

Developing Inclusive Practice in Teaching and Learning

The term inclusion can be difficult to define and measure (Neely-Barnes and Elswick, 2016: 145), which can result in a lack of clarity regarding how to implement meaningful practical changes which are inclusive. The terms efficiency and flexibility are a useful lens through which we can consider inclusion in teaching; if we can design and implement ways of working which enable students to work more efficiently and flexibly, then these key principles of design will enable us to be more inclusive.

When we refer to inclusion, we often consider physical factors relating to the learning environment, such as access to a room or building or printing resources with a particular font. However, it is also important to consider cognitive inclusion, which refers to the very nuts and bolts of teaching and learning; in other words, are our students able to assimilate, process, recall and synthesise the knowledge we impart in a way that is meaningful and effective?

If we move beyond the labels of many specific disabilities, we can identify **patterns in difficulty** as many students with disabilities will face similar hurdles in the context of learning in Higher Education. It is also important to note that students with disabilities do not experience distinctly different challenges than those of the wider student cohort. Rather, they often experience a more exaggerated version of the difficulties that all students face. Therefore, if we tailor our teaching and learning to meet the needs of this particular cohort, then all of our students will benefit.

The following guide provides a range of strategies that will help to develop teaching and learning which is more inclusive, efficient and flexible.



Practical Strategies for developing Inclusive Practice

Adopt a clear structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lectures that are then divided into discernible chunks with clear headings can allow students to compartmentalise and organise the information they're processing. Providing an overview of these chunks at the start of the session will provide students with a map to help them navigate their way through the material.
Keep the big picture in mind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academia often requires students to focus on the fine detail of their subject. Many students are skilled in this area, but feel they need to be able to see the whole picture in order to do this effectively; context or reminders relating to the wider point of reference can be really useful as this provides students with a framework to link and thread together different pieces of information. This is particularly important when encouraging students to make links between different modules they are studying, or different sessions or episodes within a unit. When reviewing your materials, consider the overall narrative flow of your lecture; most students struggle with the links between information rather than the concepts or ideas themselves – perhaps consider using a visual cue to aid students making connections by marking transition points clearly.
Avoid information overload	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short intermissions help students to review material, to stay on message and to prepare questions. Receiving questions – typically for clarification – can provide a natural break or segue to the next section. When a student does ask a question, ensure that you repeat it so that all can hear, as the questioners are often facing away from the rest of the audience and perhaps not used to speaking clearly in a lecture setting.
Use visual prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It often helps to back up verbal instructions with written ones. Visual supports such as flow charts, mind maps, bullet points or tables may be useful, particularly when passing on information or instructions. Visual prompts, images and diagrams will also aid memory recall. When using these, ensure that the visuals selected directly relate to the material you are attempting to convey so that they reinforce the students' learning rather than detracting from it.
Manage the environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whilst it is not always possible to alter the environment, it is useful to be aware of how the environment may impact on students and check potential difficulties with the students so they can be adjusted if possible (e.g. lighting, noise and seating). Sensitivity to environmental factors can also fluctuate depending on other factors such as time of day or levels of stress.
Managing change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although all students need to be able to adapt to change, if change is unexpected then it can undermine or remove the very 'survival' strategies students may have worked hard to put in place. As the National Autistic Society state: "It's like going abroad but not knowing where you are going, how to get there, what you will be doing when you arrive and being unable to speak the new language". Therefore it may be helpful to provide information regarding any changes (e.g. cancelled lectures, room changes, changes to assignment deadlines) early and in writing to allow the student time to plan for and manage these changes.
Opportunities for flexible learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many students find that they need to read something over and over again in order to make sense of it and assimilate it. Therefore, providing lecture notes and reading lists in advance can help students to better prepare for lectures and seminars. Making materials available electronically beforehand will also allow a student to access materials using adaptive hardware/software. Prioritised reading lists can help a student focus on the most important content and focus on their depth of reading rather than breadth.