

## Introduction to the Special Edition

**Karen Lipsedge**

Kingston University, UK

**Hilda Mulrooney**

Kingston University, UK

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy, 2020).

This timely compilation thoughtfully highlights key themes in the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) arena in general and in reference to Learning Development in particular. While it may seem absurd that in 2023 we remain in a position where a special EDI-focused edition is needed, academia is not always fast to change, with a tendency to identify rather than address institutional and sectoral barriers for minoritised groups. The papers in this special issue range from case studies to book reviews, providing a relatively broad overview of EDI in Learning Development in higher education (HE). Some of the papers focus on equity rather than equality, specifically to highlight that inclusion does not necessarily mean equal treatment but enabling access to the same opportunities for all. In this special issue the value of an equity-based approach is highlighted by those papers that show how embedding employability skills within the curriculum enables accessibility for all groups. Lowe, for instance, underscores his call to embed employability with five recommendations to improve graduate employability using the curriculum, including summative assessments and feedback. By doing so, the author argues that students from atypical backgrounds who lack the experience, family and social capital to take advantage of opportunities offered outside the curriculum, will benefit. This includes those who are first-in-family, have caring responsibilities, commuter students, those who do paid work alongside their studies, mature students and members of minority ethnic groups, all of whom may be disadvantaged by a requirement for independent learning.

Similarly, such groups may feel less able to share their writing with tutors. As Baer and Kearney note, for instance, the Writing Café project, operating since 2014, offers students the opportunities to share their writing with a trained student partner who acts as a mentor. Sharing their knowledge with a peer outside their specialist area allows students to explain their field in their own words, deconstructing the topic-specific jargon which may be a barrier to non-traditional students, empowering them in the process. Although offered outside of the academic curriculum, the Covid-19 pandemic required the project to offer additional online options, which increased student uptake, particularly from atypical groups. This peer-working in partnership is an example of offering inclusive spaces, both virtual and physical, to students, going beyond simply providing access to HE to all groups.

In relation to inclusivity, a passionate call for the HE sector to continue to offer and enhance the hybrid model of teaching and learning is made by Compton, Standen and Watson. Using the example of students with disabilities, they argue that the shift online necessitated by the pandemic benefitted some groups, who would be disadvantaged by a wholesale move back to physical delivery of teaching and learning. Hybrid teaching, with simultaneous delivery in-person and online, would offer students choice and, they argue, could be offered relatively quickly and inexpensively. This would not only demonstrate institutional priorities in relation to inclusive teaching and learning but would also align with the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) agenda (Advance HE, 2021). The benefits of hybrid delivery in relation to one-to-one tutorials were also argued as the 'logical next step' in HE by Kantcheva and Bickle. Nonetheless, they highlight the need for careful planning to ensure that the disadvantages of online delivery are minimised, particularly those related to equitable access to equipment and facilities for disadvantaged groups. They also discuss issues such as loss of informal social contact online, the physical demands of online provision and potential impacts on health and reduced non-verbal communications online. All of these important considerations are potentially of more import for some groups than others.

Belonging and its importance in enhancing the inclusivity of traditionally marginalised groups is also a key theme. Welton cites the value of a regular community of practice (COP) for students with dyslexia. The opportunity to share experiences enhanced confidence, facilitating interdisciplinary collaborations and the establishment of a new student union society. The COP started online and no concerns are raised by Welton about this in relation to students' sense of belonging. However, others do raise concerns

about the impact of online teaching on opportunities for students to develop a sense of connection and belonging to their institutions. Ohadomere for instance, discusses the interventions introduced to mitigate against the disadvantages faced by international students from lower- and middle-income countries during the pandemic when teaching and learning moved online. By contrast, Todd used the online space to create a support group for parent-students, a group usually unrecognised and unsupported in HE. Working with them to identify what this group needs, two things emerged – the need for flexibility and the importance of belonging. Utilising both the online space and the personal tutor scheme, the sense of belonging among this marginalised group was enhanced.

Interestingly, Bao, Kilmister and Caldwell remind us of some of the learning opportunities afforded by the pandemic, which helped to identify more effective strategies for supporting persons of colour (POC) students and addressing the BAME awarding gap. By adopting a pedagogy of race-consciousness to enhance students' critical thinking skills, Bao, Kilmister and Caldwell show how this approach also enabled the authors to demonstrate the value of students' own culture as a resource for enhancing learning. Implicit in this thought-provoking article, is how centring students' culture helps Learning Developers to begin to decolonise the curriculum.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, well-documented awarding gaps between different groups suggested there was a need to re-examine what belonging is and what it means in practice. A toolkit developed for academic staff to address the BAME awarding gap focused on inclusion, since that requires action on the part of staff. The toolkit, described by McCabe and Pollard comprised three webpages, focusing on Addressing Awarding Gaps, Inclusive Curriculum and Internationalisation. Their development was from a largely homogenous, white and therefore limited perspective; to address this, they encourage dialogue between staff and students in order to understand the role of privilege.

