

Education for Social Justice: Research, Policy and Practice

Price, I., Whitehead, G., Khan, A., Webb, J

London Metropolitan University

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Introduction

In February 2020, Webb, Arthur, McFarlane, Burns and Warren conducted a qualitative evaluation of the experiences of Black and minority ethnic undergraduate Health and Social Care students studying at London Metropolitan University (London Met). The evaluation was later published in the *Journal of Further and Higher Education* (2021). This article discusses the recommendations made by Webb et al. for the undergraduate Health and Social Care degree programme at London Met before comparing how these align with the London Met Education for Social Justice Framework (ESJF; 2020). Finally, this article presents how the actions taken in redesigning the undergraduate Health and Social Care course curriculum over the 2020/21 academic year reflect the recommendations from Webb et al. and the principles of the ESJF. It is noted that these three programmes of work or actions were completed independently of one another. This paper provides a comparison of research (the recommendations of Webb et al), policy (the principles of the ESJF) and practice (the redesign of the BSc (Hons) Health and Social Care degree) before summarising the areas for on-going reflection.

Research: Recommendations of Webb et al.

Webb et al. (2020), set out to understand the experiences of London Met undergraduate Black and minority ethnic Health and Social Care students, assessed through a critical race lens (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Recommendations for practice were made at an institutional level and at a course level; this article focuses specifically on the course level recommendations.

Taking a critical and cultural relevant pedagogical approach

The evaluation from Webb et al., recommended that actions taken towards curriculum development be culturally relevant using critical pedagogy and critical race praxis. The recommendation was for a culturally and socially relevant curriculum; using a critical problem-posing approach; that was student centred with 'teacher-talk' kept to a minimum to support critical dialogue (Shor, 1992). Marginalised students need to critically analyse and question environments and processes that promote inequalities with the confidence and skills to do so (Ladson-billings, 1995).

Decolonising the curriculum

Decolonising the curriculum requires a commitment to understanding the differences in students' experiences of the University, the degree, and its modules. It requires a commitment to open and critical dialogue in all areas. The curriculum should be democratised with multiple perspectives embraced and celebrated (Kingston University, n.d). The syllabus and delivery of the course content should engage the socio-cultural diversity of students, allow and promote different learning styles, abilities, and needs, whilst not presenting one ideological perspective.

Curriculum co-creation

To empower students, power needs to be distributed appropriately across all parties with power imbalances challenged, especially where they may reinforce existing inequalities (Higher Education Academy, 2014). Students should be fully engaged as partners in curriculum design and pedagogical approaches with power shared equally (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014; Shor, 1999).

Creating a sense of belonging

Attention should be given to the impact that diverse classrooms can have on student experience. Academics should endeavour to develop a feeling of social and cultural comfort and facilitate communication between students of different cultural heritage (Bamford and Pollard, 2019). Advanced HE supports student centred approaches, such as working across different peer groups in small group settings, allowing students to draw on their own experiences.

Academic skills and literacy

Academic abilities and literacy are the basic skills needed for academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Webb et al. emphasised the necessity to facilitate the development of academic and literacy skills for students early in their learning journey.

Cultural awareness extends to the assessment strategy. A diverse range of assessment approaches should be considered, giving students the ability to choose the approach that reflects their own strengths, educational and cultural backgrounds (Kingston University, n.d.).

Staff engagement

Staff engagement is the foundation of inclusive curriculum development (McDuff, Tatam, Beacock and Ross, 2018). The views of staff were missing from the evaluation by Webb et al., identified as an important area for follow-up research. Peer feedback on the early evaluation results highlighted the importance of avoiding both a student deficit and a staff deficit model. Development opportunities should be provided on cultural awareness and developing consciousness of anti-oppressive practice.

Action research

The recommendations by Webb et al. offer an opportunity for Action Research, a critical reflection of practice in action (Zubber-Skerrit, 1992). Academics should be encouraged to undertake research and evaluation of their own practices and pedagogical approaches, continuously questioning “If the journey is the same, why is the outcome so different?” (Kingston University, n.d.).

Policy: The London Met Education for Social Justice Framework

The 2019 London Met Strategy was designed to foreground and strengthen the University’s position as an institution with a deep social purpose and longstanding commitments to social justice and social mobility. As part of the Strategy, and building on previous University initiatives (e.g., the Inclusive Curriculum Framework, 2019), the University launched the ESJF in July 2020.

The ESJF was developed by a group of 30 London Met staff, students, and the Students Union. It consists of six key dimensions (see Figure 1). These are designed to inspire deep reflection on how an egalitarian ethos and equitable educational outcomes might be achieved. The ESJF is a values-led, inclusive pedagogy framework that brings together principles of best practice from the wider higher education sector. It aims to address the University’s awarding gaps and support all students to meet their higher education goals.

