory practice and the implementation of inclusive practice in higher education; despite progress however, policy flaws and lack of implementation remain across the higher education sector (Wray and Houghton 2019). Working in partnership with

the students, our initial research examined our transition initiatives, quality processes and assessment procedures to see how best to address some unintended omissions to inclusive participation. The findings of the initial study and further analysis of the related literature were presented at the Research Conferences and in an international journal (Authors, removed for review, 2017; 2018;2019; 2020). In summary however, we note some key points below.

A person is classified as 'disabled' if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and a 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to undertake 'normal daily activities (The Equality Act 2010). Universities' Senior Management at the University (termed *University of Lockdown-Hybrid* in the research) and throughout the UK have endeavoured to develop systems and practices to ensure equality for all staff and students (Barkas, Armstrong, and Bishop 2020; Ross, Schneider and Walmsley 2014). Despite these good intentions, reports appeared in the media of an 18.7% year- on- year increase in students losing study time through anxiety related issues (Weale 2019) with an increase in non-completions (Johnson quoted in Jenkins 2020).

Despite the robust response from the University, the move to digital teaching therefore, highlighted 'cracks in the curriculum' such as unequal access to digital technology and difficulties some students experienced without the structure provided by physically attending the University.

In these circumstances, the sudden move to online teaching during the pandemic was managed well and quickly and this service has been maintained. While *University of Lockdown-Hybrid has* always fully understood its responsibilities and capacity to respond to supporting students, as in the higher education sector as a whole, it has been unable to predict and respond to all the challenges that have arisen (Barkas, and Dixon-Todd, 2024; Bengtsen and Barnett, 2020, Formica, 2020). It is within this context that we sought the views of staff and students. We wanted to find out what they felt about their experiences and what systems had been put in place to address areas of concern to them and their colleagues/peers. Obtaining their views would help to explore what small steps could be implemented to positively impact on the student experience.

In the next section we state the aims and objective of our study, followed by the methodology.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the research was to improve the university experience of staff and students and in particular, students with non-visible (mental health)/non-apparent disabilities and special learning needs.

Objectives:

1. To investigate how small changes in the curriculum and the learning environment can support the University's inclusion policy to support all learners and address the issues highlighted by the move to online learning during COVID-19.

2. To ascertain what staff development could more effectively help support disabled students.

3. To engage students as partners in our community of practice to develop staff development resources in wellbeing and mental health.

3. To integrate transition initiatives into the first-year UG programmes.

Methodology

Ethical clearance

Whilst the nature of the support, guidance and help provided by well-being and student support services is confidential, the number of self and academic referrals to the student support services are recorded for quality assurance purposes. The research was categorised as 'low risk' and ethical approval was obtained.

Multi-method qualitive methodology

Drawing on Denzin's (2017) critical inquiry model, we conducted a multi-method qualitative methodology and worked with students as partners in the research process. As part of a suite of shared staff development resources between faculties and support services, we invited students to contribute as researchers, to the literature review and also to create their own life history. Internal reports were reviewed, surveys were circulated to staff and students and students were invited to submit their 'life histories' of their time at the University. While the students were happy to openly talk about their frustrations, only five were willing to talk about their time at the university. A small sample of just five student life histories were then evaluated in order to obtain a rich data source.

Questionnaires

Since the start of the project, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that teaching had to move online, so it was necessary to review the related information that affected the curriculum delivery in a digital format and so a further questionnaire was added to our existing choice of methods.

Method.

A multi-method qualitative approach was utilised as follows: institutional and national reports on issues on inclusion/students' mental health/digital learning were reviewed.

Pilot study

A pilot study of an 'open question' survey was designed and circulated to Business Management students to ascertain students views on the help/support provided. The pilot study invited volunteers to complete the questionnaire.

University and faculty wide questionnaires

This was followed by a university and faculty wide questionnaire that was distributed to all students to ascertain their views of the move to online teaching.

Life histories and students as co-researchers

Business Management students were invited to share their 'life histories' and work with the authors on the project. We asked for their 'feelings' about their study and suggested they might like to write about each year but otherwise wanted the students to write their 'story' in any way they felt was appropriate.

