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History, Pedagogy and EDI Project Report

The project research was co-led by Dr Sarah Holland and Dr Adam Budd, with financial support from History UK and the Royal Historical Society.

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With thanks to all participants who took part in the focus groups and to Moss Pepe who undertook the literature review work for this project.

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Executive Summary

Our research reveals that EDI (Equality/Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) is recognised to be integral to the teaching and making of history. Amongst a diverse range of EDI issues identified by focus group members, all affirmed that decolonisation of the curriculum was a priority for their department and institutions. The RHS reports on 'Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History', 'Gender Equality and Historians', and 'LGBT+ Histories and Historians: Report and Resources' were considered foundational to EDI work. However, there is widespread frustration at the lack of resources to embed and sustain these initiatives. Investment in new and existing staff, specific resources and students are necessary for decolonisation work, and we must take time to allow it to be fully embedded across the curriculum. Similarly, there was widespread recognition of the importance of addressing ongoing experiences of discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ students, and history was considered uniquely useful for this work. Yet participants reflected that teaching and research on gender and sexualities was not always valued by institutions. More broadly, there was consensus that critical EDI reform work was not adequately rewarded or recognised in staff workload models, leading to excessive workload becoming an EDI issue in and of itself.

Concerns over appropriate terminology in relation to decolonisation or diversification reflected broader anxieties over the remit and meanings of EDI. Disability was consistently highlighted as an issue that was often neglected in EDI discussions, although participants noted that inaccessible practices had become more visible during the Covid-19 pandemic. More resources for dedicated staff to support student mental health are urgently needed to help the growing number of students with mental health difficulties and to avoid this falling onto colleagues without the training to adequately support students in this way. Accessibility initiatives introduced during the pandemic for digital and sensorial inclusion have not been widely retained, and the work involved in establishing these practices has been scarcely understood or recognised. The pandemic has exacerbated the effects of poverty and the cost-of-living crisis and further impacted on both staff and students. Obstructive bureaucracy was recognised to be a key barrier to EDI work. Flexible, clear, agile responses to EDI issues are necessary for the kind of

intersectional holistic approach our participants suggest. In our recommendations we suggest six pathways to support such responses.

Recommendations

Issues concerning equality, diversity and inclusion have affected the experiences of staff and students alike. This report argues that the experience of the learner cannot be separated from that of the teacher and therefore recommendations to improve policies and practices in History departments across UK HEIs will concern both categories. Many of the recommendations are not subject-specific and are widely applicable across the sector. However, where history specific opportunities or challenges have been highlighted, we have responded accordingly.

1. Increase EDI data collection

We need more robust and timely data on student progression, including evidence of intersectionality between EDI indicators. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on moving beyond 'awarding gaps' to measuring 'gaps' across the degree from induction to transition and retention, as well as graduation and beyond. We need accurate and timely data on the extent of mental health issues within the student population and we need qualitative research about broad lived experiences to contextualize this quantitative data. We also need more innovative methods of collecting data to ensure better representation of broad lived experiences of a range of EDI issues.

2. Decrease administrative processes that impede EDI

Individuals should be empowered to respond to EDI issues autonomously, but in alignment with the broader connected goals of their department and institution. Processes to access support should be simplified. EDI is not one single entity and there is a need for greater connectivity between institutional strategic priorities and the needs identified at disciplinary or departmental level.

3. Support staff

There should be dedicated time for EDI included in workloads to enable colleagues to undertake this work in a meaningful way. This work should be recognized and valued appropriately in promotion processes and there should be disaggregated data collection in relation to staff promotions to make gender gaps and other data gaps more visible.

4. Support students

Continued support for widening participation initiatives to support diverse recruitment is important. Equally, support focused on transitions, both to university and throughout the degree, for all students should be provided with a balance between institutional and subject-specific schemes and a focus on a wide range of EDI indicators. Enhanced data collection would support this. Awareness and provision of specific support and funding for Black and ethnic minority groups to undertake history PhDs should be increased.

5. Increase Inclusion

Disability should be consistently considered within the remit of EDI work, and further work on disability in relation to History and its teaching is urgently needed to make history truly accessible.

6. Use of the history curriculum

Support (time and resources) is crucial to developing and evaluating more diverse curricula and inclusive pedagogical practice embracing all aspects of teaching, learning and assessment. The study of history has an important role in engaging with and responding to a range of global challenges and thus subject-specific approaches should be emphasised in EDI pedagogy.

Introduction

This report presents the findings of the History UK (HUK) inclusive pedagogies project co-led by Dr Sarah Holland (University of Nottingham) and Dr Adam Budd (University of Edinburgh). It considers key priorities relating to EDI policy and practice in history departments and curriculum-specific EDI issues. EDI is often defined as equality, diversity, and inclusion, but the remit of EDI is changing with increasing emphasis on equity rather than equality. Our scope is intentionally broad, covering a range of EDI issues (including gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, disability, mental health, socio-economic background) and a range of pedagogical issues (including curriculum design, community building and identity, awarding gaps). The objectives of this project were two-fold: (1) to examine how history departments have been affected by wider EDI issues and (2) to identify what curriculum specific EDI work is being undertaken. Although the remit of this project is broader than pandemic pedagogy, the impact and implications of COVID-19 pandemic are addressed.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, HUK committed itself to undertaking research on EDI-focussed pedagogy. We recognised the innovative and inspiring work being undertaken in history departments across the UK, but also the challenges they faced, and so we proposed a project on subject-specific inclusive pedagogy. The onset of the global pandemic and the first UK lockdown of March 2020 put this project on hold, as colleagues professionally and personally faced 'uncertain times'. However, History UK launched the [Pandemic Pedagogy Handbook](#) in May 2020 to help colleagues navigate the pedagogical uncertainties they faced, particularly with regards the transition to online teaching and learning. Subsequently, Professor Jamie Wood (University of Lincoln) and Dr Marcus Collins (Loughborough University) led the Post-Pandemic Pedagogy project to 'gather evidence from within the discipline to inform history-specific frameworks for post-pandemic teaching, learning and assessment' and identified a range of EDI issues exacerbated by the pandemic.¹

¹ M. Collins and J. Wood, *Post-Pandemic Pedagogy: a report for best practice for history teaching after Covid* (2023). See also interim report online: <https://www.history-uk.ac.uk/post-pandemic-pedagogy/>.

In Spring 2021, HUK resumed its EDI pedagogy project, which took on new urgency given the barriers that students and staff faced during the pandemic. Two focus group meetings were conducted with colleagues (Directors of Teaching and Learning and EDI Leads – or their equivalents) from five HEIs belonging to the [East Midlands Centre for History Teaching and Learning](#) (EMC) during Summer 2021. They included institutions of different sizes and types and colleagues at different stages of their careers. A subsequent series of focus group meetings were undertaken with colleagues from a further 10 History departments from across the four nations in Spring 2022 (again DoTs and EDI Leads), again covering a range of HEI types including pre- and post-92 universities and members of the Russell Group. In each instance, participants were asked to identify and discuss key priorities and challenges in terms of inclusive pedagogical practice, including work undertaken before the pandemic and the extent to which the pandemic shifted departmental and individual teaching and learning strategies. Colleagues were also asked to consider whether the [RHS reports on race and ethnicity, gender, and LGBT+ history and historians](#) (2018-2020) and the [HUK Pandemic Pedagogy Handbook](#) (2020) had been useful to their teaching practice and, if so, how and why.

The focus groups provided an opportunity for historians to openly reflect on our practice and highlighted a range of priorities and practices relating to EDI and History in HE. These included educational practices affecting all students and departments, as well as history subject-specific opportunities, challenges and responses. Initial findings formed the basis for an interim report and a [blog post](#). Literature review work was then conducted by Moss Pepe in the Summer/Autumn of 2022.

The production of this report highlighted interactions between the educational landscape and broader societal issues, and revealed the opportunities and challenges this interplay presents for subject-specific EDI work. Socially rooted problems including the ongoing repercussions of the pandemic have augmented problems linked to the cost-of-living crisis and the 'attack on art and humanities'.² Against a backdrop of political

² The most recent manifestation of this long attack is the cuts to subsidies for arts and humanities courses at English Universities. See '[UCU condemns "biggest attack on arts in living memory" announced by Office for Students' \(2021\)](#) and for background to this see Joe Moran, 'The Humanities and the University: a Brief History of the Present Crisis', *Critical Quarterly*, 64:3 (2002).

polarization, a growing mental health crisis in University age adults, digital misinformation, and widespread mistrust of science, it is clear the kinds of critical thinking and research skills linked to historical work are essential tools. As Henry A. Giroux argued, 'education and critical pedagogy are needed more than ever', and historical perspectives are crucial to combatting issues such as social injustice and the spread of disinformation across digital and conventional media.³

This report presents the findings from the 2021 and 2022 focus groups together with contextual research. However, History UK are committed to EDI work, and we do not view this report as an endpoint. The report is the start of a longer-term project to advance EDI in History and has already led to a new HUK History and Disability project, reflecting our findings about the lack of attention to disability within EDI initiatives. Our report findings are also now being embedded in our working groups. We welcome comments and reflections on the report and suggestions for future work.

³ H.A. Giroux, *Race, Politics and Pandemic Pedagogy: Education in a Time of Crisis* (2021)

Inequalities in Higher Education

Research highlights numerous inequalities in Higher Education that affect staff and students at institutions across the UK. Advance HE notes that under-representation of ethnic minority staff, staff with disclosed disabilities and women (particularly in senior roles) indicates that there are barriers to career progression for these groups that have wider EDI implications for the sector.⁴ Academics have cited working conditions, ranging from bullying and harassment to casualisation and precarity, that are detrimental to inclusivity in the sector. Precarity intersects with the underrepresentation of minoritised individuals in the sector, with Black staff 50% more likely than white staff to be on a zero-hours contract.⁵ These issues also significantly affect staff with caring responsibilities and with health conditions. It is more difficult for disabled staff and those with caring responsibilities to manage the financial disadvantages and attendant stress linked to insecure contracts, and these situations themselves have negative impacts on those working in this way.⁶

Retention and awarding gaps highlight measurable inequalities for students relating to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic background and care leavers.⁷ One [report by the Office for Students](#) also

⁴ Advance HE report: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/governance/governance-and-edi/edi-challenges-higher-education/staff-inequalities>.

