

'IDEAS': Developing a 'travelling companion' model of inclusive curriculum development

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive curriculum development in higher education is increasingly witnessing the development of institutional inclusive curriculum frameworks and toolkits. This 'on the horizon' paper introduces one such framework recently developed at a modern university in the South East of England. The IDEAS model (Inclusive learning and teaching, Digital inclusion, Employability learning, assessment for learning, Sustainability mindset) involves a range of distinctive features in both design and scope, and was likewise co-created by colleagues working in the educational development and access and participation domains of academic practice. In a discussion structured by the stages of a traditional quest narrative, the paper relates the genesis, development and early implementation of the IDEAS model and draws attention to some of its distinctive emphases as well as its points of correspondence with wider sectoral initiatives on inclusive curriculum development.

Keywords: Inclusive curriculum, curriculum frameworks, curriculum toolkits, co-creation

I Introduction

If curriculum development initiatives can aptly be viewed as a kind of *quest*, this is all the more the case when the members of the curriculum development team join the project at different phases and stages. Accordingly, in this short 'on the horizon' paper, we draw on the structure of the quest narrative (drawn in this instance from seminal folklorist Campbell, 1949), to share the outline of our recent co-development of an inclusive curriculum model at a post-92 higher education institution in the South East of England. We outline the distinctive features of the model, reflect on the process of collaborating on its development, and indicate some of the implications arising for both our own and wider practice.

Departure

Our starting point will be familiar enough to colleagues involved with inclusive curriculum development across the sector. Informed by the impressive range of inclusive curriculum tools, inventories and frameworks made available for at least the last decade - see for example Kingston University London (2021) and reviewed by McDuff et al. (2021); May and Thomas (2010); Advance HE (2013); Tran and Reilly (2019) - we sought to develop our own institutional model that would include a number of distinctive features.

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- Many models of this kind are conceived as frameworks or checklists with an expectation of comprehensive mapping of provision against different criteria and domains of practice. We conceived instead of an agile and responsive 'model' or 'map' of curriculum development, whose unvarying core or 'threshold' requirements in terms of sector research and good practice would be nested amongst a more flexible set of 'threshold plus' factors that course teams might themselves express or draw attention to.
- Some models (and this was true of our own model hitherto) tended to imply a single point of engagement for inclusive practice development in the curriculum, being used at initial design stage rather than iteratively. Contrastively, we sought to develop a 'travelling companion' model, that would inform curriculum development and enhancement through the course of each academic year and thus bring cumulative gains.
- Some models are framed principally in the language of quality assurance, with an accompanying tendency to elicit inclusivity narratives based on documentation, procedures and policies. We chose instead to couch our model in the student voice, thus ensuring a focus on the lived experience of contemporary students and tending to elicit inclusivity narratives focused much more on the cultures, contexts and 'feel' of a programme.

We were attentive to ensuring the IDEAS model was not only about embedding inclusive education but also was inclusive of different strategic priorities. The intention here was to avoid programme teams experiencing these priorities as 'another thing to do'. Equipped with our existing inclusive teaching benchmarking tool, and with a firm eye on the commitments of our institutional Access and Participation plan (OfS 2021) regarding inclusive practice development, we set out to design, pilot and implement a model that was reflective of these key considerations.

Initiation

We began our initiation stage mindful of the way in which the most applicable curriculum development models tended to include some form of diagrammatic representation and/or to be structured around an acronym or some other unifying conceit. Accordingly, and after a number of iterations, we settled upon the acronym of IDEAS (Inclusive learning and teaching; Digital inclusion; Employability learning; Assessment for learning; Sustainability mindset) and established that this would be a model where the stable core of 'threshold' inclusivity considerations (established with reference to sector research and evidence) would be complemented by a more flexible envelope of 'threshold plus' areas of excellence and innovation that could be 'mapped' or visually represented by diagrammatic means. The initiation stage involved extensive piloting of the model with programme teams who were preparing for the validation of new or existing provision in programme development workshops. Typically, each team would work with one or two of the domains of IDEAS rather than the full framework at this stage. This enabled the honing of the question sets and individual question items to a considerable degree. For example, the first of our questions in the Inclusive Learning and Teaching domain ('How will you get to know me and how will I get to know my peers?') reached its ordinal position only after rich and detailed discussion of the crucial role of student belonging as a precondition of successful learning. Likewise, the first of the questions in the Sustainable student success domain ('Where in my course am I able to explore definitions of sustainability, taking account of social equity and environmental sustainability?') took root only after extensive discussion amongst teams of the

inevitable commensurability of social justice and sustainability considerations. Visually represented, the different domains of IDEAS appear as below (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The IDEAS model

Transformation and adaptation

It would be fair to say that both the IDEAS model itself and the collaborating team have been transformed during the journey reported in this paper. Stretching to date across three years (two of them affected by a global pandemic), the project has developed in a number of ways as follows:

- there has been considerable and constant rebalancing between core equalities and accessibility duties, and wider inclusive practice development and student experience considerations in the model;
- the project personnel has flexed: the contributing authors/core project team are drawn from educational development and faculty-based roles, and a number of them have changed role and/or institution during the project period;
- the pandemic context galvanised aspects of the model's development such as the Digital Inclusion domain whilst also presenting challenges in the capacity and 'bandwidth' of programme teams to engage with a new and far-reaching initiative.