Staff participation

Staff were invited to meet with us/send their comments on any aspect of student support/inclusion and adjustments to the curriculum. A detailed report was provided to *University of Lockdown-Hybrid* Faculty Management (2021, Research Report on Inclusion, Unpublished and the follow-up meetings were presented to Faculty Management during formal Faculty meetings in 2022 and 2023.

Responding to students' needs/support

In terms of supporting students' needs, this was primarily focused on the support required from the tutors to develop the skills and knowledge around the subject discipline; this included reference to employability and career readiness. There were comments made about flexibility of study and the need for more online resources (for example, eBooks).

When asked what their needs were, this ranged from the need for more support from their tutors to access to tutors, academic resources, career services. There was also reference to the need for recognition of outside influences and their impact on their studies (for example, childcare and supporting their children in home-schooling, and the balance between studying and having space and time to fulfil care responsibilities).

Improvements needed

When asked what could be improved, there were comments made in terms of organisation, more advice and support in terms of study guidance, recognising the reasons behind non-attendance due to conflicting responsibilities. The following comment captures a clear theme from this pilot study:

> 'Module tutors could be uploading all lectures/workshops/reading lists at the beginning of the semester so those who cannot attend/do not have time to do the set reading in the one night we are sometimes given have more of a chance to keep up.'

The quote above captures the prevailing theme from the pilot study, in terms of the competing pressures and impact this has on 'full-time' students' ability to balance study and 'non-study.' There is the inference within the responses in terms of flexibility, support required and recognising the priorities given to home life and studying.

Figure 1. Summary of the key aspects that students' valued:

1. Support from tutors.
2. Flexibility in terms of study patterns.
3. Material and support required to study to be made available earlier.

78 students who stated they had a disability, responded to the open question survey and 5 students provided detailed life histories.

Questions on the move to online teaching

As Covid-19 led to the transition to online learning there has been a number of key changes, at the university, including the appointment of Digital Learning and Teaching Leads (DLTL) and one of the authors of this report is the School of Business and Management DLTL. In this capacity, feedback was collected from the undergraduate, post-graduate and degree apprenticeship students on their experience since moving to online (there were 78 responses). This feedback was collected to inform decisions around hybrid learning approaches for the

following academic year, which was 2020-21, however from this feedback there are some themes which inform and support this study conducted from 2021-2024.

The themes were related to those who had found the move to online learning beneficial, as it allowed them to work from home, however there were many who did not enjoy the experience and terms such as *'anxiety,' 'apprehension,' 'abandoned,' 'uncomfortable' 'bad,' 'not engaged,' and 'I don't like learning this way.'*

Students with atypical sleeping patterns lacked energy at unpredicted times, and this added to their anxiety.

There were respondents who missed the interactions with their fellow students, other comments were made about interactions face-to-face. There were some who did not enjoy the online learning environment and this comment below captures the anxiety which existed for some of the learners:

> *'Anxious and uncertain. The (Virtual Learning System) VLE system is too messy. I get confused while using the discussion board.'*

The survey was designed to discover how we could develop our online learning practices and it was recognised by the comments on the survey there was confusion in the use of the LTI tools, there needed to be more interaction between students and other students, a clearer timetable for learning opportunities, return to classroom teaching with smaller number of students. While many students were using social media such as WhatsApp groups, excluding staff. Although these groups help to improve students' sense of belonging, the comments cannot be moderated by academics in real time. Of course, the appropriateness of academics sharing students' communications this way can be interpreted across many different levels. On the one hand sharing an online community in WhatsApp can be positive, but on the other, students not in the group may feel excluded.

From the survey it is evident there is a split between those who enjoyed online learning and those who prefer face-to-face classroom teaching. Some of the words used do express the stress, anxiety and feelings of abandonment which were amplified due to Covid-19 and the transition to online learning.

Summary of the key issues students raised:

1. Hybrid learning: mixture of online and face to face to delivery
2. Collaborative learning (online and face to face)
3. Consistency in use of online platforms and LTI tools
4. Clearer instructions and support for online learning including the structuring of learning including the layout of the Virtual Learning Environment

Of the 78 responses, 5 students agreed to meet to talk about their academic life histories. The next section includes insights from the five students' academic histories.

