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Project Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

September 2018

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Freedom to Achieve (FTA) is DMU's commitment to ensure that everyone, whatever their background, can achieve their potential and can see themselves and people like them reflected in the institution. The project is a multi-faceted programme with a number of individual projects designed to enhance our cultural diversity and support success for all. This report presents the work completed over the last academic year. It is organised into four key sections, each of which are summarised below:

1.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND

The latest data from the sector show that the attainment gap between white students and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students obtaining first-class and 2:1 degrees is 15 percentage points[1]. DMU has a smaller, though still significant, difference of 10.7 percentage points. In response to the attainment gap, DMU have partnered with a group of institutions, through an Office for Students (OfS) funded project to explore positive ways of addressing this issue.

- Kingston University
- University of Hertfordshire
- University of Greenwich
- University College London
- University of Wolverhampton

In line with DMU's University Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy, student voice via co-creation is a core element of the project work[2]. The project moves away from the traditional student deficit model perspective and focuses instead on the wider student experience and how we can ensure that all students, regardless of their background, feel a part of the DMU community and can see their identities, experiences and history reflected in what they learn and how they are assessed.

1.2 DMU FREEDOM TO ACHIEVE

The project was designed with a different focus for each year.

- **Year One:** understanding Kingston University's Value Added (VA) metric and Inclusive Curriculum Framework (ICF) and how they can be integrated into existing DMU pedagogic practices. Disseminating these approaches across the 40 programmes and working with programme teams to explore their attainment gap data.
- **Year Two:** beginning to implement curriculum change across the 40 programmes and more widely across the institution. Engaging in co-creation with our students to ensure that their voice is heard throughout this process.
- **Year Three:** embedding changes in practice at both an institutional and programme level to ensure that culturally inclusive practice is considered 'business as usual' at DMU.

Running in parallel to this activity, the evaluation strand of the project seeks to identify how DMU have integrated Kingston University's work into their existing practices, and what impact this has had on the attainment gap. A critical race-grounded methodology is utilised to allow for the exploration of data, without the influence of a hypothesis, to develop a theory with explanatory power rather than merely description. The guiding principle behind grounded theory is the notion that theory is emergent, rather than predefined, and through a critical race theory lens, the approach helps to

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[1] ECU (2017) *Equality in higher education: statistical report 2017*
[2] De Montfort University (2018) *University Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2018 – 2023: Providing a Transformative and Co-Created Education and Student Experience*. Leicester: DMU.

illuminate the experiences of those who are marginalised[3]. A multiple-case design has been chosen to ensure that students and staff from each faculty are represented in the research. In this way, the research will aid the sharing of best practice not only within faculties, but also across the wider institution.

1.3 INITIAL FINDINGS

During the initial six months of the evaluation strand of the project, there have been three main phases of data collection and analysis:

1.3.1 CO-CREATION EVENTS

- A total of 142 students and staff participated in the pilot co-creation events.
- Six themes were generated out of these collaborations: Relationships, Teaching & Learning, Community, Development, Employability and Exclusion.
- Relationships - 34 per cent of all references related to students' relationships on campus. Discussions within this theme included: role models, student integration, student-staff relationships, improved communication and transparency of processes for dealing with issues of racism.
- Teaching and Learning - 20 per cent of all references relating to this theme. Discussion within this category focused on: cultural examples used in lectures, learning resources, student experience of learning and lecturers' delivery methods and assessment styles.
- Community - 18 per cent of statements referred to this theme. Here attendees discussed: belonging, cultural inclusivity, co-creation, student societies and campus development.
- Development - 17 per cent of all statements were focused around this theme. Three key areas of discussion surfaced: development of academic skills, access to support and development opportunities and support specifically for international students.
- Employability – with 8 per cent of references this theme was discussed in relation to three main topics: practical experience, specialised careers advice and placements.
- Exclusion - Whilst only 3 per cent of statements related to students feeling excluded at University, these experiences are crucial to highlight so that the reasons behind them can be explored. Attendees noted a feeling of not belonging at University, due to the inherent white culture present in many UK Higher Education institutions.

1.3.2 STUDENT BASELINE SURVEY

- A total of 233 students from the 40 pilot programmes participated in the student baseline survey. The majority represented programmes with the Health and Life Sciences Faculty (NUMBER), though students from all four faculties engaged.
- Of those students, 45 per cent were unaware of the attainment gap.
- In relation to this project, 54 per cent of students were unaware of the work undertaken as part of Freedom to Achieve.
- None of the students who took the baseline survey has engaged with project activity. This was, again, largely due to a lack of awareness that activities were taking place (63 per cent).

