Working Toward Meaningful Change: A Student-Centered Approach Towards Diversity and Inclusivity within the Fashion Curriculum

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Abstract

Fashion often looks towards marginalized communities for inspiration, using exotic historical tropes for financial gain. However, there is a concerted effort within the fashion industry to re-evaluate this position and make positive steps toward equality. Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) voices are being heard, with key industry members taking steps toward a more diverse workforce at executive level to educate and impact fashion content and production processes. So how can the fashion educator take action toward inclusivity and diversity to initiate progressive change?

Student cohorts noted that aspects of existing educational systems render students as other, and voiceless. This paper takes a position of responding through pedagogic practice in working toward an inclusive curriculum with students operating as active participants. New strategies encouraged students to engage in and challenge curriculum design, resulting in positive outcomes. Student commentary noted insightful and bespoke teaching and learning methods to de-colonize the curriculum, and to specifically respond to concerns on issues of diversity. The actions taken, and qualitative research methods utilized, re-evaluate existing pedagogic and industry practice in response to Student Union requests and sector-wide policy in promoting equality. Academics and students provided meaningful examples to learn from, and greater collective awareness and knowledge is gained. By building capability through intercultural competencies an exciting paradigm shift is taking place.

Keywords: challenge, diversity, ethnicity, inclusivity, value

Introduction

Social justice is a hot topic for fashion students, with equality at the root of many issues students experience on their educational journey. The focus of this paper is on diversity and inclusion in creative pedagogic practice. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019) report Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged, highlights the differentials in UK student attainment alongside many underlying factors that suggest learning environments must improve approaches to diversity and inclusivity. The aim here is not to place an overarching focus on what may be considered negative institutional issues and behaviors in relation to diversity and inclusion (although it is important to note that sector-wide and local institutional systemic issues are being addressed), but rather to understand how students and staff feel their local experiences can be improved, and the progressive steps they are initiating to generate change.

In line with an institutional initiative, Decolonising the Curriculum, two case studies are outlined using a qualitative approach to select and act on reoccurring themes to progressively move forward. The first case study demonstrates how students were engaged to improve inclusive curriculum design and delivery. The second is a student-led visual activity that tried to capture an inclusive moment in fashion that aligned with their ideas of social justice. Students and alumni from a variety of fashion interdisciplinary courses offered reflective perspectives on their experiences, and more specifically, what further action was

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required to place their concerns at the forefront of the learning experience. A “word of mouth” approach using student online portals assisted in creating a rich mix of voices from which to gather poignant comments from which to learn. Also included are academic staff thoughts and ideas in response to a questionnaire on taking tangible further steps toward creating inclusive learning environments. Therefore, this paper uses a range of voices, academics, students, and alumni who are active in promoting equality through collaboration.

Context

The University of the Arts London (UAL) is a collegiate university comprising of six colleges spread across the city. Each college delivers a wide range of creative arts subjects. The university’s Strategy (2015-2022) sets the challenge to ensure that university arts practice is diverse and inclusive for its students. A key driver in this approach is the overarching aim to reduce the attainment gap between black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME), international, and white students (see figure 1 and table 1). According to Patel & Panesar (2019), “issues of inequality persist, and are indicated by gaps in attainment . . . particularly wide in Art and Design. There are many factors known to be causing these gaps, and one factor is the narrow nature of the curricula offered at most UK universities, and of particularly exclusive practices in arts pedagogy.”

Table 1. University of the Arts London Student Population 2019/2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Home Total</th>
<th>BAME</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>EU</th>
<th>Overseas</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>CCI</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCW</td>
<td>2382</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>1795</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>1787</td>
<td>4683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSM</td>
<td>2188</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>1624</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>1885</td>
<td>4786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCC</td>
<td>2040</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>1216</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>894</td>
<td>1799</td>
<td>4733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCF</td>
<td>2098</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>1445</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>2896</td>
<td>5933</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAL TOTAL</td>
<td>8726</td>
<td>2484</td>
<td>6092</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>3072</td>
<td>8380</td>
<td>20178</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Improvements are ongoing to promote equality, social responsibility, and to enact change through a range of inclusive teaching and learning practices, more recently through the introduction of UAL’s Decolonising Arts Institute which, it states, seeks to challenge colonial and imperial legacies, and drive social, cultural, and institutional change. Included here are some examples of the methods and actions that are taking place. UAL’s transparent approach aims to provide the space to ensure diversity and social justice is at the core of creative practice. Strategic themes on diversity include:
- Ensuring diversity is at the core of creativity
- Making sure our course content and delivery reflects diverse perspectives and experiences
- Continuing to work toward our staff being as diverse as our students, by setting ambitious recruitment targets
Allowing students to be themselves in the university and use their experiences and identities to inform their work

**Pedagogic Approach**

**Case Study 1: Ensuring Diversity Is at the Core of Creativity**

Working directly from the Decolonising Arts Institute theme, a group of fashion students and alumni were encouraged to participate in a set of creative tasks to consider how inclusion and the approach to diversity could be improved. The aim of the tasks was to give voice to student thoughts and feelings and enable them to share their lived experiences as creative opportunities in acknowledgement of difference.

