

A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION (THEORY OF CHANGE) FOR AN INCLUSIVE UNIVERSITY

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A Framework for Action (theory of change) for an Inclusive University

Introduction

The objective of this booklet is to present the latest research evidence about what actions need to be taken in order to promote an inclusive culture for students at Newcastle University. It can be used to support areas for evaluation, particularly in respect of the areas for action identified as part of the Newcastle University Access and Participation Plan.

This is of interest to a wide range of academics and professional staff concerned with ensuring access, participation and success for students. The aim of this publication is to:

- Inspire and encourage university academic and professional services staff to consider how their work fits into the framework and what work still needs to be done
- Give university staff some ideas about what aspects of their work to encourage inclusion are important to evaluate in terms of the impact on students and potential students

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Background

Where has this come from?

As part of the evaluation of Newcastle University Access and Participation Plan, work has been undertaken to develop a theory of change, as required by the Office for Students. This booklet forms part of that work and outlines the learning from our research so far. We present a Framework for Action for an Inclusive University that consists of six strands. This booklet primarily refers to creating impact for students and potential students in the areas of access, success and progression.

The strands have been developed following a period of intensive research including interviews, workshops and discussions with academic and professional services staff (including senior leadership) discussions with students, as well as desk-based research and literature reviewing, culminating in a series of workshops with the whole Inclusive Newcastle Knowledge Centre (INKC) team to undertake analyses and make sense of the data.

What is a Framework for Action?

A framework for action (or in other words, a theory of change) helps us to know what needs to change to get the best outcomes for students, and how that change is expected to happen. Once that is clear, it then helps us to understand how our actions can be evaluated in respect of the short-, medium- and long-term outcomes and impacts for students and potential students.

In a complex organisation such as a University and with a pervasive issue such as inequality, actions need to be taken on multiple levels, in different ways, and with different people in order to effect change for students.

A 'Strand of Action' is a way of categorising and describing the situation which needs to change into categories for which actions are needed. Each of these strands are linked and intersecting in a number of ways, reflecting the complexity of the situation, the complexity of the organisation (NU) and the complexity of the solutions needed to address the situation.

What is a step of change?

Steps of change describe how we expect any actions to impact upon 'beneficiaries' (e.g. students, staff, wider community members). They aim to describe a causal link between the actions we need to take and any outcomes we desire. This works by articulating the changes we expect to see along the way if we are stimulating the kind of short- and medium-term outcomes needed to reach our longer-term outcomes. These steps of change can be measured to establish whether actions are working as intended or not, and whether they are likely to stimulate longer-term outcomes given time.

How will this framework help me?