Mind the Gap: gender differences in Higher Education – by Rachel Hewitt (March 2020)

<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/03/07/mind-the-gap-gender-differences-in-higher-education/>

⁵ What researchers think about the culture they work in (Jan 2020) – Wellcome Report

<https://wellcome.org/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture>

Counting the costs of casualisation in higher education (June 2019)

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10336/Counting-the-costs-of-casualisation-in-higher-education-Jun-19/pdf/ucu_casualisation_in_HE_survey_report_Jun19.pdf

Precarious work in higher education: Insecure contracts and how they have changed over time (Oct 2021)

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10899/Precarious-work-in-higher-education-May-20/pdf/ucu_he-precarity-report_may20.pdf

⁶ Ann Lopes and Indra Angeli Dewan, 'Precarious Pedagogies? The Impact of Casual and Zero-Hour Contracts in Higher Education', *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, 7:7 (2015) p.35; Teresa Crew, *Higher Education and Working-Class Academics: Precarity and Diversity in Academia* (2020) pp.50-53.

⁷ Advance HE reports: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/governance/governance-and-edi/edi-challenges-higher-education/student-inequalities>

And OfS report – 'Differences in Student Outcomes (Nov 2020)

[https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/3948d9a3-84b5-409b-8b11-](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/3948d9a3-84b5-409b-8b11-760a9e94c997/differences_in_student_outcomes_further_characteristics_november_2020.pdf)

[760a9e94c997/differences_in_student_outcomes_further_characteristics_november_2020.pdf](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/3948d9a3-84b5-409b-8b11-760a9e94c997/differences_in_student_outcomes_further_characteristics_november_2020.pdf)

'Care leavers more likely to drop out of university' (June 2020)

[https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/care-leavers-more-likely-to-drop-out-of-university/;](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/care-leavers-more-likely-to-drop-out-of-university/)

highlighted geographical inequalities in terms of access to HE and to graduate-level employment opportunities and earnings.⁸ Additional inequalities were noted for the increasing number of local and commuter students, especially where this intersected with socio-economic background or ethnicity.⁹ Numerous reports document discrimination, harassment and feelings of exclusion across the HE sector. A 2022 report revealed that more than half of Black students surveyed experienced racism in their accommodation and that three-quarters reported negative impacts on their mental health due to racism.¹⁰ This reflects wider concerns that Britain is 'not close to being a racially just society'.¹¹ A Wonkhe report on sexual harassment on university campuses noted that 'any progress in tackling these issues has been slow, inconsistent and not widespread across the sector'.¹² In 2016 and 2017, guidance and recommendations were published on improving the experiences of trans staff and students in HE.¹³ However in 2018, Stonewall reported that 'experiences of discrimination and harassment at university remain high for LGBTQ+ students', and intersectional pressures further accentuated

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-students/>

⁸ 'Place matters: Inequality, employment and the role of higher education' (nov 2021)

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/e7b7531f-f61b-4641-9952-8d38ff12a321/ofs-insight-brief-11-updated-10-may-2022.pdf>

⁹ Local and Commuter Students (July 2020) <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/local-and-commuter-students/>

Students who commute to university are getting a raw deal (Dec 2018)

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/dec/13/students-who-commute-to-university-are-getting-a-raw-deal>

Where do HE students study? (Feb 2022) <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study#accommodation>

¹⁰ 'Living Black at University': Research into the experiences of Black students in UK student accommodation (Feb 2022) https://www.unitegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Living-Black-at-University-Report_FINAL.pdf

¹¹ P. Butler, 'Britain "not close to being a racially just society", finds two-year research project', *The Guardian* (April 2023): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/09/britain-not-close-to-being-a-racially-just-society-finds-two-year-research-project>

¹² It's time to assure students about safety on campus, by Jim Dickinson (March 2021)

<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/its-time-to-assure-students-about-safety-on-campus/>

¹³ Advance HE: Trans staff and students in HE and colleges: improving experiences (Nov 2016)

<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/trans-staff-and-students-he-and-colleges-improving-experiences>; TransEdu Scotland: Researching the experience of trans and gender diverse applicants, students

and staff in Scotland's colleges and universities (Nov 2017) <https://www.trans.ac.uk/Portals/88/TransEdu-Scotland-Report-2017.pdf?ver=2017-10-31-142716-560>; TransEdu Scotland: Recommendations for the

inclusion of Trans Students by Dr Stephanie Mckendry & Dr Matson Lawrence (2017)

<https://www.trans.ac.uk/Research/Recommendations/tabid/7223/Default.aspx>

this, particularly when LGBTQ+ identity intersected with matters of race and ethnicity, disability and socio-economic background.¹⁴ A 2021 UCU report, noted that both 'homophobia and transphobia remain serious issues'. There were also concerns that teaching and research on gender and sexualities was not valued by institutions. Areas for action included: supportive work environments, collection of data on promotions, challenging the lack of value given to gender and sexuality teaching and research.¹⁵

Priorities and Practices

Participants in our focus groups highlighted a wide range of different EDI priorities identified by their departments or units, both before and during the pandemic. These included defining the scope and parameters of EDI, the importance of intersectionality, problematic data, problems linked to community building, issues of basic accessibility, the development of curriculum in alignment with EDI priorities, awarding gaps and workload.

A clear sense of the extent of EDI issues affecting students emerged in the focus groups, many of which were noted to have been exacerbated by the pandemic. It was also noted that priorities and practices were shaped by both institutional agendas, recruitment and the student body, and staff and students both individually and collectively. Participants stressed that there were limits to what could be done at departmental level highlighting wider structural issues (institutional and societal) which could undermine efforts. Generally, there was widespread commitment to and enthusiasm for subject-specific EDI work, coupled with inevitable frustrations.

¹⁴ 'LGBT In Britain: University Report (2018)

https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/lgbt_in_britain_universities_report.pdf

¹⁵ UCU report: Challenging LGBT+ exclusion in UK Higher Education (May 2021)

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11495/Challenging-LGBT-exclusion-in-UK-higher-education/pdf/LGBT_exclusion_May2021.pdf

Defining EDI

The way in which EDI is defined shapes EDI priorities and practices. Indeed, the sector has now posited equity (with a focus on fairness) as more appropriate than equality (with a focus on sameness), and so the literal meaning of EDI is changing.¹⁶ Participants in our focus groups acknowledged that EDI is a somewhat generic phrase that has been used to encompass a wide variety of different issues and underpin a range of varied policies and strategies. They therefore discussed EDI in relation to race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, disability and health, socio-economic background and age. Inevitably, there was difference in the extent to which these had been prioritised at different institutions/departments. Many felt that disability did not generate as much attention or commitment as other EDI issues. Some reflected that disability (both visible and invisible disabilities) had become a more 'visible' EDI issue due to the pandemic. Others felt that students as carers, commuter students, mature students and those with religious obligations were also 'hidden' by discussions of EDI in HE. There were also concerns expressed that terminology adapted in EDI policies could be problematic, not least because the labels do not always represent the diverse lived experiences and challenges that students and staff have faced. Moreover, participants highlighted the importance of intersectionality, because many staff and students may 'not simply fit into existing EDI boxes'.

Participants sought a holistic vision of EDI that does not reduce associated work to 'tick-box exercises' or 'buzz words'. Lauren Stentiford and George Koutsouris have observed that 'Inclusive pedagogies remain something of a black box; a term used to refer to a potentially disparate array of practices, and with inclusion itself remaining a hazy and under-examined concept', warning that it has the potential to simply become embedded in a 'performativity culture' that represents but does not always enact change.¹⁷ The different ways in which individuals, departments or institutions understand and prioritise EDI show that future work and

¹⁶ T. Zakrajsek, 'Do we need equity or equality to make things 'fair'? Actually, we need both', *Times Higher Education* (2021): <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/do-we-need-equity-or-equality-make-things-fair-actually-we-need-both>

¹⁷ Stentiford and Koutsouris, 'What are inclusive pedagogies in higher education? A systematic scoping review', *Studies in Higher Education*, 46:11 (2021), pp. 2245-2261.

recommendations must address this. EDI is not one single entity and participants urged greater connectivity between institutional strategic priorities and the needs identified at disciplinary or departmental level. Participants also felt that history as a discipline was well placed to engage with varied EDI issues and create inclusive curricula and pedagogies, although many agreed there was still scope to focus more on what was history-specific about this work.

Problematic data

All participants agreed there were issues around the nature of statistical evidence for EDI that relate to 'awarding gaps', since this was a major strategic priority among institutions. Although intersectionality is widely recognised by focus group participants, data is often crude and can be based on very few students (linked to recruitment issues). This means that the available information reflects unique experiences and lacks intersectionality. Thus, when we focus purely on the available data, we find that it can be very difficult to support students or make meaningful changes. Nevertheless, strategic agendas often cite such data. Participants called for more robust and timely data, including evidence of intersectionality between EDI indicators, to provide qualitative data about broad lived experiences alongside quantitative data.