As noted above, the questionnaire was shared with students on undergraduate, postgraduate and work-based learning programmes. Even though the response rate was lower than anticipated there was a cross section of views from different ages, ethnicities, genders and stages of academic development. The questionnaire captured the unintended frustrations of online learning during the pandemic. The inconsistency in scaffolding learning. For example: how canvas sites were designed differently and as one of the authors of this paper was the Digital Learning and Teaching Lead during Covid his role was to respond to the feedback from the students and support the staff in designing inclusive online learning material which

placed thew student at the centre of the learning. These small steps supported the students and considered the diverse range of learners on our programmes. The impact on digital education practices of staff is still evident today as staff are now designing VLE's which consider being and becoming inclusive. The impact on the learners is still emerging as Covid had an impact on how students learn, their expectations of how they are coached, guided and supported during their learning journey.

5 Students with invisible disabilities 'Academic life histories'

The students shared their experiences over the 3 – 4 years at the University of Sunderland.

With permission from the students, the full transcripts were recorded for the unpublished research report.

Over the past three years, the University has introduced a number of measures across student support, administration, and the curriculum. While these have been generally positive, a number of issues stand out from the students' views. The 5 Academic Life Histories illuminate the students feelings about their studies and while many of them are currently being addressed, a more consistent approach could be helpful. The issues of concern noted in the academic life histories, also reflect the current findings in the questionnaires, some examples of comments are as follows:

Timetable.

The timetable was a concern to students as noted in the examples of comments below:

"Throughout my university experience I was vaguely concerned that many lectures and classes were interrupted for varying reasons, student union, study abroad, masters degrees, placements etc. With such little contact time (Only 9 Hours a week on a full-time course) having the minimal time we did receive being taken over for topics that did not apply to my situation was irksome, if I had been pre-warned I would have been able to use the time to do personal study, however these interruptions were very rarely forewarned".

Assessment and presentations

Assessment and presentations are a major and often under-appreciated source of stress for students with or without a disability, as the following comments suggest:-

"*Over assessment, particularly too many presentations and group work."*

"Too many presentations all the time."

"Presentations should be optional."

"During one group assignment a team member told me that he wouldn't put much effort in as this was his "dump class," meaning of the 6 modules only the top 5 marks count towards the final classification, he considered this the class he would get the worst marks in so would not make much of an effort, which would jeopardize my mark too".

Team tensions such as expressed above, are often underestimated and where one or two individuals do not contribute, can have a negative impact upon the remaining team members.

"I feel like seminars with group presentations never ever work. Tutors would ask us to either prepare a presentation before the seminar or we would take time out of the seminar to work on the presentation and it would be presented either at the end of the seminar or the following week. The material that we would do the presentations on also wouldn't really be that relevant so no one would really put themselves out and make some sort of an effort. More hands-on work usually works better in my opinion as you get a proper understanding of what you are studying; Tutor X was often good at creating seminars which focused on this. Using seminars which also factored in the assignments were also good, reading academic articles in your seminars helped at the end of the assignment when I had to research as this reduced time."

"Creating your own assignment should be banned there should be 3 designated options that you choose from if that is the style that the lecture wishes to use".

We believe that if academics and senior managers know about the concerns students expressed from year one, and their impact on student welfare, further careful consideration to the decisions made on the learning and teaching strategies can be undertaken. We summarise below the key issues the students raised in Table 1:

Table 1. Key Issues from the students' Academic Life histories

Year 1 Enablers	Inhibitors
Information readily available, very clear	Timetable not flexible for mature students with families/work commitments
Staff supportive and helpful	Skills/Personal Development over emphasised not needed for mature professional students who may not need so much attention on this
Move to online, generally good	The demand for skill and professional development for students to take on extra work such as volunteering, not practical for mature students or others with jobs
Year 2 Enablers	**Inhibitors**
The value of the Excellence Grant	Inflexibility of being able to change timetable due to work commitments continued to be a big problem
Students talking about their placement experience	Changing structure from previous years, e.g., student did not want exams, only to find exams introduced in a module
Year 3 & 4 Enablers	**Inhibitors**
Good placement experience	Too big a jump from year 2 - 3
Move to online was fine	Transition back to study proved very difficult and not enough support
	Not a consistent approach to delivery online by all tutors
General comments on the curriculum	**Inhibitors**
	Too many presentations all the time
	1st and 2nd year marks should be worth more

Source: authors own work

Discussion of the implications of the findings

After the research, we introduced small strategic steps to further support students. Some of the issues raised by the students in the life histories had already been addressed. For example, at the start of the pandemic, laptops were loaned to all students and over the past four years, the University has instigated and developed a number of strategies to improve the student experience, such as ensuring information is prepared to support students at every stage of their studies.