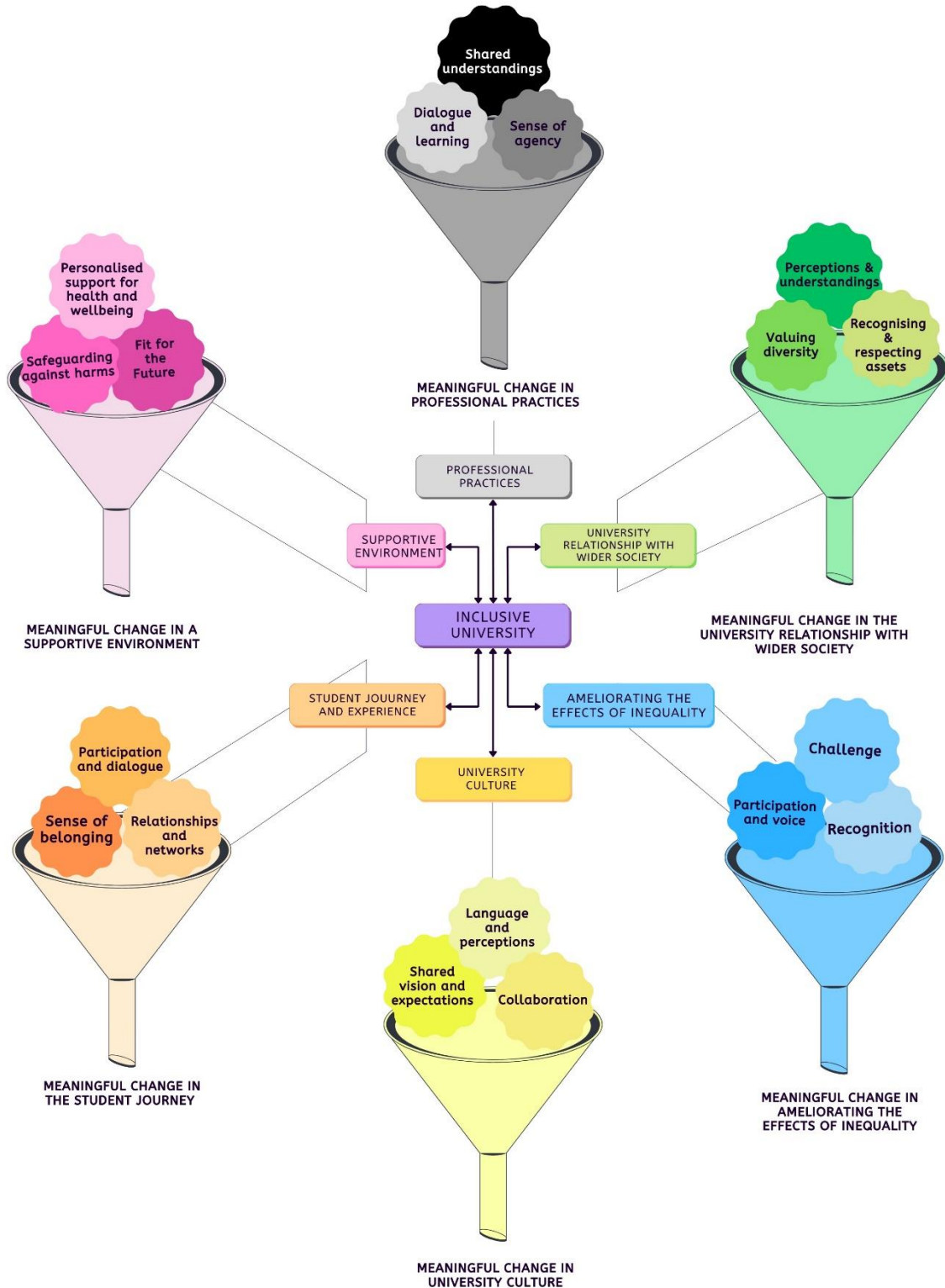
This framework can help you to think through what have been identified as areas for change for the University, and to reflect on:

- *What kind of initiative, intervention or project might help you to create meaningful change in the issue you want to address*
- *How your initiative, intervention or project is expected to work*
- *What kinds of factors could be measured or monitored*

What next?

The following sections present details about the six strands of action that research has indicated are necessary for NU to fulfil its ambition to be a truly inclusive university. Each strand is different and will require different kinds of actions. Currently, the university takes action in respect of all of the strands in some way. The focus of the current Access and Participation Plan is currently largely focused around student experience.

The framework for action (theory of change)



Strand of Action 1:

Ameliorating the effects of inequality

What does the research say?

Some challenges in respect of achieving inclusion have been identified as ones that are largely societal, but which have an impact on the functioning of the University. These challenges include: poverty and low-income, (institutional) racism and white privilege; Covid 19; gender inequalities; nepotism; classism and other structural inequalities. This strand is mediated (both positively and negatively) by the political and social context within which the university operates, e.g. HE policies set out by Government and OfS such as tuition fees, admissions targets. The university can tackle some of the effects of these contextual challenges, and current action includes work to provide financial support, or diversify the university, for example, but it may be beyond the university gift to have a lasting impact on the wider structural context.

What are the critical ingredients for inclusion?