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[3] Malagon, M.C., Perez Huber, L. and Velez, V.N. (2009) Our Experiences, Our Methods: Using Grounded Theory to inform a Critical Race Theory Methodology. Seattle Journal for Social Justice, vol.8 (1), pp. 253-272

These findings highlight the importance of reflecting on how we communicate with students about our project work and the wider attainment gap debate. In particular, it would be of value to learn more about the communication channels utilised by our students, so that we may communicate with them more effectively.

▍ Students were asked the extent to which they felt represented in their learning experience at DMU. The learning experience was broken down into five categories: curriculum content; teaching methods; learning materials; assessment and feedback.

▍ On average 75 per cent of students felt reflected in their learning experience.

▍ Students of Pakistani, Caribbean and 'Other White' heritage were most likely to feel unrepresented within their learning experience.

This would suggest that further work should be done with these groups to identify if this is a wider institutional trend and how these student groups can be supported more effectively.

▍ Finally, students were asked to reflect on the last academic year and consider if they had experienced changes that had resulted in greater inclusivity. The majority, 55 per cent, had not experienced any changes.

▍ Where students had experienced change in each of the five areas, this was expressed as change which resulted in:

Curriculum content	Greater representation	Listening to student voice
Teaching methods	Increased access	Relationships
Learning materials	Increased access	Greater opportunity for personal development
Assessment	Removing barriers	Greater variety of approached
Feedback	Greater opportunity for personal development	Improved timing of feedback

1.3.3 STAFF BASELINE SURVEY

▍ A total of 44 members of staff, from across the 40 pilot programmes engaged with the staff baseline survey. Similarly to the student survey, the majority of these (56 per cent) represented the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences.

▍ Most staff had heard of the attainment gap (77 per cent).

▍ Seventy per cent of staff had made changes to their practice in response to their programmes' attainment data. Most commonly these were changes to the way staff dealt with students during teaching, changes to curriculum content or changes to the way staff dealt with tutees.

▍ Of those who had not made changes, the majority felt that they were already working in an inclusive manner (60 per cent).

▍ Most staff had been using the UDL review template for over 6 months (64 per cent).

▍ As a result of learning about their programme's UDL compliance, sixty-six per cent of staff had made changes to their practice. Most commonly these were changes to the way staff dealt with students during teaching, revisions to assignment styles, changes to curriculum content or changes to the way staff dealt with tutees.

▍ Of those who had not made changes, the majority felt that they were already working in an inclusive manner (67 per cent).

- Most staff met with their Fair Outcomes Champion (FOC) at least once per term (43 per cent), though a significant minority had yet to meet their FOC (30 per cent).
- The majority of staff (61 per cent) believed the role of FOC to be important to the wider success of the project.
- Use of the attainment data and engagement with the UDL audit template were how most staff had engaged with the project to date (30 and 26 per cent respectfully). A further 20 per cent had participated in co-creation and 12 per cent in training.
- On average, the majority of staff (84 per cent) felt confident in their ability to develop inclusive approaches across the five areas of their teaching: curriculum content, teaching methods, learning materials, assessment and feedback.

1.4 NEXT STEPS

In response to the outcomes and findings of this first year of activity, the Freedom to Achieve team have identified a number of priority areas for further work. Over the coming academic year, project activity will focus on greater engagement with our staff and students. In particular we will begin our main phase of co-creation and this will be supplemented with additional activity to support staff and student progress. A Freedom to Achieve seminar series, Team Talks, will be established in the autumn term, alongside both an academic reading group and a leisure reading club, that focus on culturally inclusive materials. These will help to raise greater awareness of our project work and will also provide safe spaces in which to engage in challenging conversations on campus.

The project team have also recruited four Frontrunners within the role of Student Curriculum Advisors who will work with the project team to consider the curriculum and offer insight into how curricula can be more culturally inclusive. The inclusion of students within the project team will also enable us to reflect on how we can better communicate our work with the student body.

The evaluation strand of the research will continue to respond flexibly to the outcomes of ongoing project work. The launch of an Evaluation Support Group will create a forum for discussion around the evaluation methodology. Additionally, a phase of deeper qualitative data collection will begin, including student focus groups, programme team interviews and Fair Outcomes Champion interviews. The purpose of these sessions will be to explore the notion of belonging at DMU and to discuss the impact that the project is having on student and staff experience.

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