Awarding Gaps

Awarding gaps were noted as a key priority in HEIs.¹⁸ Participants noted that some institutions still used the phrase 'attainment gaps', perhaps suggesting a reluctance to move away from a deficit model. Many also noted a change in terminology from 'reducing' to 'eliminating' awarding gaps. Participants however felt that awarding gaps emphasised an end

¹⁸ For context to this see Advance HE report: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/governance/governance-and-edi/edi-challenges-higher-education/student-inequalities>
And OfS report – 'Differences in Student Outcomes (Nov 2020)
https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/3948d9a3-84b5-409b-8b11-760a9e94c997/differences_in_student_outcomes_further_characteristics_november_2020.pdf
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<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-students/>

point (degree awarding) and that greater emphasis needed to be placed on measuring 'gaps' across the degree from induction, transition and retention to graduation and beyond. The introduction of Access and Participation Plans (APPs) entail that HE providers develop intervention strategies and evaluate the impact of this work.¹⁹ Focus group participants saw the potential of these plans, particularly at department or school level, but still noted that the 'problematic data' and the lack of lived experiences of a diverse range of students could compromise the efficacy of these plans. As Randall Whittaker argued 'Not many university leaders have lived experience of being from [marginalised or under-represented] social groups and so have a fear of getting it wrong'.²⁰ Without going into detail about specific APPs, participants highlighted the importance of widening participation initiatives and recruitment, support for transition to university and throughout the degree, and community building and student voice. Participants reflected how all-embracing the term 'widening participation' was and the importance of not making broad generalisations about WP cohorts or people within them, not least because not everyone within a specific WP group will have the same knowledge, cultural backgrounds or experiences.²¹ Moreover, participants highlighted the importance of 'in-reach' to ensure that 'outreach and WP initiatives and the rhetoric around inclusivity is translated into positive experiences for all students on campus'. Looking beyond undergraduate study, many noted the low levels of Black and ethnic minority groups undertaking history PhDs – in part due to aforementioned issues faced at undergraduate level – and the need for greater awareness about support and funding available for these students.²²

¹⁹ OfS, Access and Participation Plans: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/>

²⁰ Quote from Whittaker in chapter by R. Whittaker and S. Broadhead, 'Disaggregating the Black Student Experience', in Broadhead (ed), *Access and Widening Participation in Arts Higher Education* (2022), pp. 51-72.

²¹ For more on this theme see, D.W. Thompson, 'Widening participation research and practice in the United Kingdom on the twentieth anniversary of the Dearing report, reflections on a changing landscape', *Educational Review*, 71:2 (2019), 182-197.

²² For context on this wider issue see Robbie Shilliam, 'Black Academia in Britain', 28 July 2014, <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2014/07/28/black-academia-in-britain/>; Jason Arday, 'Exploring black and minority ethnic (BME) doctoral students' perceptions of an academic career', June 2017, https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8633/BME-doctoral-students-perceptions-of-an-academic-career/pdf/JA_BME_doc_students_report_Jun17.pdf; Daniel Akinbosedo, 'Recruiting more Black PhD students isn't so hard if you really want to do it', *Times Higher Education*, 30 March 2021, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/recruiting-more-black-phd-students-isnt-so-hard-if-you-really-want-to-do-it>.

Procedures and Processes

Some participants felt there was an increasing disconnect between what was happening at institutional level and what was (or should be) happening in departments/units. This was not to say that central initiatives were inherently bad, but rather to highlight a need for greater scope for agency at department/unit level to address immediate needs. A sense of frustration was expressed about not having the resources to respond to all the increasing (and sometimes competing) needs or to be more flexible in responses. Centralised processes can mean people 'on the ground' don't have the information they need or that would help until too late. There were also concerns that policies and procedures were not always agile enough to respond to the increased demands and pace of change. This is reflected in the wider literature on EDI policies.²³

Staff/Recruitment

The lack of diverse representation amongst staff was noted as having 'significant implications' for EDI work. One participant said, 'we cannot talk about decolonising or diversifying the curriculum without addressing staffing'. Some participants observed a push for greater diversity in staff, strategic hires, and unconscious bias training for members of interview panels. However, other participants noted that some institutions were not in a position to recruit new staff. Some felt that more diverse representation had been achieved even without new recruitment by working in partnership and collaboration. For instance, by inviting guest speakers or working with other organisations (e.g. museums and galleries), which can have the added benefit of introducing professional skills and experiencing them in action from people who have applied the study of history to a range of careers. Nevertheless, participants recognised that this still raised issues of money and resources and could not be viewed by institutions as an alternative to more diverse recruitment. Wider issues about staff representation were discussed in relation to student recruitment, retention and progression. Participants

²³ Roger Pizarro Milian and Rochelle Wijesingha, 'Why do EDI policies fail? An inhabited institutions perspective', *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 42:3 (2023), 449-64; Michael F.J. Fox, Camille Kandiko Howson and Martyn Kingsbury, 'Equity, diversity and inclusion – does social justice from the top trickle down?' *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47:6 (2023), 850-61.

noted the need for clear pathways and resources to support diverse entry not only onto undergraduate degrees but also Masters, PhDs and early career positions.

Workload

Workload has been noted as a major EDI issue affecting staff health and wellbeing. Even before Covid-19, academic staff within HEIs reported highly demanding and stressful workloads leading to increasing rates of mental illness and poor wellbeing. The demands of research and teaching matrix, rising numbers of students and associated increased diversity in the student population coupled with decreased staffing ratios, have led to staff feeling overworked and devalued. Burnout as a result of high level of job demands coupled with limited resources, short-term contract and precarious working conditions, redundancies following department closures, as well as low levels of job satisfactions are amongst the most common experiences outlined in surveys of academic staff in UKHEIs and abroad.²⁴

Staff workload allocation has been the subject of numerous reports and policy papers; as financial and regulatory pressures coupled with growth in student numbers started to be experienced in UK Higher Education, the need for a comprehensive system of workload allocation based on equity, transparency and consultation became more apparent. The recommendations of the 2007 Leadership Foundation for Higher Education report highlight the 'dynamic' nature of the workload allocation model, which far from being the result of 'managerialist intervention' should be the product of an active engagement with and by academic staff.²⁵ The principles underlined in the Leadership Foundation report remained at the

²⁴ See for example, J.C. Shin and J. Jung, 'Academics job satisfaction and job stress across countries in the changing academic environments', *Higher Education*, 67(5), 2014, 603-620. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9668-y>; M. Y. Tytherleigh, C. Webb, L. C. Cooper and C. Ricketts, Occupational stress in UK higher education institutions: A comparative study of all staff categories. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 24(1), 2007, 41-61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436052000318569>; G. Kinman, 'Doing more with less? Work and wellbeing in academics', *Somatechnics*, 4, 2014, 219-235. <https://doi.org/10.3366/soma.2014.0129>; G. Kinman and S. Wray, Higher stress: A survey of stress and well-being among staff in higher education. University and College Union (UCU), 2013, https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/5911/Higher-stress-a-survey-of-stress-and-well-beingamong-staff-in-higher-education-Jul-13/pdf/HE_stress_report_July_2013.pdf .

²⁵ P. Barrett and L. Barrett, *The Management of Academic Workloads*. Summary Report, Research and Development Series, The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, January 2007, p.4.

heart of the Managing Academic Workload (MAW) project in the following years, and the data produced by the exercise is useful to ensure that resources are allocated correctly and that no member of staff is significantly over worked. However, the growth in academic workload has meant that there is often tension and disconnect between workload modelling and planning and what academics actually do.²⁶

Changes to the universities financial model and market environment following the introduction of student fees in England, were identified in a 2015 report by the Financial Sustainability Strategy Group as issues that in the long-term might affect the sustainability and stability of higher education in the period after the 2007-2008 financial crisis.²⁷ But it was to be a different type of crisis that brought staff burnout and wellbeing to the fore. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated poor mental health amongst academic staff as in-person teaching was suddenly moved online with often limited resources and time to prepare. Data collected in March 2021 across 92 universities and from 1,182 staff indicates that 55% of academic staff had experienced chronic emotional exhaustion, 53% had experienced worry and 51% stress during the academic year 2020-2021; 47% of the staff surveyed described their mental health as poor and 50% of staff had experienced high level of anxiety, compared to the national average of 32%.²⁸ Further research into the experiences of academics during the pandemic showed that the demands of online teaching, which included the development of new teaching material and strategies, the expectation that they would support anxious and upset students and be available online 24/7, social isolation, the challenges of maintaining boundaries between work and personal life had all resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of working hours and caused mental and physical exhaustion amongst academic staff. Here are some worrying statistics

²⁶ There is an interesting summary of the history of the academic workload model in D. Kernohan, 'A Beginner's Guide to Academic Workload Modelling', 01/01/2023, <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/a-beginners-guide-to-academic-workload-modelling/>

²⁷ The Sustainability of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in England, Financial Sustainability Strategy Group, March 2015, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20180319130312/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/funding/finsustain/pubs/Sustainability_of_Learning_and_Teaching_2015/

²⁸ I. Dougall, M. Weick and M. Vasiljevic, *Inside UK Universities: Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing during the Coronavirus Pandemic*, report (Durham University, June 2021), <https://durham-repository.worktribe.com/output/1634263/inside-uk-universities-staff-mental-health-and-wellbeing-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>

emerging from one study that surveyed 2,046 academic and academic-related staff in 2021: 62% respondents reported regularly working over 40 hours per week; 53% showed signs of probable depression, and as a result 78% strongly believed that the psychological health of employees was as important as productivity in UKHEIs.²⁹

The dramatic increase in workload experienced by academic staff before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic was highlighted by our focus group participants as affecting EDI work, with 'insufficient time to fully engage' with this work and an acknowledgement that this work itself had 'major workload implications'. There were also concerns about EDI work being imposed on a small group of colleagues that created an 'overwhelming burden'. These views echo others published in recent years, such as Manvir Grewal, who emphasised that 'Often, EDI work is led by individuals who continue to be routinely minoritized. So not only do they face multiple, intersecting oppressions, in many cases they are also required to put aside their experiences and "fix" the very injustices they suffer'.³⁰ Sara Ahmed also noted that 'When women of colour enter the institutions of whiteness, we become symbols of diversity. And we have to do diversity as well as be diversity'.³¹

Participants recommended dedicated time for EDI to be included in workloads to enable colleagues to undertake this work in a meaningful way but that workload itself needed addressing as an EDI issue. Leadership was paramount in mitigating the impact of these roles. Some participants outlined how their Heads of Department had ensured some workload allocation for colleagues redesigning modules as part of wider de-colonising the curriculum initiatives. The significance of dedicated time being allocated for EDI work was further highlighted where it was non-existent and a decolonizing the curriculum working group had disbanded due to staff exhaustion. As a recent Wonkhe reported stressed,

²⁹ S. Wray and G. Kinman, *Supporting Staff Wellbeing in Higher Education*, Education Support, 2021, <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/media/x4jdvxpl/es-supporting-staff-wellbeing-in-he-report.pdf>.