The three areas of change which our research indicates seem essential to the causal process of creating meaningful change in ameliorating the effects of inequality seem to be 'Participation and voice', 'Recognition' and 'Challenge'.



MEANINGFUL CHANGE IN AMELIORATING THE EFFECTS OF INEQUALITY

'Participation and voice' refer to the ways in which we seek to understand the effects of inequality. Involving students (and staff) enables an understanding of their lived experience of inequalities, and how they impact upon them in terms of their time at Newcastle University.

'Recognition' refers to the ability to reflect on these lived experiences in order to recognise how the culture, policies and practices of NU may be impacting on students experiencing barriers due to structural inequalities.

'Challenge' refers to the ability to expose and confront these barriers to stimulate change and ameliorate the effects of inequality.

What might the steps of change look like in action (an example)?



Strand of Action 2: University culture

What does the research say?

The culture of Newcastle University is one which is mediated by a number of different and sometimes conflicting forces, for example: external regulatory demands and performative target-driven approaches; its status and position as a ‘red-brick’ or member of the Russell Group; perceptions of what constitutes quality and excellence; the pervasiveness of high-stakes testing as an aid to social mobility; and the growth of ‘student as consumer’ narratives. NU has a Vision and Strategy (From Newcastle. For the World) which sets out the kind of culture and values that it wants to encourage. Sometimes, there are tensions between the demands upon NU and the ability of NU to be student-centred in terms of outcomes. The way we see and talk about students can affect the actions we take. Sometimes there is a risk of reinforcing stereotypes of students and forming an understanding of the student experience from statistical majorities (numbers) rather than the voices and stories of individual students. The data on which these understandings are formed is, in many cases, partial. Partnership working between staff, and between staff and students can be challenging given the size of the organisation and the multiple roles, understandings and expectations operating within it.

What are the critical ingredients for inclusion?

The three areas of change which seem essential to the causal process of creating meaningful change in university culture seem to be ‘Language and perceptions’, ‘Collaboration’ and ‘Shared vision’.

What might the steps of change look like in action (an example)?



‘Collaboration’ between staff and students and between staff in different job families and/or sections working in partnership to form a clear, consistent, coherent understanding of what inclusiveness means at, and for, NU. Communication is two-way, meaning changes are communicated in return for participation.

‘Language and perceptions’ of NU community change from deficit or incomplete notions and stigmatising language to more inclusive perspectives and ways of talking about widening participation and inclusion.

‘Shared vision’ refers to the creation of a coherent, shared and clear longer-term vision for what an inclusive NU looks like, that can guide and inform local practices and cultures.

Strand of Action 3:

Professional practices

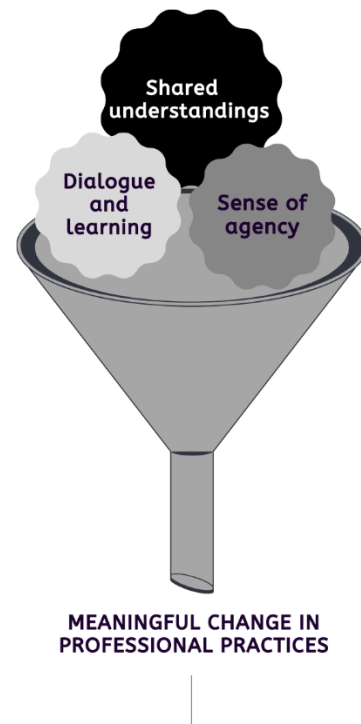
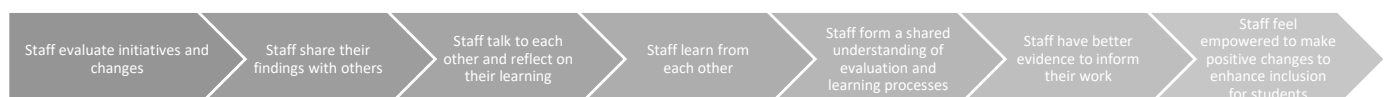
What does the research say?