The workshop focus was placed on students taking creative ownership of their learning. The phrase “inclusion through collaborative creativity” was emphasized at each session. Gurhnam Singh notes that, “the project of decolonisation is less about seeking out authentic culture as such but more about the opening up of creative spaces to facilitate the production of culture informed by indigenous thinking and doing” (Singh, 2018, p. 1). In this respect students were prompted to capture and reflect on their own spontaneous thinking and doing through taking ownership of the session. The theme and task was “fashion, diversity and inclusion: In your voice, what does it mean to you?”

The focus group was student-led. Students were divided into five groups of between seven and ten students, with an additional small group of alumni who were operating as student ambassadors for the course/s. Students initially wanted to further understand what the intentions were around diversity and did not always understand the position on diversity and inclusion.

A zine produced in collaboration with the UAL Student Union and UAL Teaching and Learning Exchange (figure 2) was distributed so students had a clearer understanding of the UAL approach to decolonizing the curriculum.

![Figure 2. Decolonising the Arts Curriculum: UAL Zine front cover.](image)

The students cited a number of different points from the zine (figures 3 through 8) and shared and discussed their ideas in a collaborative session. The group demographic consisted of students and alumni (international, international BAME, home BAME). Commentaries
and notes picked up some interesting themes. Some students celebrated the encouragement they received from academics and visiting lecturers on their courses to explore a range of cultures to inform research processes, assessment outcomes, and personal development. In contrast, comments also suggested a narrow range of content examples within the curriculum materials and style of the delivery. Students suggested that some behaviors pertained to forms of inequality in their learning journeys. Particularly notable were the reoccurring comments on the way learning environments made them feel undervalued, at times invisible, and the approach and tone of sessions questionable.

An interpretative space, inviting stories, experiences and ideas about decolonisation, rather than a didactic ‘how to decolonise’ guide.

… responses were plenty and much more diverse than we had imagined, in content and in form.

Figure 3. What’s Your Perspective?
Figure 4. UAL Zine: Decolonising the Curriculum.

Figure 5. Did I get in because I am Brown? UAL Zine 2018 Student contribution
Figure 6. Student Union: Twitter post UAL So White Twitter account screenshot
Despite being placed in a neutral setting, students appeared concerned about potential repercussions, and this initially affected their contribution to the focus group. The student/alumni-led approach appeared to increase confidence and generate the ability to capture the feelings that are usually hidden or saved for external student surveys where anonymity is guaranteed. Furthermore, students were assured the session environment and objective should be approached with confidence. The intention was to “emphasize the need for courage . . . to position [y]ourselves . . . and more accurately reflect the nature of genuine dialogue regarding these challenging and controversial topics” (Arao and Clemens, 2013, p. 143).

Palfrey (2018) argues that safe spaces afford students the ability to explore and express opinions without feeling marginalized. Campus lecture halls, classrooms, or public space, should all operate as fertile territories for students, where engaging and searching for knowledge is fundamental despite any challenging subject matter. It is in these brave and safe spaces that Arao and Clemens (2013) and Palfrey (2018) assert students gain the opportunity to engage with diversity and purposeful free expression. Students did note the irony in that safe spaces are generally protective and avert risk. Opening up about personal experience places individuals in vulnerable positions, which is inconsistent with any notion of safety; “this dilemma looms large for target group members in any social justice-related learning activity; reflecting on, and sharing, their direct experiences with oppression . . . will likely result in heightened discomfort” (Arao and Clemens, 2013, p. 143). The suggestions students made regarding inclusive improvements had as much to do with improving learning spaces and behaviors in relation to inclusivity as the curriculum. In a Student Union-led survey 87% of respondents answered “No” to the question, “Do you think your curriculum represents people from diverse backgrounds and identities?”