³⁰ Manvir Grewal, 'There are so many reasons why EDI is not the answer', *The Times Higher Education* (Sept 2021) <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/there-are-so-many-reasons-why-edi-not-answer>.

³¹ S. Ahmed, 'Rocking the Boat: Women of Colour as Diversity Workers' in Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy' in J. Aday and H. Mirza (eds), *Dismantling Race in Higher Education* (2018)

[‘Integrating equality, diversity and inclusion throughout education is a challenge we all share’.](#)

Disability³²

According to a 2020 [OfS report](#), the proportion of students who self-report a disability or disclose having a mental health condition is rising. Their evidence for these groups suggests relatively lower retention rates, lower awarding gaps and lower levels of progression into highly skilled employment or postgraduate study. Kevin Johnson and Tema George note that the proportion of students with disabilities in FE and HE had increased by 60% in recent years but that these students were less likely to be awarded a 2:1 degree or above.³³ They were also more likely both to perceive their courses as low quality and to have a lower rate of employability than people without disabilities. The OfS report made a number of recommendations to obviate these effects, including the collection of disaggregated data, introducing a range of inclusive approaches and practices, and listening to and engaging with disabled students.³⁴ However, the ongoing impact of the pandemic has exacerbated the situation, with the [Disabled Students’ Commission](#) noting that ‘disabled students already face significant challenges during their higher education’ and that ‘the challenges of the pandemic were even more pronounced for disabled students’. Their report emphasised that they will ‘challenge, inform and advise the higher education sector to accelerate the pace of change regarding support for disabled students, and will influence higher education sector agencies and institutions to remove barriers to learning’. They highlighted the need to develop policy through consultation with disabled students and showed that the pandemic had variable impacts on disabled students, demonstrating the need for flexible intersectional policies.³⁵ Evidence also suggests that in

³² The language used in this section reflects that of the studies referenced and the focus group participants and thus includes ‘people with disabilities’ and ‘disabled people’ interchangeably.

³³ K. Johnson and T. George, ‘Supporting Inclusive Teaching Practice within a UK Further and Higher Education Context’, *COMPASS: journal of learning and teaching*, 13:2 (2020)

³⁴ OfS, Disabled Students (July 2020): <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/disabled-students/>

³⁵ Disabled Students’ Commission, Annual report 2020-2021: Enhancing the disabled student experience (2021): <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/disabled-students-commission-annual-report-2020-2021-enhancing-disabled-student>

spite of legal requirements of reasonable adjustments and support we still 'lack evidence on what works for closing disabled students' equality gaps'.³⁶ This may be especially true at postgraduate level, as it has recently been shown that 66% of disabled STEM PhD students do not receive enough support to put them 'on an equal footing with their non-disabled peers'.³⁷

However, it can be difficult for disabled students to reach the point of PhD study. In 2018, *Disability and Society* determined that disabled students have worse post-degree outcomes, worse drop-out rates, and are less likely to do postgraduate study compared to their non-disabled peers.³⁸ This problem may well have been exacerbated because of the recent changes to the Disabled Student Allowance, which has made funding access less clear, especially for postgraduate students.³⁹ It is clear that 'there is a potential gap in current research for specifically classroom-based experiences of disabled students'.⁴⁰ This gap widens to a chasm when it comes to evidence for best practices for teaching on neurodivergent students. Yet there are an increasing number of neurodivergent students entering higher education.⁴¹ Problems with obtaining accurate data abound because many students will not disclose a disability if they perceive it as stigmatising and if they have made it to university, they may have developed strategies that allow them to 'pass' as neurotypical.⁴² This means that accessibility must be embedded at a structural level, creating a supportive framework that can be further modified at the individual level on a case by case basis.

³⁶ O. Khan, 'We lack evidence on what works for closing disabled students' equality gaps', Wonkhe (February 2023): <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/we-lack-evidence-on-what-works-for-closing-disabled-students-equality-gaps/>

³⁷ Mette Anwar-Westander and Pete Quinn, 'Disabled PhD students can be better supported', Wonkhe (October 2023): <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/disabled-phd-students-can-be-better-supported/>

³⁸ T. Osborne, 'Not lazy, not faking: teaching and learning experiences of university students with disabilities', *Disability & Society* (2018)

³⁹ See new report on 'Improving the experiences of disabled students in STEM': <https://disabledstudents.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Improving-the-Experience-of-Disabled-PhD-Students-in-STEM-small-print.pdf>

⁴⁰ Osborne, 'Not lazy, not faking'.

⁴¹ L. Clouder, M. Karakus, A. Cinotti, N. V. Ferreyra, G. A. Fierrors & P. Roja, 'Neurodiversity in higher education: a narrative synthesis' *Higher Education* 80 (2020) 757-778.

⁴² For a full discussion of passing in disability studies see, A. Brune, and D. J. Wilson, *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity* (2013). p. 92.

Alongside such anticipatory universal design, individual accommodations communicated from Disability Services are obviously important and need to be considered using standard procedures. However, there are huge difficulties in gaining these diagnoses, especially for students from working class backgrounds. In addition, the learning resources available to students with diagnoses are often focused on school-age children rather than those in higher education and tend to assume low levels of academic performance. This means that university learning centres can focus too much on issues like spelling and do not aid students in developing subject specific skills.⁴³ For example, advice to avoid figurative or metaphorical language is hardly possible for those studying or teaching English (or History).⁴⁴

In addition to legal protection and reasonable adjustments, Johnson and George argue that a diverse range of teaching strategies can enable a more inclusive learning environment. They make a series of recommendations for using a combination of written, audio and visual materials, for making teaching adjustments and for institutional-wide changes.⁴⁵ There are excellent reasons to provide multiple ways of engaging with the source material (other than textual). For instance, 'multi-sensory teaching techniques have been postulated as an apt way to enhance engagement and outcomes for learners with dyspraxia.'⁴⁶ Similarly, it has been convincingly demonstrated that student's attention span is predicated on just twenty minutes of sustained and productive attention.⁴⁷ Splitting up lectures in twenty-minute 'chunks' or using 'change-up' breaks (which might include active learning interventions in small groups) can promote greater inclusion, attention, and constructive

⁴³ E. Griffin, D. Pollak, 'Student experiences of neurodiversity in higher education: insights from the BRAINHE project' *Dyslexia* 15:1, (2009) 1-69, p.33.

⁴⁴ <https://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/opentel/guidance-designing-learning-for-autistic-and-neurodiverse-students/>

⁴⁵ K. Johnson and T. George, 'Supporting inclusive teaching practice within a UK further and higher education context', *COMPASS: journal of learning and teaching*, 13:2 (2020) <https://journals.gre.ac.uk/index.php/compass/article/view/1034/pdf>

⁴⁶ A. Sewell, 'Understanding and supporting learners with specific learning difficulties from a neurodiversity perspective: a narrative synthesis' *British Journal of Special Education* 49:4 (2022) 507-686 p.551.

⁴⁷ See Bligh 1998 *What's the Use of Lectures* (Intellect Books, 5th edition) J. Middendorf & A. Kalish 1995. 'The "Change up" in Lectures' (Teaching Resources Centre, Indiana University) & L. A. Burke & R. Ray. 2008. 'Resetting the concentration levels of students in higher education: an exploratory study' in *Teaching in Higher Education* 13 (5)

alignment with learning objectives.⁴⁸ Interventions aimed at enhancing concentration levels promote greater inclusion by allowing for engagement with more diverse learning styles, thus allowing all students to engage with higher-order learning processes.

Accessibility

Accessibility is a central facet of being inclusive but again it is an expansive term. Participants discussed a wide range of accessibility issues. The pandemic had sought to redefine accessibility for many with a focus on digital accessibility. In addition, the move to online learning during lockdowns, which was uneven across institutions, raised questions about which elements of digital technology/software were most appropriate, let alone accessible, for specific teaching and learning purposes. Some participants noted the value and importance of support from learning technology teams and highlighted that this had made a 'massive difference' during a period of 'great uncertainty'. Moreover, the pandemic became the impetus for more widespread use of collaborative annotation software in some departments. That said, many participants said that colleagues felt very much unprepared for ensuring digital accessibility among their students. The shift to online learning put more emphasis on access to essential digital resources. Some digital technologies are still not accessible to screen-readers and there was widespread use of recorded video content without captions. The importance of making resources accessible was not in question, but many felt there needed to be greater recognition of the time commitment this required, and they called for sufficient time, expertise and support to enable this.

Accessible classrooms have multiple meanings. Some participants noted that even at a very practical level some rooms or buildings used for teaching were not physically accessible for people using wheelchairs. Others talked about the layout of classrooms and the difficulties of creating an 'inclusive' space without the need to rearrange furniture which is time consuming and may not be feasible. Some participants discussed whether all learning activities can always be accessible to everyone. In

⁴⁸ J. McKimm & C. Morris. 2009. 'Small group teaching' in *British Journal of Hospital Medicine* 70 (11) p.654

addition to reasonable adjustments/accommodations for individual students, many looked for ways to 'include' all students including those without formally diagnosed conditions through their pedagogical practice. For some, this began with a welcome email at the beginning of the module to introduce themselves and invite students to reply with anything that could help them to get the most out of the learning experience on that module. Others talked about the importance of content notes relating to potential traumatic content and how this intersects with mental health and marginalisation. Bureaucratic processes were again flagged as potentially inhibiting accessible and inclusive teaching, urging simplification of processes to access support and reporting systems for incidents. The increased effort to include pronouns in email signatures and on course syllabi was discussed. Some noted that students had thanked tutors for doing this, especially when they highlighted why this was important and noted that it had made them feel more welcome. Others observed that some systems could be slow to update and did not reflect changes to name or gender quickly or consistently enough. Some did note that although it could be useful to state one's own pronouns, caution needed to be shown in asking others to state their preferred name or pronoun as this could put people under pressure and place them under the spotlight. Finally, participants noted that issues of access extended beyond academic study to the wider student experience and particularly highlighted the role that student accommodation and culture on campus could play in facilitating inclusivity.