Several papers discuss diverse approaches to encouraging open dialogue, whilst acknowledging that this is difficult. Prompted conversations among different groups of minoritised staff and students identified common themes among disparate groups (friends, stakeholders) in the Listening Rooms project. These included the importance of role models for minority groups, as well as training to address negative behaviours. Devoting attention to the lived experience of those often marginalised was also fundamental to the work of Sillence and colleagues, who developed a set of cards and related activities to

enable discussions about EDI issues using a 'serious play' approach (Rieber, Smith and Noah, 1998). The EDI cards allowed individual stories to emerge, so that EDI moved from the abstract to the personal, resonating with listeners. Both case studies suggest that research-informed approaches and resources allow respectful dialogue to take place, with potential for positive change to occur. They also emphasise the importance of listening, as does another case study by Clay et al. in the compendium, focusing on the creation of a professional framework for coaching and mentoring within a student support service. By using an equity perspective, a variety of existing national and international frameworks informed the process, but institutional commitment to meaningful change as well as listening to the stories of marginalised groups were identified as key. This paper, like others in the special issue, stresses the importance of reflecting on privilege.

The need to acknowledge and address the potential impact of power dynamics in staff-student collaborations is reflected on by Martin and Lusted, specifically in relation to race. Their paper raises an important and often overlooked aspect of pedagogy and highlights the need to decolonise staff-student relationships to minimise the risk that the ultimate beneficiary of such collaborations can be the white staff member.

In addition to original case studies, this issue includes a number of book reviews. They also highlight the importance of challenging 'benign' assumptions about who our students are; that the dominant theories may not relate to the realities of their day-to-day lives, and that there is a need to understand their realities as well as challenge predominant thinking in HE. Challenging assumptions using tools such as concept mapping and conversational research is advocated in the book by Kinchin and Gravett (2022), as reviewed by Mottershaw and Scott. Meanwhile, Gundry and Collins in their respective book reviews of Tran (2021) highlight the author's emphasis of the adoption of specific theories to prompt discussion about the decolonisation of university learning and teaching. The use of student voices to articulate their own experience is an underlying theme throughout, adding authenticity and realism to what might otherwise risk remaining theoretical. This was previously captured in a series of interviews by Abegglen, Neuhaus and Wilson (2022), in relation to teaching and learning online. Notable here are explorations of belonging and how this may be facilitated. Similar themes arise in this special issue, building on this and other previous work. Although it is worth exploring what belonging means for different groups, nonetheless, working to facilitate connections and partnerships within and between staff and student groups enables empowerment and co-construction. The Covid-

19 pandemic, whilst imposing necessary physical barriers to contact, simultaneously enabled innovation at pace within a sector not always fast to respond.

What does a special issue on EDI in Learning Development in 2023 tell us? Several salient points made by the papers help to answer that question. First, that notions of EDI are being challenged, in particular assumptions about who our students and their realities are. Without a clear understanding of students' experience gained by actively listening to them, equity cannot be truly achieved since the barriers will remain obscured, especially when intersectionality of disadvantage occurs. Second, a number of the case studies included describe approaches to listening and using prompts to facilitate discussions about EDI topics. Third, that using theories to challenge entrenched notions is important. While progress in access to HE for disadvantaged groups has been made, now work must focus on challenging the HE structures, including the curriculum, to ensure equity of opportunity and employability for all our students. The importance of safe spaces, including online and outside the academic structure, as well as the importance of suitable role models is emphasised. As such, this work focuses not just on minoritised student groups, but also the staff who provide opportunities to challenge the curriculum, facilitate difficult conversations and who themselves act as role models, but many of whom are also minoritised. Finally, in addition to providing specific approaches and tools for action, this collection also offers much food for thought from a theoretical perspective.

So, what have we as a sector learnt from this special issue? As Bao, Kilmister and Caldwell observe, at the very least one would hope that the special issue will generate meaningful and courageous conversations about those areas that have been largely absent from Learning Development theory and practice, such as, for instance, race, disability and the consequences of an imbalance of power and privilege. We look forward to continuing those conversations and reflecting on some potential solutions that may emanate from a future special issue on the lessons learnt. We also hope that this special issue has reminded us all of the positive impact that comes when we take brave steps to effect change, as well as the sobering consequences that result from either not recognising the need for, or being unwilling to, change. As Rosa Parks, often known as the 'Mother of the Civil Rights Movement', observed, 'to bring about change, you must not be afraid to take the first step. We will fail when we fail to try' (Reed and Parks, 1997).

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## Author details

Karen Lipsedge is an Associate Professor in English Literature at Kingston University, and her research focuses on eighteenth-century domestic space, interiors, the relationship between objects and people, and the novel. She is the Access and Inclusion co-lead for the British Eighteenth-Century Society. Karen is also part of the Directorate for Access, Participation & Inclusion, Students, at KU, where she works as a Senior Adviser for Teaching and Learning. She is an academic contact for KU's Harassment Scheme, the

Chair of the NEON Diverse Learners' group and helped to set up the KU/POC BAME Staff Network in July 2020.

Hilda Mulrooney is a nutritionist and dietitian with primary care and public health experience. She is currently Associate Professor in Nutrition at Kingston University London. She is a member of the Network of Equality Champions and the Faculty EDI action group. She is interested in exploring how difference is perceived: within her profession working to help ensure that those with excess weight are not discriminated against and, pedagogically, looking at the impact of demographic characteristics on aspects of teaching and learning.

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