It would moreover be fair to say that the notion of transformation is built into the IDEAS model: the model's 'threshold plus' dimension is the space in which course teams are invited to actively shape the model by sharing the kinds of innovation and excellence that are distinctive to their individual programmes. The model's question sets are also conceived of as time-bound; tied to the four-year cycle of the institutional Access and Participation plan, they will be reviewed and updated at the end of the cycle, with the input of course teams forming a central impetus for this renewal.

The transformation stage also involved close collaboration between the IDEAS project team and our institution's quality enhancement team whose leadership showed the bold initiative to restructure all core programme development and review documentation in line with the IDEAS model. This has had the effect of further realising IDEAS as a 'travelling companion' model for inclusive curriculum development since, far from being regarded as a single-point-of-engagement model, IDEAS accompanies programme teams through the quality cycle of programme delivery and annual and periodic review, forming the key points of reference and the thematic map for articulating programme quality and student experience.

The stage of the IDEAS project that answers to the adaptation phase of the quest narrative includes the relatively late incorporation of sustainability as a core consideration (this emerging from voluble student feedback) and a substantial revision to the model's structure so that Access and Participation considerations were made core to the 'Threshold' category rather than forming a substantive third strand in the question sets - and thus risking the perception that Access and Participation is a discrete consideration rather than embedded. Again, the time-bound nature of the model and the facility for programme teams to offer their own narrative under the 'Threshold Plus' category reflect how we view this adaptation stage as effectively ongoing and central to the model. If IDEAS is a map, it is one that programme teams can annotate, drawing attention to the distinctive contours and features of the student experience as they move through the landscape of each programme. Indeed, as part of the development project for IDEAS, the intention is that programme teams will be able to generate a radial diagram of their provision where their differential strengths in the different domains of the model can be visually represented as in the example below, where Employability learning and Sustainable student success are particular strengths of the sample programme (Figure 2).

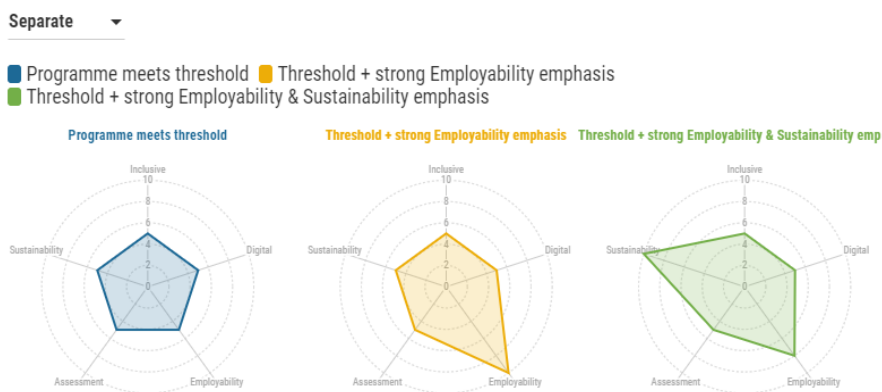


Figure 2: Example radial diagram of three programmes mapped against IDEAS

Return

In the sense that we have as yet only early-stage findings and initial observations to report (in line with the spirit of an 'on the horizon' paper), we have yet to fully realise the final stage of the quest motif, the return. However, we are optimistic that IDEAS has been subject to sufficient piloting and workshopping with

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programme teams and student curriculum partners to suggest the following emerging insights and the significance of this work within the sector landscape of inclusive curriculum development.

The student voice component of the model is distinctive and merits further development. As a next step, the model has been migrated to a digital platform where the different questions are presented via an interactive IDEAS Toolkit to be used by programme teams with inputs from student curriculum partners and from educational developers/facilitators to ensure the tool is utilised in a consistent fashion, while still eliciting insights on programmes' distinctive strengths.

There are good indications that the model is indeed flexible and agile in eliciting quality reflection on inclusive practice development across programme teams. There are suggestions that it is effective as a cross-disciplinary tool but some feedback that it tends to assume the norm of the undergraduate student experience and may be less applicable in its current format to postgraduate programmes; this is accordingly being pursued as a development and reflection area.

While the gains in aligning inclusive curriculum development with the quality enhancement cycle are already emerging, there is scope for more clearly delineating how the impact of the IDEAS model will be evaluated in relation to Action and Participation targets and milestones. We would hope, for example, to be in a position to observe a clear correlation between engagement with IDEAS and decreases in degree awarding gaps for underrepresented groups of students within a relatively short time frame.

In summary, we consider that IDEAS has distinctive merits as an inclusive curriculum development tool based on its foregrounding of student voice; its 'travelling companion' conception of curriculum enhancement; its agility and responsiveness to the inputs of programme teams; and its alignment of student experience and quality enhancement processes. As a model much indebted to the wider curriculum development literature, and to the collaborative efforts of a core team who are now distributed across three institutions, IDEAS has the potential to inform comparable journeys for educational developers and programme teams across the sector.

Biographies

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