HE, EDI and crisis: the pandemic and beyond

As investigations such as the aforementioned post-pandemic pedagogy project have established, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated a range of EDI issues and brought others to the foreground or into sharper focus. These included unequal access to digital learning during lockdowns; lost learning and disrupted transitions to HE; financial precarity; dangerous domestic situations (especially for LGBTQ+ students); increased mental health issues (including students with anxiety and depression, as well as high levels of generally poor mental health and wellbeing, emotional exhaustion and stress amongst staff); and health inequalities (especially for staff and students from Black and South Asian backgrounds or with

disabilities and chronic health conditions).⁴⁹ Staff and students faced uncertainty that extended far beyond their experiences of teaching and learning. An emphasis on 'survival' meant it was difficult to focus on anything else other than the immediate demands and challenges of pandemic teaching – often while experiencing Covid-related illness first-hand or while caring for others.

The demand to provide additional asynchronous learning activities created an almost insurmountable workload. Staff were undertaking additional work at a time when everyone was dealing with the challenges of 'carrying on in uncertain times'. Participants in our focus groups were also acutely aware of the impact on mental health and wellbeing – both of staff and students – with one participant stating that 'anxiety is endemic' and others noting the impact on 'community'. Many noted the importance of personal tutoring and maintaining regular contact with tutees: 'reminding students we were there was sometimes enough'. Some students needed much more support than others and personal tutors were sometimes left overwhelmed: after all, as one participant noted, 'staff are not trained to deal with the range of issues students were facing'. Online learning also led to some expectations for 'on-demand learning' and more meetings were held to 'manage change'. Several participants felt that the 'move online' had 'accentuated trends in the consumerisation of higher education'. Expectations to do even more created hierarchies, with one participant emphasising that 'we need to be really careful about valorising the additional labour that colleagues put into supporting students', to avoid endorsing overworking or

⁴⁹ See M. Collins and J. Wood, Post-Pandemic Pedagogy: a report on best practice for history teaching after Covid (2023); A. Budd, 'Inclusive Pedagogies during the Pandemic: Can Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy Keep Up?' History UK, March 2022, <https://www.history-uk.ac.uk/2022/03/03/inclusive-pedagogies-during-the-pandemic-can-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-policy-keep-up/>; NUS: COVID-19 and Students Survey Report (April 2020) <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/covid-19-and-students-survey-report>; Office for Students: Equality, diversity and student characteristics data (June 2022) – detailed info about 20/21 cohort of students in UK HE <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-characteristics-data/>; ONS: Coronavirus and first year higher education students (Oct 2021) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandfirstyearhighereducationstudentsengland/4octoberto11october2021> ; Inside UK Universities: Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing During the Coronavirus Pandemic (June 2021) <https://psyarxiv.com/23axu/> (Dougall, Isla, Mario Weick, and Milica Vasiljevic. 2021. "Inside UK Universities: Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing During the Coronavirus Pandemic." Preprint. doi:10.31234/osf.io/23axu.) <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/digital-poverty-risks-leaving-students-behind/>

marginalising colleagues with caring responsibilities, disabilities or health issues.

Focus group participants stressed that we won't know the longer-term effects and impact of the pandemic on different groups of students for some time (and in terms of intersectionality, perhaps not at all). Some felt that a desire to revert to 'normality' had the inherent risk of not recognising and addressing existing and new challenges and in some instances undermining the value of initiatives introduced during the pandemic (especially around digital learning in the classroom) that could be (and in some cases should have been) retained.

Research continues to document and interpret the complex physiological, psychological, and social consequences of the pandemic among staff and students in HE. Some staff and students who are 'extremely clinical vulnerable' or in 'high risk groups' may face ongoing risk and challenge within a society focussed on returning to 'normal'. HE may also face longer term consequences associated with the lost learning and digital poverty in primary and secondary schools during the pandemic. The pandemic has notably led to a large increase in the numbers of people diagnosed with long-term illness including long-Covid and mental ill health.⁵⁰ A recent report by the Welsh Parliament highlighted the scale and scope of mental ill-health within HE. Anxiety amongst the Welsh student population is 2.5 times that of the general population, with 23% of students feeling lonely most or all of the time, compared to 5% more generally. It highlighted the academic and social pressures faced by students and noted that associated mental ill-health had been further exacerbated by the pandemic. The report demonstrated the need for accurate and timely data on the extent of mental health issues within the student population, including evaluation of the pandemic 'on readiness

⁵⁰ J. Tapper, 'Covid pandemic sparks steep rise in number of people in UK with long-term illness', The Observer, March 5, 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/mar/05/covid-pandemic-sparks-steep-rise-in-number-of-people-in-uk-with-long-term-illness>; 'How should universities support students with long Covid?' (Aug 2021) <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/how-should-universities-support-students-with-long-covid/> (Dickinson, Jim, 'How should universities support students with long Covid?', Wonkhe, [accessed 10/08/22]); 'Prevalence of ongoing symptoms following coronavirus (COVID-19) infection in the UK: 4 August 2022' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/prevalenceofongoingsymptomsfollowingcoronaviruscovid19infectionintheuk/4august2022#prevalence-of-ongoing-symptoms-in-the-population-aged-16-years-and-over-by-employment-status>

for, and transitions into, higher education' and greater awareness of how mental health problems intersected with other characteristics, together with more mental health support and action to reduce any stigma associated with mental illness and accessing support at university. It also urged people not to lose focus of the many and varied personal experiences among those affected.⁵¹ Advance HE have urged educational providers to 'consider support with an intersectional lens, in light of the multiple barriers disabled students had to manage and overcome' during the pandemic.⁵² The Department for Education and the Education Policy Institute highlighted that learning losses remained greater for 'disadvantaged' pupils than their 'non-disadvantaged' peers. They also noted large regional disparities which should be considered alongside the existing geographical inequalities noted earlier in this report.⁵³

Participants in our focus groups noted that poverty was increasingly identified as an issue for students and that this was exacerbated during the pandemic. Specific issues such as the cost of high-speed broadband connections to enable online teaching and learning, together with wider issues about 'spaces' to study and engage with online lectures and seminars, only emphasised the EDI concerns related to the longer-term implications for progression, awarding gaps and employability. Much of this may be difficult to map out if they are not captured by data. This of course has become even more striking during the current cost of living crisis. The need to undertake paid work, to support themselves or families, affected students' ability to attend and engage with some aspects of university life. Participants sensed much greater anxiety about the future amongst students.

⁵¹ Welsh Parliament: Children, Young people and Education Committee, 'Mental health support in Higher Education' (March 2023): <https://senedd.wales/media/mdzljae3/cr-ld15768-e.pdf>

⁵² Disabled Students' Commission: Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences: in-depth qualitative report (Aug 2021) <https://advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/exploring-impact-covid-19-disabled-students-experiences>

Disabled Students' Commission: Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences: in-depth qualitative report (Jan 2022) – follow up report <https://advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/exploring-impact-covid-19-disabled-students-experiences-depth-qualitative-report>

⁵³ DfE Report: Understanding Progress in the 2020/21 Academic Year: Extension report covering the first half of the autumn term 2021/22 (March 2022) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1063488/Understanding_Progress_in_the_2020_to_2021_Academic_Year_Extension_report_covering_the_first_half_of_the_autumn_term_2021.pdf

EPI research for the Department for Education on pupil learning loss (March 2022)

Alongside the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis has accelerated and is now affecting both staff and students. Several reports have drawn attention to a rise in both accommodation costs and homelessness (including so-called 'hidden homelessness').⁵⁴ The value of student loans has been weakened by inflation.⁵⁵ Student poverty also affects health and wellbeing, the time and ability to focus on studies, and retention rates.⁵⁶ Most recently, in June 2023, [the Student Academic Experience Survey by Advance HE and HEPI](#) highlighted that more university students are working alongside their studies (55% compared to 45% 12 months ago) and that a large proportion said that the cost of living crisis was negatively impacting on their studies (76%).

A [guide to student poverty](#) aimed at university lecturers was produced by Dr David Hitchcock (a historian of poverty) in 2022. It provides practical advice to create more inclusive and understanding learning environments in the wake of the cost-of-living crisis, emphasising the importance of flexibility and support. Lecturers should be aware that financial circumstances may force many students to work long hours alongside full-time studies and students may need to interrupt or withdraw from their studies due to the escalating cost of living. Personal tutoring, knowledge of student financial systems and potential sources of aid, and adaptations to learning activities (planning with 'poverty in mind'), together with avoiding judgements about attendance and preparedness are all recommended.⁵⁷

Most focus group participants agreed that the pandemic, coupled with the cost-of-living crisis, became a catalyst for wider debates ranging from workload and engagement to the nature of history curricula. A very

⁵⁴ Guardian: Homeless students on rise in UK amid cost of living crisis (July 2022) <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jul/21/homeless-students-uk-cost-of-living-crisis>; Accommodation Costs Survey (2021) <https://www.unipol.org.uk/acsreport2021>

⁵⁵ 'House of Commons Library: The Value of Student Maintenance Support' (April 2022) <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN00916/SN00916.pdf>; 'Government uses high inflation as cover for hitting students, graduates and universities' (Feb 2022) <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15940>

⁵⁶ NUS – Broke: How Scotland is failing its students (May 2022) <https://www.nus-scotland.org.uk/alariming-research-on-student-poverty>

⁵⁷ 'Student Poverty: A Short Practical Guide for University Lecturers' (Aug 2022) https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mZCKUhywCFq55NocZnUuEgld57VrZKpv_4gB29ifep0/edit#

important point was raised as part of this discussion: given the increased pressures and constantly evolving challenges on the one hand and the lack of adequate resourcing on the other, how do we facilitate reflective thinking on pedagogy and the curriculum within wider constraints? EDI policy within HE needs to address broader political, structural and societal forces. Curriculum reform alone will not resolve social inequalities but nonetheless there is extensive research on EDI and pedagogy and associated initiatives that can be undertaken to make HE more accessible and inclusive.