Working cultures can be very different between job families of staff. Resources for evidence informed practice are not consistently accessible to all. Some PS and academic staff routinely underpin their work with evidence-based research, others have less resource to access this, meaning that evidence informed practice is more difficult to enact. Similarly, there can be inconsistent access to data and knowledge that could enhance understanding of the situations to be addressed and inform potential solutions. Evaluation, reflection and critical dialogue is helpful to practice improvement, but this needs a shared understanding of what is meant by evaluation, and what evaluation is for. Approaches to practice, for example, pedagogy and assessment can vary. The meanings and values that staff place on their work can also vary. In an organisation the size of NU, effective sharing of good practice, and critiquing of things that don't work, may also be challenging.

What are the critical ingredients for inclusion?

The three areas of change which research indicates seem essential to the causal process of creating meaningful change in professional practices seem to be 'Dialogue and learning', 'Shared understandings' and 'Sense of agency'.

What might this look like in action (an example)?



'*Dialogue and learning*' refer to the ability of staff to learn from, and share, their practice. This is supported by effective evaluation, access to knowledge, and opportunities to reflect and discuss their learning with each other.

'*Shared understandings*' are formed about what evaluation is, what learning is, and how it can inform practice.

'*Sense of agency*' is when staff feel empowered to be able to enact changes and have the autonomy to do so.

Strand of Action 4: The university relationship with wider society, families and communities

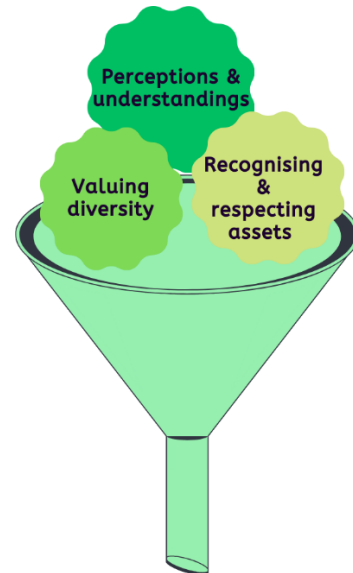
What does the research say?

Structural inequalities exist in society that influence the ways in which communities can engage with NU. Students and potential students have an inequity of experience and bring different kinds of social and cultural capitals that are valued differently. Diversifying student intake remains challenging, and actions are not always informed by full understandings of potential students and their applications. Transparency is needed in our systems and pathways. Potential students can have limited knowledge and understanding of how NU works, of finance, and of what HE involves. Perceptions of students as lacking social capital and attributes such as confidence, that more traditional students are perceived to have can sometimes lead to actions that prioritise the development of these.

What are the critical ingredients for inclusion?

The three areas of change which seem essential to the causal process of creating meaningful change in university relationship with wider society seem to be 'Valuing diversity', 'Recognising and respecting assets' and 'Perceptions and understandings'.

What might this look like in action (an example)?



MEANINGFUL CHANGE IN THE UNIVERSITY RELATIONSHIP WITH WIDER SOCIETY

'*Valuing diversity*' is the ability to appreciate diversity as a benefit for all and something to be welcomed and encouraged.

'*Recognising and respecting assets*' refers to the ability of the university community to identify and utilise the different skills, knowledges, cultures and perspectives that each other bring.

'*Perceptions and understandings*' refer to the knowledge and understanding of student's lives that can inform how they are enabled to access the university, and subsequently do well.