The reoccurring themes and key words stated by students were value, visibility, and experiencing odd feelings during session/tutorial. Students noted these as “small things,” yet stated they had significant impact, and while this did not affect session participation or engagement; learning experiences were not as inclusive as expected. A 2019 report echoes this position further: “research unearthed a strong theme of international students feeling unwelcome, isolated and vulnerable” (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019, p. 8).
Student feedback identified pedagogic approaches to diversity inclusion that could be positively responded to, with teaching and learning altered to ensure learning spaces were welcoming. Despite a call for more diversity and visibility of academics and support staff, it was felt this would not necessarily guarantee a change in behaviors. Students noted the focus group session activity offered further opportunities to consider the way course material and behaviors could be reframed and repositioned throughout the duration of the student experience. Students welcomed opportunities to be included in potential change and valued the fact that their opinions, life experiences, and being actively involved with aspects of decision making could impact future teaching and learning practice.

**Case Study 2: Making Sure Our Course Content and Delivery Reflects Diverse Perspectives and Experiences**

In this session, students were asked, “Bring something in current fashion you think is diverse/is inclusive/is relevant/relates to you.” Students were invited to bring—or use online resources/social media/other—related to their subject specialization or the wider fashion industry. This was to gain a sense of what the student groups were thinking about in the moment. A range of imagery was sourced. The most popular theme from the session was student positivity on the appointment of Edward Enniful as editor in chief of *British Vogue*. Students felt very strongly about this, and suggested it was a landmark shift within UK fashion.

The student groups worked with images and statements from Enniful which they felt captured their thoughts on inclusivity and diversity. It is worth noting that, prior to Enniful’s appointment, “Vogue was criticised for its lack of diversity: . . . there was no solo black model on the cover between Naomi Campbell in 2002 and Jourdan Dunn in 2014” (Cartner-Morley, 2017).

Discussion around the appointment generated passionate responses from students, and demonstrated that students had not imagined a traditional commercial fashion bible would have a BAME male leading the magazine, or that the magazine would employ a diverse leadership team to generate content. This was seen as making bold statement on many levels regarding the important issues to which students could relate.

The December 2017 cover (figure 9) was heralded as highly significant by the students, as the image on the cover was of model Adwoa Aboah, a role model to many students on her “Gurls Talk” platform. With Aboah’s increasingly high-profile stance on issues of well-being and mental health, students referred to the cover as “a double dose of inclusivity.” Students also felt that the *British Vogue* cover for May 2018 (figure 10) titled “New Frontiers” with its image of women from different ethnicities appeared to break new ground in its representation of ethnicities to which they could relate, particularly in terms of social justice and equality; these are diverse women at the pinnacle of British fashion.

The September 2019 cover (figure11) students selected was noted as groundbreaking. For students, the message “Forces for Change” was testament that a magazine not known as a favorite among fashion students had shifted in perception. It captured the attention of a younger, diverse market for its contemporary focus and representation of diversity, and its inclusion and promotion of topics with which they could identify. Several students in the group had purchased print copies of the magazine, which they had not done previously. Students understood the intercultural approach of the content and wanted to discuss the range of connections that could be utilized to make stronger statements on inclusivity in their courses.
During the session, students used straplines and statements from Enniful and contrasted these with their own words and quotes prior to making a montage (figure 12). This related to their own experiences of what was important, celebrated, or needed changing while studying for their courses. Students collectively felt there was change taking place socially, and appreciated the workshop focus on diversity and working toward inclusive practices in arts education during their course of study. Students made reference to Enniful’s use of “normal life” to inspire the content and how ‘what he sees outside the corridors of fashion informs his view’ (Cartner-Moreley, 2017).

“I want to see the marginalized normalized. I want the new generation to look at an image and think.

‘It’s very important that I show images that make the world think it is normal to be who you are.”

Figure 12. Edward Enniful quote (focus group student selection).

In the workshop plenary session summary, students were keen to explain they selected material that they “could see themselves in,” that “something new was happening in industry,” but they could not always “see themselves here,” referring to the college environment, or in course staff leadership and representation. Student rarely stated their concerns on course; to quote Arao and Clemens (2013, p. 143), “They are aware that authentic expression of... oppression is likely to result in... dismissal and condemnation as hypersensitive or unduly aggressive.” It was apparent that students felt there was further work to do within the institution that could really effect change.

Students also noted the positives: the workshops and focus groups were “more interesting than just talking or answering questions,” and reviewing the zine, which included similar feelings to their own, also offered them knowledge of the theme of diversity, and actions to improve inclusive practices were happening across the institution. Statements were
captured and utilized for teaching and learning development, with the most obvious change highlighted as “a change of culture.” The students noted working in small groups and having alumni alongside to bounce off was seen as “a good thing.” By attempting to create a safe and brave space that Arao and Clemens (2013) and Palfrey (2018) refer to as the necessary prerequisite to enable any cultural shift, students took ownership of the session and found their own way to exploit, capitalize on, and share what are often difficult subjects to discuss, and did so through a simple creative process.