EDI and History Curricula

Studies have demonstrated that aspects of curriculum design and delivery can help challenge inequality and discrimination. A number of resources and toolkits encourage inclusive curriculum design and delivery, which include reflection on content and approaches to teaching, learning and assessment across all disciplines.⁵⁸ An [Advance HE resource](#) emphasised that inclusive learning and teaching not only require consideration of curriculum design and delivery (including assessment and feedback) but also institutional commitment. With regards to approaches to learning and teaching, it highlighted the emphasis on student-centred, collaborative approaches 'in encouraging students from different backgrounds to engage in learning in higher education', but that not all students feel comfortable with this. The report also presented a range of institutional case studies and resources, which show inclusive practice in action.⁵⁹ Of course, it is important to recognise that what might help one student, or one group of students, may not work for everyone. A flexible and agile approach is needed to enable both clarity and diversity in teaching, learning and assessment methods.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Advance HE, *Inclusive learning and teaching in HE* (2010) <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/inclusive-learning-and-teaching-higher-education>; DfE report: *Inclusive teaching and learning in HE* (2017) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-teaching-and-learning-in-higher-education>; UCL, *Inclusive Curriculum Health Check* (2018) https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching-learning/files/ucl_inclusive_curriculum_healthcheck_2018.pdf

⁵⁹ Advance HE, *Inclusive learning and teaching in HE* (2010) <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/inclusive-learning-and-teaching-higher-education>

⁶⁰ Studies are numerous but those focus on the arts and humanities include S. Richardson, 'History', in S. Marshall (ed), *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Academic Practice* (5th edition, Routledge, Abingdon, 2019); R. Carballo, A. Cotán and Y. Spinola-Elias, 'An inclusive pedagogy in Arts and Humanities universities classrooms: what faculty members do', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*,

Subject specific research about teaching history in higher education has also addressed questions of EDI. Alan Booth argued that students should be enabled to 'connect their lives to the topics covered and experience the learning not merely in transactional terms but as a personal journey of self that involves mind, emotion and body'.⁶¹ *Teaching History for the contemporary world* (April 2021) explores the connections between teaching history in HE and social justice.⁶² Onni Gust's chapter emphasises the need to foreground difference: 'To start from the assumption that the class is full of different identities, experiences, needs and ways of learning is to make difference, rather than sameness, the norm'. They acknowledge that 'we will never fully escape the wider structural inequalities that beset higher education and society at large' but that it is possible to show an awareness of the wider challenges and difficulties faced and a willingness to do what is feasible. Gust concludes that 'It is a matter of urgency that the history discipline reads, incorporates into the curriculum, and hires people and perspectives that have been historically excluded or marginalised from the discipline'.⁶³ Gust also explored 'traditional disciplinary norms of history' in relation to objectivity and discussed how demands to 'view the past with a sense of distance and relativism' are 'profoundly alienating, if not re-traumatising, for minoritized students'.⁶⁴ Mark Hinton and Meleisa Ono-George, reflecting on the challenges and successes of designing and co-teaching an interdisciplinary module on the history of race and racism and its legacies, noted that 'One of the dangers of teaching histories of race, and in particular racial violence, without considering contemporary racism is that you can easily end up detaching these historic acts from their legacies in contemporary society and in the lived experiences of those in the classroom'.⁶⁵ In discussing the application of anti-racist pedagogy,

20:1 (2021), pp. 21-41; T.E. Richardson, 'The under-attainment of ethnic minority students in UK higher education: what we know and what we don't know', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39:2 (2015), pp. 278-291.

⁶¹ A. Booth, *History Teaching at its Best* (2014)

⁶² Adele Nye and Jennifer Clark, *Teaching History for the contemporary world: Tensions, Challenges and Classroom Experiences in Higher Education* (2021).

⁶³ O. Gust, 'Foregrounding Difference' in Adele Nye and Jennifer Clark, *Teaching History for the contemporary world: Tensions, Challenges and Classroom Experiences in Higher Education* (2021).

⁶⁴ Gust, 'Foregrounding Difference'.

⁶⁵ Mark Hinton and Meleisa Ono-George, 'Teaching a History of "Race" and Anti-Racist Action in an Academic Classroom', *Area*, 20, 52 (2020), p. 217.

they note the importance of creating space for students to share their understandings of race and racism, valuing the student voice and experience, and challenging traditional pedagogical practices. Ultimately, they argue that learning should 'transform the way both the teacher and student think and operate outside the classroom'.⁶⁶

Participants in our focus groups highlighted a range of ways in which curriculum design could support EDI work, emphasising the role that history specifically played. Discussion focussed on the drive for more inclusive curricula and what this meant in practice for history, the ways in which we teach and assess history as well as what we teach and assess, and the ways in which history curricula could be used to address some EDI issues and enhance student experience.

Drive for more inclusive curricula: Diversifying and decolonising the curriculum

All participants identified this as a key priority in their departments, units or institutions. Movements such as the 'Why is my curriculum white?' campaign, launched at University College London (UCL) in 2014, and Black Lives Matter, founded in 2013, and more recently the death of George Floyd (2020) and the toppling of the Edward Colston statue (2020) have given momentum to endeavours to decolonise the curriculum.⁶⁷ HE has responded in different ways, with both institutional responses and with staff- and student-led initiatives.⁶⁸ Although these have had varying success, participants felt that this had largely not been affected by the pandemic.

Some participants talked about a preference for 'diversifying' rather than 'decolonising' the curriculum. This was recognised as potentially

⁶⁶ Hinton and Ono-George, 'Teaching a History of "Race" and Anti-Racist Action in an Academic Classroom', pp. 217-8.

⁶⁷ UCL, 'Why is my Curriculum White?' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Dscx4h2l-Pk>. Black Lives Matter <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>

⁶⁸ The Halpin report on UK Universities' Response to Black Lives Matter noted that 83.3% of respondents said their institution made public statements regarding the BLM movement but only 25.6% felt this was appropriate or sufficient. 'UK Universities' Response to Black Lives Matter (Nov 2020) <https://halpinpartnership.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Halpin-Report-UK-Universities-Response-to-Black-Lives-Matter.pdf>

problematic but important because they felt that often it was diversification rather than decolonisation that was taking place. On reflection, it was speculated as to whether this was due to a focus on what we teach rather than how we teach in some instances. In addition, one participant noted that 'vastly diverging views on what was meant' by decolonising the curriculum could hinder action on anything. It was noted that there tended to be widespread support for first-year curriculum reform that embraced 'decolonisation' but not necessarily beyond. In part this was associated with autonomy over modules but also related back to varying definitions and interpretations. Programme level curriculum reform, together with greater understanding of the importance of how we teach as well as what we teach, were seen as potential ways in addressing these challenges.

Participants welcomed an increasing emphasis on anti-racist pedagogy as a way to move discussion and practice away from not only **what** we teach but also **how** we teach. As Ono-George emphasises 'You do not have to teach a module directly related to race or racism in order to employ anti-racist pedagogy'. Moreover, 'teaching a module that is explicitly about people of colour or empire does not automatically mean it engages an anti-racist approach to teaching'. Ono-George stresses 'Racial equality will only be achieved if we are willing to change the very structure and pedagogy of our classrooms, adopting critical and engaged anti-racist pedagogical practice'.⁶⁹ Principles of anti-racist pedagogy include fostering critical thinking, encouraging staff and students to be self-reflective of their positionality, valuing student contributions, enabling students to put theory into practice, and facilitating peer communities through collaborative learning. Inclusive teaching often emphasises the need for staff to give up or share some power and authority in the classroom 'so that students can experience a greater sense of ownership and choice over their learning', but Chavella Pittman and Thomas J. Tobin ask what are the consequences of this, 'when the member of staff is someone whose authority may already be questioned', citing gender, race and

⁶⁹ M. Ono-George, 'Beyond diversity: anti-racist pedagogy in British History departments', *Women's History Review*, 28, 3 (2019), pp. 500-507.

disability as examples.⁷⁰ Encouraging staff and students to be self-reflective of their positionality and how this informs power dynamics, an anti-racist pedagogical approach can also highlight wider structural and societal issues.⁷¹

Participants acknowledged that decolonisation work takes a lot of time (time which was not usually adequately credited in workloads, if at all), and although it can be useful to demonstrate 'success' or even 'easy wins' to sustain commitment from colleagues, participants stressed the importance of being realistic about the long timeframes involved and that this was an ongoing process. Other challenges identified included extending this work beyond those actively interested and engaged and overcoming resistance and bigger structural issues that can hinder or even undermine 'work on the ground'.

Everyone taking part in the focus groups considered the RHS reports to have been inspirational and pivotal, with one participant describing the race and ethnicity report as 'paradigm shifting'. Participants noted how the reports had been used to generate discussion and stimulate change. Much of the EDI work being undertaken in history departments was thought to be underpinned by the findings of these reports in some way. This ranged from highlighting issues and pushing for reforms to informing curriculum reform. Participants discussed how the reports were being used in modules to raise awareness of issues of race, ethnicity, gender and LGBT+ in history departments and discuss inequalities in the discipline, and in some cases had become compulsory reading on core, introductory history modules.