Strand of Action 5: The student journey and experience at NU

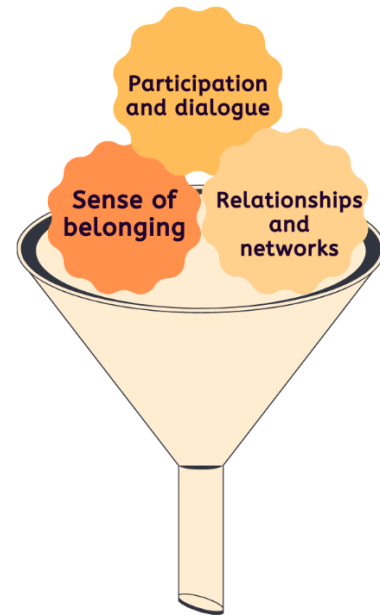
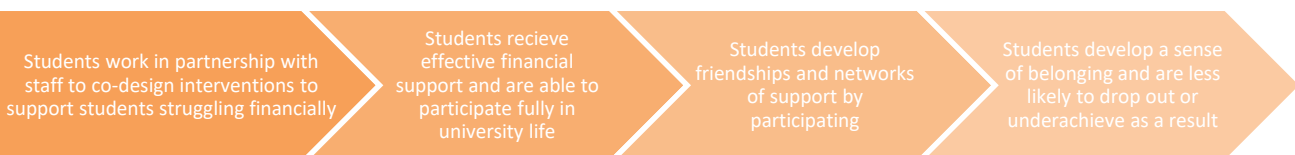
What does the research say?

One current and unforeseen factor that has affected student's experiences has been the Covid-19 pandemic. Some effects have been positive, e.g. changes to assessment methods. Others have been less so, e.g. the challenging employment context, lack of face-to-face interaction and the availability and development of support and social networks. Students have access to different levels of financial resources, and different levels and types of external support from family and friends and are inevitably subject to the effects of the wider structural inequalities outlined in SoA1, such as sexism and racism. A lack of understanding of students' lives perpetuates some deficit narratives of students by staff and peers. A lack of diversity in the staff body, particularly in some disciplines, can compromise sense of belonging, networking and access to support for some students. Inconsistent understandings of inequalities, including poverty, gender, race and racism mean that their effects are challenging to tackle in the context of the university.

What are the critical ingredients for inclusion?

The three areas of change which seem essential to the causal process of creating meaningful change in the student journey and experience seem to be 'Sense of belonging', 'Participation and Voice' and 'Relationships and networks'.

What might this look like in action (an example)?



MEANINGFUL CHANGE IN THE STUDENT JOURNEY

'*Sense of belonging*' refers to whether students feel that they fit in at university, both socially and academically.

'*Participation and voice*' refer to the ability of students to have their say, and/or be part of decision-making processes.

'*Relationships and networks*' refer to knowing people, and where to go for help, establishing friendships, and being part of groups that can enable students to receive emotional, social or academic support.

Strand of Action 6: A supportive environment

What does the research say?

With UCAS projecting record numbers of up to 1 million applicants to full time HE study by 2026, the evolving size and shape of the HE landscape coincides with changing student requirements. With declarations of mental health conditions rising, there is an increasing and corresponding pressure on sources of support.

In addition to pre-existing and declared physical and mental health conditions, experiences of racism, racial and sexual harassment and assault are common issues in universities (EHRC 2019; Roberts, Donovan and Durey 2022). Research suggests that these experiences - on and off campus - may contribute to harm and distress for students during their time in university. Our students have sometimes struggled to find sufficient, culturally competent support. In addition, fears and concerns about reporting misconduct can confound barriers to receiving support and guidance, which may be critical to course success. Research at NU also highlights the emotional and psychological burden on students and staff working on inclusion.

What are the critical ingredients for inclusion?

The three areas of change which seem essential to the causal process of creating meaningful change in a supportive environment seem to be 'Personalised support for health and wellbeing', 'Fit for the Future' and 'Safeguarding against harms'.

What might this look like in action (an example)?



MEANINGFUL CHANGE IN A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

'Fit for the Future' refers to being prepared for the changing size and shape of the university population.

'Personalised support for health and wellbeing' refer to whether support is sufficient to meet the needs of the individual, including timely, as well as culturally, competent services.

'Safeguarding against harms' refers to the ability of the university to proactively identify, mitigate and address harms and distress experienced by its students and staff whilst on campus or its vicinity, where possible.

Inclusive Newcastle
Knowledge Centre

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