We have partially addressed the objectives of the study as follows:-

Objectives

1.To investigate how small changes in the curriculum and the learning environment can support the University's inclusion policy to support all learners and address the issues highlighted by the move to online learning during COVID-19.

We have shown how the small steps to support all learners have been achieved, but more needs to be undertaken, especially in terms of curriculum development. As a result of the small steps introduced, and the further issues highlighted by COVID-19, the next 'bigger step' has been to review the undergraduate curriculum. Over the past two years, the undergraduate curriculum has been reviewed. It was the result of staff working groups who explored how best to review and update the programmes. The curriculum transformation project reframed undergraduate Business and Management education (taking into account feedback from students, employers) using the principles of: CV building; experiential learning (each module to include an experiential learning activity, e.g. guest speaker/experts, alumni, co-created assessments with employers, employer panels); less modules (reduced from 6 modules per stage to 4 per stage); smaller summative assessments (one per module), increase importance of formative assessment (to be used as points of discovery and 'tested' understanding for the learners); move towards students as partners through co creation, negotiated assessment; use of blended, agile learning using Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI). The curriculum transformation project has presented challenges for inclusive instructional design. These challenges include embedding digital literacies; understanding of instructional design; time and space given for teachers to design inclusive activities.

2. To ascertain what staff development could more effectively help support disabled students.

The findings of the study showed how small changes to materials and assessment could better support inclusion and staff development to raise awareness was introduced, and this support is ongoing. A comprehensive digital support strategy for staff development was created by the digital learning specialists (and is also ongoing). The Digital Learning and Teaching Leads Team present workshops on the effective use of digital technologies and online support. Further staff development on Personal Academic Tutoring(PATs) was also introduced, including guidance from specialists in mental health/counselling to help raise academic staff and PATs awareness of mental illness and how to help.

3.To engage students as partners in our community of practice to develop staff development resources in wellbeing and mental health.

This objective was partially achieved, and the first set of staff development was instigated. This is an ongoing challenge to provide a toolkit of resources for staff development which acts as conduit of university level practices. This is reflected in institutional changes for wellbeing services for staff, which has moved towards an advisory model rather than an intervention model. In practice, this is working with students as partners and represents a cultural shift for the School and University. The student voice may be more receptive than senior managers' interventions. Academic staff may view senior managers as distant whereas they meet students regularly.

4. To integrate transition initiatives into the first-year programmes

Transition to First Year was given extensive development. The Student Journey website was further enhanced with detailed information and clear links to other important information. Each link takes the student directly to the site for example, the library, Disability Support or Wellbeing. A 'Returners' site has also been added. Through the extension of the Personal Academic Tutoring system, students returning from a break in study, are now included.

Conclusion

Despite these good intentions however, the core of the revised curriculum is a deeper emphasis on employability and any possible self-managed activity is then taken up. So 'space' to learn and absorb knowledge is soon filled with other employment initiatives, such as attendance at guest speakers' talks, volunteering and so on. Over the past decade of work undertaken to embed inclusive practice, the key role reflection plays in learning has been drowned out in the employability discourse (Authors, removed for review, 2021), Therefore, we continue to argue that while these initiatives are important, there must be *planned space both within and around* the subjects to allow students time to read, think, and reflect (Barkas, Bishop and Armstrong, 2024). Much more needs to be done to again review the **content** of the curriculum to ensure a fully inclusive curriculum that allows space for students to learn.

The small steps approach has highlighted the cultural shift since the global pandemic, there is a need for ongoing evaluation and integration of inclusive digital and hybrid teaching practices which enables all students and recognises those who are neuro divergent, might walk in the same shoes, however the shoes are different styles, colours and sizes. Small steps in the curriculum is the start of this recognition, not the end. An inclusive curriculum enriches the learning experience for all, not just learners with disabilities.

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