Participants in the second set of focus groups noted that EDI was 'far more visible' in the revised [QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for History \(2022\)](#) and that this was a useful framework with which to review curricula. The statement encourages 'shared commitment to and shared

⁷⁰ C. Pittman and T.J. Tobin, 'Academe has a lot to learn about how inclusive teaching affects instructors', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 Feb 2022: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/academe-has-a-lot-to-learn-about-how-inclusive-teaching-affects-instructors>

⁷¹ Mai Abu Moghli and Laila Kadiwal, 'Decolonising the curriculum beyond the surge: Conceptualisation, positionality and conduct', *London Review of Education*, 19:1 (2021), pp. 1-16; Kyoko Kishimoto, 'Anti-racist pedagogy: from faculty's self-reflection to organizing within and beyond the classroom', *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 540-554.

responsibility for EDI in the content and delivery of History courses'. It provides subject-specific perspectives, noting that the discipline 'seeks to recover the diversity of human organisation and experience in the past, and to recognise the enduring legacies of the past in the present'. It goes on to highlight that:

'History is not a comfortable subject; it includes confronting uncomfortable and unsettling aspects of the pasts, elements of which may continue to resonate and inspire controversy and debate today, but which are an unavoidable part of the process of historical recovery and essential to the rigour of historical enquiry. History operates best when its practitioners reflect the diversity of human society and thought, bringing different perspectives and life experiences to bear on the past, and engage in self-reflection and critique to test and question both their own and the discipline's approaches to studying the past. In particular, history has the capacity to create a balanced understanding of the past through examination of non-dominant and traditionally marginalised cultures'.

As a Wonkhe feature reflected, the QAA Subject Benchmark statements enable us to reflect on what inclusive education looks like at a subject level.⁷²

All participants noted an emphasis on redesigning first-year modules to include more diverse content and to make them more inclusive. However, many identified difficulties translating this across the rest of the degree programme with some resistance specifically regarding specialist teaching and autonomy over the curriculum but more generally around concerns about time and workload. Nevertheless, some excellent case studies were discussed, and the role of curriculum review processes was emphasised in ensuring this work is undertaken at programme level. Participants noted that great work had been undertaken at modular level but that the ideal was to embed EDI in the curriculum ensuring all students had opportunities to engage with these debates and conversations. This required programme-level approaches to curriculum design, but some participants also referred to the importance of mindset and how one colleague 'used the stick of rock analogy to talk about EDI in the

⁷² A. Crum, 'What does inclusive education look like at a subject level?', Wonkhe blog post (March 2022) <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/what-does-inclusive-education-look-like-at-a-subject-level/>

curriculum – it should be evident throughout and everywhere, not just on designated modules’. Leadership and a strong commitment from everyone within a department were recognised as being crucial to enacting change. Challenges to creating truly inclusive curricula were also identified. In addition to workload pressures and the need for wider commitment, participants also noted that curriculum change can be slow to implement which can lead to frustration and in some cases apathy. Resourcing was highlighted as a key challenge. For example, accessing global and diverse perspectives can be difficult, with sometimes limited secondary reading in English and issues with translating sufficient sources. Moreover, a lot of work to ‘decolonise’ or ‘diversify’ includes ensuring reading lists are more representative in terms of gender and ethnicity. This was often considered a small and manageable change. However, participants noted that even where full names have been given, this still doesn’t necessarily reveal gender and ethnicity and it would be problematic to make assumptions based purely on names. Thus, even if the reading list was more diverse and representative, this may still not be transparent to students.

Assessment

Participants felt that less attention was generally given to ‘inclusive assessments’ as part of EDI work compared to that devoted to content. Plenty of examples of excellent practice in this area were discussed but there was still a sense that this was secondary to content when thinking about EDI and the history curriculum. Indeed, some participants had observed resistance to changes in assessment, especially where assessment remained relatively traditional or concerns about academic rigour being undermined by ‘alternative’ assessments are foregrounded. Moreover, there is less research about how assessment in history relates to awarding gaps.

Participants agreed that two key questions should always be asked:

- why are we assessing?
- and why are we assessing in the ways we do in history?

This process of questioning should also encourage us to think about how we build in more choice for students and how assessment can be part of wider curriculum approaches regarding EDI. Designing assessment from a programme level perspective was noted as being key to ensuring

'alternative' assessments can be 'inclusive', introducing students to these formats in the first year to develop their assessment literacy. Creative methods of assessments were discussed, with examples of excellent innovative practice that retained academic rigor cited. Assessments where students could actively engage with aspects of EDI, such as decolonisation, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, disability or poverty, were also discussed. This could include engagement with public history, designing their own decolonised curriculum or historicization of contemporary issues.

Pastoral care and academic support

The growing pressures and challenges faced by students and the often-insufficient support to address the increased demand for support was highlighted as a matter of concern amongst the participants in our research.

Mental health in HE was recognised as a priority prior to the pandemic, although participants noted it has certainly been exacerbated during and after. A report by the House of Commons on student mental health in England found that according to HESA data, in 2021-2022 the number of students who said they had a mental health condition was three and a half times higher than reported in 2014-2015. The report identifies a number of factors specific to the university experience which are believed to be affecting students' mental health: moving away from home and from their support network, particularly in first year; pressures to secure a high-class degree; and financial pressures with rising costs of living, with 90% of students surveyed by the National Union of Students reporting that rising costs of living had had a negative impact on their mental health.⁷³ The Covid-19 pandemic caused significant disruption and anxiety amongst students, which impacted the mental health and wellbeing of staff and students alike. Student mental health charity, Student Minds, analysed data concerning the student experience throughout 2020 and 2021, and found that 74% of students reported that

⁷³ J. Lewis and P. Bolton, *Student mental health in England: Statistics, policy and guidance*, Research briefing, House of Commons Library, 30 May 2023, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8593/>. The report includes links to a wide range of data recently collected by universities and third sector organisation on student mental health.

Covid had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing at university, while 49% of students reported that the pandemic had negative consequences for their financial situation and two thirds of respondents said that they 'often felt isolated or lonely since March 2020'.⁷⁴ The experience of our participants clearly reflects the national trend: many noted a large number of students being diagnosed with mental health or a range of chronic health conditions before university and that there needed to be increased support to address this demand. Some colleagues had undertaken mental health first aid training but there were concerns that staff should be adequately supported, especially as they were sometimes the first point of contact for students experiencing traumatic and distressing incidents.

In post-pandemic higher education, pastoral and academic support services have become central to students' retention, achievement and wellbeing. Whilst many institutions have approached mental health and wellbeing from a strategic perspective within the organisation, the growth of academic and pastoral support provision, particularly of wellbeing services, has not always been organic and has often resulted in a complicated, bureaucratic and fragmented system that both staff and students find it difficult to navigate. Assessing the sector's attempts to improve student support, Professor Edward Peck, Vice Chancellor of Nottingham Trent University, notes that 'Most interventions lack robust evidence, require investment in a time of financial constraint and create expectations of colleagues, in particular academics, who may not be well equipped to implement them'.⁷⁵ The Student Needs Framework, a collaboration between Advance HE, UUK Student Policy Network and the Higher Education Student Support Champion, was conceived as a template for HEIs to develop support systems as a response to the core needs of their students, which are broadly divided into two categories: needs that 'relate to students' individual competence, confidence and resilience', and those that enable students 'to build their feelings of belonging and community'.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ N. Frampton and D. Smithies, *University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic Listening to higher education communities throughout 2020/2021*, <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/lifeinapandemic.html>.

⁷⁵ E. Peck, 'Seeing the wood through the trees: redesigning student support', AdvanceHE, 4 October 2023, <https://advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/seeing-wood-through-trees-redesigning-student-support>

⁷⁶ *Student Needs Framework*, <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning/student-needs-framework>

Academic and pastoral support delivered through personal tutoring is regarded as central to support student transition into university and develop a sense of belonging by facilitating academic and social integration.⁷⁷ Focus group participants discussed the crucial role of effective personal tutoring systems and compared different models. One highlighted the success of embedding personal tutoring in the curriculum, with colleagues acting as both personal tutor and seminar tutor for groups in the first and final year of their UG degree. This curriculum integrated model has become more widespread in recent years due to its efficient use of resources and ability to generate a sense of belonging amongst students.⁷⁸ The value of 'knowing our students' was stressed. Support plans, although important, were considered very generic and focused on mitigating problems rather than supporting students on a day-day basis. Often, we know very little about the students we teach – staff may engage with students through large group teaching or one-off classes with no substantive data about them or their other work that could help with support. Some participants spoke about how certain history modules created 'connection and community' and meant students were more willing to discuss their own experiences with their tutor. These included modules connected either with personal tutoring or with interests and identity (e.g. special subjects or modules with a focus of race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, health and disability). Others discussed how they invited students to introduce themselves and share anything that might help support them during their degree or a module. The benefits of this approach were noted to include foregrounding what the students felt was important and ensuring students without formal diagnoses or support plans could still be supported, although it was acknowledged that some students may not want to share. The move to online learning during the pandemic sometimes made it more difficult to check-in with students, with participants stressing the importance of reaching out to students and letting them know you are there, but acknowledging the risks associated with less opportunities for informal

⁷⁷ A. T. Yale, 'The personal tutor–student relationship: student expectations and experiences of personal tutoring in higher education', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43:4, 2019, 533-544, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1377164>

⁷⁸ D. Grey and C. Osborne, 'Perceptions and principles of personal tutoring', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44:3, 2020, 285-299, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1536258>

encounters on campus (e.g. before or after a lecture, seminar or workshop).