It should be noted that the overriding concern of the ESJF is to support the development of curricula and practices that directly align with principles of equity, that support student diversity and that meet the challenges facing the University’s local and global communities. The ESJF is thus the main way in which the University has set out to deliver its Strategy via the curriculum. It is an ambitious and far-reaching educational framework with distinctive features for transforming structures so that all students can fulfil their potential.

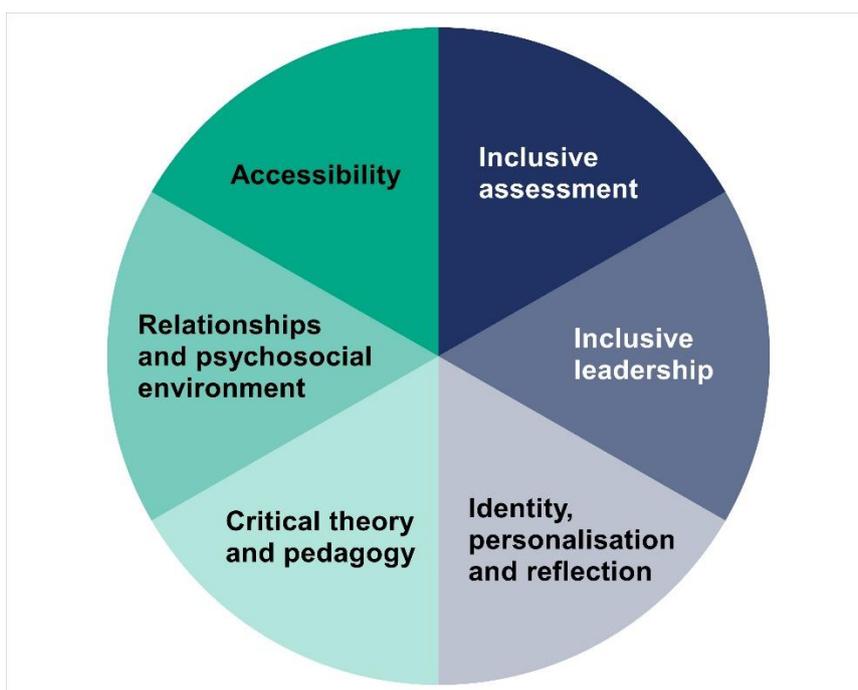


Figure 1. The six dimensions of the ESJF (London Met, 2020)

Parallels between the ESJF and the recommendations of Webb, et al.

The insights elicited by the course level evaluation of Webb, et al. appear to align in many respects with the transformational direction promoted and led by the ESJF - and underscore the value of action research and ongoing scholarly activity in staff. For example, Webb et al., recommend that staff and students should work in partnership to co-create the curriculum including using critical and culturally relevant pedagogies, creating a sense of belonging, and decolonising the curriculum. Partnership and co-creation was the practice used in the original development of the ESJF itself in 2019 and underpins the ongoing implementation of the framework: The University's Student Curriculum Partners Programme was introduced in summer 2020 and continues to be rolled out across all courses to embed co-creation.

Practice: Redesigning the Health and Social Care curriculum

The redesign and revalidation of the BSc (Hons) Health and Social Care programme at London Met was undertaken prior to both the evaluation by Webb et al. and the introduction of the ESJF. However, this process was informed by the same issues that prompted the investigation of the lived experience of Black and minority ethnic students and influenced by discussions with senior University staff responsible for the development of the ESJF to ensure broad alignment with the anticipated features of the framework. The aim of the course team was not to take an interventionist approach, rather, to redesign the programme from the ground up with critical and relational pedagogy at its core. Relational pedagogy and creating a sense of belonging begins with tutors, the importance of which are highlighted in the ESJF and in the work of Webb et al. A collaborative approach was taken to the redesign and revalidation of the BSc (Hons) Health and Social Care programme with the course tutors involved ensuring shared belonging of the course with the teaching team.

The demographic profile of student cohorts is characterised not only by a high percentage of Black and minority ethnic students but also by other factors which needed to be considered when redesigning the curriculum. These include age, gender, declared disability, dependents and non-traditional academic pathways to undergraduate study. To address these challenges, critical social theory was adopted as the course philosophy which would allow for course activities to be consistent and aligned to the overall purpose of the course; to be inclusive and progressive. Students study disciplines related to health and social care in order to expose and critique dominant ideologies and societal structures that lead to poorer outcomes for specific groups. A key ethos of the course is, therefore, a central emphasis on social justice and social inclusion, consistent with the ESJF.