**Tangible Shift: Continuing to Work Toward Our Staff Being as Diverse as Our Students**

In relation to students “seeing themselves here,” staff are also committed to seeing a wider narrative on diversity employed. Despite being low in numbers over the years, long-standing BAME academic staff have worked tirelessly with colleagues to put diversity at the forefront of the strategic agenda. At the London College of Fashion, Shades of Noir has been a strong force in working to generate equality of experience for both students and academic staff. Social responsibility has been a pivotal axis in raising profile and shaping the steps the College has taken in recognizing “difference” and “otherness” through a wide range of internal and external projects. “Better Lives” describes the work the College does that uses fashion as a discipline to drive change. Staff voices are vocal, active, and insist on consistent measures to increase diversity and inclusion:

In the context of UAL, the infinite and depressing debate on poor attainment levels still persists, even with marginal improvements; the lack of racial diversity in our academic staff (only 10.32%—106 out of a population of 1,027 (excluding the 50 academics recently hired); senior management figures on individual contracts (8.12%—16 from a population of 197); the disproportionate number of student appeals by black students and staff, for that matter. I could go on. (Drisdale-Gordon, 2019)

Some hard facts point to the need for further action and the Equality and Human Rights Commission report titled; *Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged* (2019) sets recommendations for the education sector to address. The inquiry states that 24% of ethnic minority students acknowledge experiencing harassment in relation to race on campus. The report also noted that two-thirds of student survey respondents who had experienced racial harassment had reported the incident to their university, and less than half of all staff who responded to the same survey said they had reported incidents to the university:

Half of the international students who responded to our call for evidence because they had experienced racial harassment, said that they had been made to feel excluded, over half said they had experienced racial micro-aggressions, and 44% said they had experienced racist abuse, but 77% of respondents did not report it to the university. (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019)

The report also noted that systemic issues with internal culture/s are prevalent across the UK higher education sector, indicating the need for institutional scrutiny to unpack how life on campus and teaching can be better understood to actively change existing cultures.

**Diverse Perspectives and Value: Making Sure Our Course Content and Delivery Reflects Diverse Perspectives and Experiences**

While the UK education sector reports that much work is required to improve equality measures, staff and students are keen to go on the journey. International and BAME student groups have identified the need for improvement to ensure the student experience is a good one. In another step to consider how arts academics can effect the required change, 28
academic staff responded to a questionnaire (figure 13) on required sector actions, outlining their thoughts on working toward a more inclusive teaching and learning approach. In a small selection here, they suggest the following.

Figure 13. Sample questionnaire example: Academic response

Q. What do you expect from the current focus on inclusivity? What does it mean to you within arts education?

A. Arts education has for a very long time had a problem with diversity, but this is not due to any singular failing, most subjects have this problem. The change has come about because access to education has become fairer and there is a demand to ensure inclusive practices to meet the current student population—a move that is personally welcomed.

A. Continued focus on inclusivity and a broadening of focus to encourage support and exploration of, for example, things like physical disability and class, and fashion practices. Also, the critical evaluation of the construction of whiteness, rather than it being a norm or invisible ideology. It would be good to recognise that there is also huge diversity within white staff and students, who come from such a range of countries, backgrounds, circumstances also. Critically reflecting on this would help, for example, BAME students to not feel “picked out.” Sometimes it may seem obvious when we often put them forwards first for exposure/comms etc.

Q. What are the specific issues students experience that demonstrate an improved approach to curriculum development is required?

A. With a high number of students from countries with Confucian philosophies as a background to their thinking, it might be interesting to explore this perspective alongside the more constructivist approach used in the UK. Perhaps a student-led knowledge exchange activity.

Q. What have students highlighted as the biggest obstacles to creating a stronger sense of equality and inclusion on their day-to-day student experience?

A. Not enough diverse staff, and industry practitioners don’t have the same “understanding” of diversity and inclusion.
Q. How can the use of language—spoken/ body/ written—be improved to demonstrate that an inclusive and diverse approach to learning and teaching is taking place?
A. Deliver with empathy and awareness, deliver examples from a wide range of practices across the world, through business, design, and make. Include the issues that young people are concerned with, things that affect them and others close to them.
A. We could consider using them/they pronouns on the whole.