Community Building and Belonging

Participants noted the importance of the community building and the idea of belonging, which builds on the 'sense of membership' recognised and developed in the literature dealing with students' experiences of higher education.⁷⁹ Research on student belonging is wide and suggests that a sense of belonging can affect the overall experience of university, with students who do not develop this far more likely to experience poor mental health and wellbeing and to disengage from or leave their studies.⁸⁰ Conversely, students who experience a high sense of belonging tend to display higher emotional and behavioural engagement; in the increasingly diverse higher education student population, sense of belonging has been found to be of particular significance for the engagement and success of first generation students.⁸¹ Moreover, the role of specific places and spaces (especially informal places, green spaces and living arrangements) through which to build connections and community has been acknowledged.⁸² Thus, student belonging has gradually emerged as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which involves the personal space ('self-identification, self-esteem and life satisfaction) as well as academic and social engagement, and surroundings (including natural and cultural spaces).⁸³

⁷⁹ V.Tinto, *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. A detailed exploration of the notion of sense of belonging to higher education can be found in G. Dost and L. Mazzoli Smith, 'Understanding higher education students' sense of belonging: a qualitative meta-ethnographic analysis', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47:6, 2023, 822-849, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2191176>

⁸⁰ G. Capper, 'Belonging inclusion and mental health are all connected', Wonkhe (2022) <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/belonging-inclusion-and-mental-health-are-all-connected/>; Wonkhe/Pearson, Student Perceptions of Belonging and Inclusion at University (2022): <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/02/Belonging-and-inclusion-survey-Wonkhe-Pearson-Feb-22.pdf>

⁸¹ C. Gillen-O'Neel, 'Sense of belonging and student engagement: A daily study of first-and continuing-generation college students', *Research in Higher Education*, 62 (1), 2021, 45–71. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-019-09570-y>

⁸² S. Oliveira, 'Spaces and places matter for student outcomes', Wonkhe (2022): <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/spaces-and-places-matter-for-student-outcomes/>

⁸³ : M. Y. Ahn and H. H. Davis ' Four domains of students' sense of belonging to university', *Studies in Higher Education*, 45:3, 622-634, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1564902>

The relationship between student belonging and retention and attrition has been widely explored, with some studies focussing on the experience of first year students and research students as the group most susceptible to attrition.⁸⁴ In the transition to university, in particular, the academic and social environments become key in supporting students' 'confidence and competence', with academic and non-academic staff playing a significant role in helping students build a sense of 'connectedness' to the university.⁸⁵ The importance of engaging students early (at pre-entry and induction levels) and throughout the student life cycle has also been emphasised as a key responsibility for HE institutions, with activities designed to help students develop social relationships with their peers and through the creation of activities with an overt academic purpose that will facilitate the interaction and understanding between staff and students.⁸⁶

The Covid-19 pandemic altered the way in which community building had been conceived and constructed as higher education switched from in person to online synchronous and asynchronous learning. In the [Pandemic Pedagogy Handbook](#), History UK highlighted challenges and opportunities for emerging online communities. Some of the documented experience of belonging and community building during the pandemic outlines clear communication, student support and the creation of online study groups helped students' maintain engagement and a sense of belonging; students' preference for synchronous learning and live lectures was noted, although in the post pandemic education environment, students have started appreciating the benefits of recorded lectures that they can watch at their own pace.⁸⁷ Research on students' sense of belonging during the pandemic found that it was mostly affected by the individuals' experience of the transition from in person to online learning.

⁸⁴ P. O'Keefe, 'A sense of belonging: Improving student retention', *College Student Journal*, 47(4), 2013, 605-613, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1651860196>; E. Kahu, N. Ashley, C. Picton, 'Exploring the complexity of first-year student belonging in higher education: familiarity, interpersonal and academic belonging', *Student Success*, 13(2), 2022, <https://studentsuccessjournal.org/article/view/2264>

⁸⁵ C. Meehan and K. Howells, 'In Search of the Feeling of 'Belonging' in Higher Education: Undergraduate Students Transition into Higher Education.', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43 (10), 2019, 1376-1390, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1490702>

⁸⁶ L. Thomas, *Building Student Engagement and Belonging in Higher Education at a Time of Change*, London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, March 2012, <https://www.phf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/What-Works-Summary-report.pdf>

⁸⁷ H. Luong, Y. Man, F. Botafago and N. Beatson, 'Sense of belonging during the global pandemic: a case of accounting students', *Accounting Education*, 31 (6), 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639284.2022.2134732>

In some cases, that transition resulted in the loss of connection between students and educators and students and their peers, which created a barrier to the development of a sense of belonging. However, when educators made a concerted effort to foster a sense of belonging in the learning environment, students reported greater satisfaction.⁸⁸

For focus group participants, community building and fostering a sense of belonging appeared relative to the size of department, with some participants perceiving this to be a bigger challenge in larger departments than in their smaller counterparts. This led to a disconnect between the provision of student engagement initiatives, even at departmental level, and engagement from students with them, without clear indications as to why this was the case. Additional efforts to build and develop community during the pandemic were noted, again with varying successes. The loss of informal spaces for community building during the pandemic, such as waiting to go into a lecture hall or sitting together in the library, were noted as having lingering consequences for students. The use of social media to create support networks was remarked, but some participants felt this had given rise to misinformation and thus additional stress/confusion. Additional demands on students' time, such as working or caring, could also mean students were less able to participate in such activities or feel like they 'belonged' to the student community. The role of induction and personal tutoring in mitigating against such isolation was noted in this context. Further discussions centred on the intersections between 'student community' and a distinct 'history community' that brought staff and students together. Wider research suggests that less than half of students feel a sense of community with others on their programme, with similar proportions perceiving there to be either inadequate opportunities to interact with others on their course or ineffective means to access a support network on their programme. It also noted that students wanted to be able to get to know people on their programme better and ideally to develop closer or more friendships with their peers also studying history.⁸⁹ Participants were keen to explore ways

⁸⁸ N. Smith, J. M. Graham, C. Waddell-Henowitch, D. De Moissac, M. Lam, 'Post-secondary student belonging in a virtual learning environment during Covid19', *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 52 (3), 2023, <https://journals.sfu.ca/cjhe/index.php/cjhe/article/view/189851>

⁸⁹ G. Capper, 'Belonging inclusion and mental health are all connected', Wonkhe (2022) <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/belonging-inclusion-and-mental-health-are-all-connected/>

in which this could be achieved in all departments/units regardless of size. They were also keen to note that community building and a sense of belonging were linked to identity and representation and could also be fostered within the curriculum. The importance of students having their 'voices' heard was emphasised, not only via formal committees and forums but also in the curriculum and assessed work.

History-Specific Opportunities

History as a discipline is well placed to actively engage with EDI. The revised [QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for History \(2022\)](#) posits that the study of history can be used to counter the under-representation of marginalised groups and contribute to 'the quest to tackle both new and historical global challenges'. This was a sentiment shared by focus group participants. Many noted that big questions about what the study of history is (or could be) are often discussed as part of introductory history modules. Students are encouraged to consider who or what is included and excluded from the study of history (in different contexts, including their own curriculum), the politicisation of history, the value of history, who writes history and how is history constructed. The content of the curriculum, especially core modules, should reflect diverse cohorts of students.

Beyond core modules, the study of history provides scope for students to shape their own curriculum. The role of specialist (often optional) modules was discussed, noting their importance not only because of their emphasis on research-led teaching and intellectual rigour but also in terms of creating opportunities where students can connect personal narratives and lived experiences with the curriculum. Participants explored examples of modules where lived experiences could come to the fore more, particularly where the content was focused on gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, or disability and health. The challenge of course is that not all students can opt for these modules, or indeed have the opportunity to do so, or that they can become self-selecting cohorts who want to address these aspects of history rather than the wider student cohort. Thus, participants agreed that in addition to specialist modules, there needs to be ways to embed EDI throughout the

curriculum, so it is not perceived to be something only done on certain modules. This returns to the importance of programme level curriculum design.

As well as choice of optional modules (where offered), historical research projects often enable students to explore aspects of history that really matter to them. This is perhaps most enshrined in the dissertation or equivalent longer piece of research or historical practice in the final year of study but can also include shorter research projects throughout the degree. Some participants felt there was scope for more personalised curricula, not only in terms of content but also more flexible pedagogies that encourage co-creation and empower students. Some universities also actively provide opportunities to showcase research and thus foreground history/histories that matter to students.

Historical source material provides opportunities to engage with a range of issues and debates. However, it can also present challenges. During lockdowns, participants noted there were challenges of presenting certain sources online, both because there were less opportunities for contextualisation and students' domestic arrangements made it difficult if not impossible to engage with material relating to topics or issues that could be contentious or even dangerous in this setting. Moreover, it was difficult to interpret how students were responding to engaging with this material when cameras were switched off and conversations went silent, or when staff entered breakout rooms. Even in a physical classroom there could be difficulties regarding 'sensitive' or 'uncomfortable' source material in team-taught modules. Participants noted that this was much easier to address in your own modules where you understand the sources and context extremely well. Emphasis was placed on the need for adequate support for all team members to equip them with the skills and knowledge to work with these sources. Examples that had worked well included team meetings, training, more time/workload allocation – particularly to support part time or hourly paid tutors, glossary of terms, tutor handbooks with advice and/or FAQs, open lines of communication between the various members of the teaching team including encouraging seminar tutors to ask questions. Gust also recently reflected that 'Teaching transgender studies during a period in which trans lives, trans rights and trans futures have been thrust to centre stage feels urgent,

necessary, and exciting, if also somewhat daunting'. They also note the 'serious but productive methodological challenges in teaching this history' discussing the 'paucity of records from the perspective of indigenous peoples is itself part of the history of colonial violence...primary sources, and their absence, have a history'.⁹⁰

In conclusion, history has a unique role to play in enabling effective EDI practices. EDI initiatives must be given long-term sustained funding, support, and staffing. Further research is urgently needed to understand and support disabled staff and students working within history and History UK is leading a new project on this. History UK look forward to further collaborations and working towards greater diversity and inclusion in the future.

⁹⁰ Onni Gust 'Teaching Transgender Studies in Turbulent Times', *Freevoice: Education Magazine*, 1 May 2022
<https://shudhashar.com/teaching-transgender-studies-in-turbulent-times/>