Consistent with a commitment to producing graduates who challenge exclusionary and discriminatory practice and who bring about lasting social change, critical pedagogy is the dominant teaching and learning approach throughout the course. This involves a collaborative approach which engages students as partners in an inclusive course and which reflects and recognises the lived experience of the diverse student body. Teaching and learning are dialogic, participative, and reflective activities involving problem and enquiry-based approaches with

students undertaking a variety of assessments reflecting the requirements of the workplace and their stage of development.

The development of critical thinking and the ability to reflect on experience is crucial to critical theory and critical pedagogy. Therefore, reflective learning is embedded within all modules as a key component of the teaching and learning approach. However, to ensure that students are given every opportunity to develop skills of reflection, these are explicitly addressed through experiential and personal activities within specific Academic Skills and Literacy modules and Personal and Professional Development modules, key additions to the Health and Social Care curriculum.

Early reflections on delivering and sustaining change

The new BSc (Hons) Health and Social Care curriculum was implemented at the start of the 2020/21 academic year for the new level 4 cohort. As outlined in the previous section, delivery of the new curriculum has included activities to decolonise the curriculum and involve students in its co-creation, the embedding of academic skills and literacy and personal and professional development as core themes. Early reviews of student experience indicate a strong level of satisfaction with the adopted approach, although it is too early to assess changes through the National Student Survey as the undergraduate programme needs to complete the full three-year cycle. The results of the National Student Survey in 2023 will provide a robust assessment of the impact of the work to redesign the curriculum. In the meantime, the course team plan to track and evaluate the impact of implementation with opportunities for action research to be explored to support continued reflection and action. They will also draw on knowledge generated by recent related projects within the team; for example, the oral history study with minoritised health and social care students (Khan, A. and Gabriel, J., 2020).

To sustain change, there is a clear need to closely monitor on an on-going basis the alignment of the new curriculum and its delivery to the ESJF using a critical race lens, whilst also referring back to the recommendations of Webb et al; modifications should be implemented where appropriate. In addition, the work of Webb et al. to understand the experiences of Black and minority ethnic students should be repeated to qualitatively assess a change in student experiences.

Central to the new curriculum is a focus on relational pedagogy with the aim of establishing a sense of community and involvement with significant focus on the incorporation of the student voice. Small groups teaching, used throughout the BSc (Hons) Health and Social Care, supports interaction between staff and students helping to develop positive and meaningful relationships. Ljungblad (2021) comments on how teachers' relational proficiencies can create opportunities for students to participate in their education. This clearly creates a need for ongoing professional development and review in order to develop a relational pathway that explores participation, accessibility and equity in delivery of the ESJF initiatives. This commitment requires consistent staff engagement and development with ongoing review to evaluate efficacy.

In summary

To improve the experiences of Black and minority ethnic undergraduate Health and Social Care students Webb et al. made several recommendations. These included taking a critical and culturally relevant pedagogical approach, action to decolonise the curriculum with the curriculum co-created by staff and students, creation of a sense of belonging and the development of academic and literacy skills. Webb et al. highlighted the importance of staff engagement and on-going action research to continually evaluate, evolve and adapt the curriculum as required. These recommendations are aligned to the London Met ESJF which is founded on the belief that curricula and practice must align with the principles of equity, student identity, and the challenges facing London and its communities.

The new undergraduate Health and Social Care curriculum embodies social justice, compassion and inclusion. Early indications are that there is a strong level of satisfaction with the adopted approach, however, on-going monitoring and evaluation is required; as highlighted by Ladson-Billings in 1995, studies investigating education and race should take place again and again as we will always need to know more about underlying issues and what works to bring about change.

The ESJF is a dynamic guide to ongoing praxis. It serves to carve out space for staff and students to participate in ongoing transformations towards the goal of educational equity and social justice, it is a call to action research and Webb et al.'s evaluation goes some way towards contributing to this.

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Biographical note

Ian Price is the Head of Subject for Health, Social Care and Early Childhood at London Met. Ian has a background in Mental Health Nursing and his research interests include the role of user and public involvement in service delivery. Ian was a member of the University Working Group that led to the development of the ESJF and led the revalidation of the BSc (Hons) Health & Social Care.

Graham Whitehead is a Principal Lecturer in Health and an Academic Liaison Tutor at London Met. Graham's research interests include transcultural practice, disability, and sexual difference. Graham is a senior Accredited Counsellor/Psychotherapist and a member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

Dr Alya Khan is a Senior Lecturer in Health Ethics at London Met and is the Education for Social Justice Lead in her School. Alya sits on the executive committee of the Society for Women in Philosophy, UK, and is a member of the International Network of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics. Alya's research interests span issues of equality and social justice in health and education.

Dr Justin Webb is a Senior Lecturer in Public Health at London Met. Justin has a background in Public Health both as a practitioner and a researcher. Justin's research interests are in education, the behavioural and social sciences, and their link to Public Health.