Q. What steps need to be put in place for students to experience a focused approach to a diverse and inclusive curriculum?
A. According to my own observation, a lot of lecturers and topics have been very Eurocentric and there is not enough encouragement from academics for students to explore a more global focus on research. When students bringing in their “research” it’s very much sourced from a British or American aspect.
A. Some students this academic year have mentioned to their personal tutors their preferred gender pronouns, however many tutors feel unfamiliar in referring to individuals in gender-neutral terms and, through habit without meaning any offense, revert to using gendered language.

Q. If the academic staff was more diverse, what impact would this have on the student experience?
A. The students would experience an interaction with someone who may have an understanding of their own life experience, although this may not always be the case. How do we define and represent diversity through, social class, race, age, and gender? Social class is not always evident, multiculturalism can be evidenced in many guises, but as long as the subjects, thoughts, teaching, and themes reflect a world that we are all living in today, then surely there must be a place for our students to connect and feel comfortable to express themselves in. Empathy, expression, and voice alongside nurturing talent and ideas in within an inclusive and collaborative approach.
A. Positive, I noticed a new Japanese student was very happy to see 2 x Japanese Associate and Special Guest Lecturers this term. We have one black female Senior Lecturer and one black male Associate Lecturer on the course currently—and I think this visibility must really contribute continually—more than occasional lectures and presentations on the topic of diversity.

One of the reasons cited for attainment gaps is student engagement, whether that is absence monitoring or noting that students are attending regularly but are not actively participating in sessions or experiencing the collaborative relationships, which can often be a crucial indicator for working toward successful student outcomes at formative and summative assessments. However, this is refuted in a report from Advance HE (2019), as research suggests positive student engagement despite students receiving lower grades. University’s UK (UUK) spokesperson said: “Equality of opportunity in higher education is of the most importance . . . we have provided specific recommendations on how to ensure BAME students are given the best chances of success” (Busby, 2019). Moreover, Orr and Shreeve (2017) prefer to focus on an awarding, rather than an attainment gap, by acknowledging that issues are systemic institutionally. By addressing issues publicly through visual artefacts, curriculum changes, and collaborative approaches, power is realigned to work for rather than against students.
Conclusion

The research activities described above were intended to be simple yet effective. They unpack the proactive nature of UAL students and staff who suggest that a variety of voices and experiences work for and, at times, against them. This study also acknowledged that improvements are being addressed locally to engender change, particularly in relation to addressing the culture of learning environments through using a range of verbal, visual, and text-based feedback. Commented one student, “The Decolonising the Curriculum series have been incredible. But all in all, having more tutors from different background could support the students better” (UAL Attainment Gap Report Arts SU, 2019). A questionnaire response makes a valuable point: “The focus on inclusivity will open the curriculum to new areas of research by staff who are informed by the broader spectrum of students. The teaching profession will also become more attractive to those who are deemed to be from a ‘diverse background’ and this will favour students enormously because topics and subjects raised in classes are relatable to them” (Lau, 2019). A notable shift toward equality is taking place where academic staff and students work in collaboration locally, with internal institutional efforts and interactions having a positive effect externally (Gertz et al., 2018). Student feedback “responses were plenty and much more diverse than we had imagined, in content and in form” (Patel & Panesar, 2019).

The summary from students and staff identified a greater need to maintain fashion education that is continuous, fluid, and relevant, with an ability to evolve with the student body. To do this, the approach toward greater inclusivity must continue to be visible; “As academics, we are reminded to reflect on our positions, to take the steps needed to consider our own bias that may affect teaching and learning as it offers a space to consider and confront any limitations” (Sabri, 2018, p. 12). In this sense, the reflective process and responding actions undertaken at UAL offer what might be understood as an open and transparent form of pedagogic introspection, where process and practice is aimed at improving approaches toward equality and social justice to generate and build confidence and trust through meaningful dialogue and action via a cohesive amalgamation of student and staff interactions.

Consistent scrutiny of institutional limitations is necessary for students to overcome the challenges and celebrate successes of diverse and inclusive experiences: “What I would like to see . . . this could be simply in the development of a curriculum that recognises the diversity of talent within our sector—every day . . . that different voices can be heard—every day; this could be in creating an environment where minorities feel like they belong—every day” (Drisdale-Gordon, 2019).

Students do want to make greater connections to diverse lived experiences so that all engaged in the learning journey can understand the twists and turns of the distance traveled. For many, the curriculum is a complex set of “lived” experiences that they can align with. The learning journey is part of “a movement of people, moving together for a common purpose, across challenging territories and borders” (Patel & Panesar, 2019). As the Decolonising Arts Institute advocates, allowing students to be themselves in the University and use their experiences and identities to inform their work is one of its core aims. At UAL, sharing peer-to-peer knowledge and experiences of inclusive pedagogic practice will hopefully encourage and nurture the students to do just that.

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