Advancing inclusive practices in higher education: possibilities and limitations of a social justice professional development course

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Published online: 18 Oct 2024.

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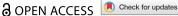Celina McEwen[a], Beate Mueller[b], Franziska Trede[c], Ben Archer[d] and Michaela Zappia[e]

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ABSTRACT

Research on widening the participation of historically underrepresented university students tends to focus on student preparation and the structural adjustments needed to attract and retain them. Few studies have examined how to prepare university staff for the diversity of students that comes with such widening participation programmes. This paper contributes to this gap by discussing the impact that a professional development course on practising inclusion in higher education had on academic and professional staff participants' understanding of equitable and inclusive practices. Using interview data, we found that participants developed a more nuanced and sensitive practice and greater confidence to act for change as they acquired new skills and knowledge associated with social inclusion practices, reflected on their professional identity changes, and gained critical insights into their roles. These findings support the need for this type of professional development to prepare all higher education staff to genuinely support university students from underrepresented groups. They also highlight the need for these professional development offerings to foster greater reflexivity about taken-for-granted assumptions, a deeper understanding of structural power and inequity in higher education, and higher education staff members' capacity to enact change within these structures.

Introduction

Higher education (HE) institutions' widening participation (WP) policies and programmes are designed to increase access, equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) of historically underrepresented student groups. As such they often imply a commitment to social justice principles and outcomes (Gayton 2020; Park and Kitching 2020). For example, in the UK, increasing the participation of the population most underrepresented in HE

programmes (e.g. with low socio-economic status or living with disability) is a government policy priority area that aims 'to ensure that all those who have the ability to benefit from higher education have the opportunity to do so' (Department of the Economy 2024). Similarly, in Australia, WP programmes are designed 'to help Australians who want to attend university, regardless of circumstances, background or location' (Department of Education 2024).

Despite the increase in WP policies and programmes, inequities and exclusionary practices persist in HE (Naylor and Mifsud 2019; Ní Chorcora, Bray, and Banks 2023). However well-meaning, WP programmes and EDI policies that only engage with social justice issues at a surface level, lack the capacity to deliver positive change for underrepresented students – and staff. To be a genuine catalyst for social change, these policies and programmes must be tied to organisational and classroom changes that go beyond structured websites, individual arrangements for reasonable adjustments, and improved digital accessibility. According to Kreber (2016), universities that take social justice in WP programmes seriously need to have a sense of shared responsibility towards EDI. Such shared responsibility can be developed through professional development programmes for practising inclusion that raise staff's awareness of students' worldviews, support their engagement with the personal and political dimensions of HE, and acknowledge 'the role of power structures in reproducing inequalities' (Park and Kitching 2020).

Little is known, however, about how to design such professional development programmes and their efficacy (Park and Kitching 2020). Heeding Kreber's call, the first three authors of this paper led the design and implementation of a professional development course in inclusive practices in HE entitled *Practising Inclusion: Working and Teaching for Social Justice* (the Micro). The Micro's development was funded by the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion of a metropolitan university. The aim of the Micro was to provide theoretical underpinnings and practical ways to enhance the Australian HE sector's academics, professionals and executives' understanding and practices of equity, inclusion, and social justice in the workplace. With a focus on practising inclusion in HE, the Micro sought to build participants' capacity to support and positively work with underrepresented students and staff.

To address the research gap in the design and efficacy of professional development programmes for EDI and social justice in HE, the authors conducted a study that explored the impact in terms of possibilities and limitations of social change for the first cohort of participants in the Micro. The overarching research question that guided this study was: How did the Micro impact participants in their approaches to practising inclusion in their HE work context?

In what follows, after providing an overview of the Micro and a review of the literature on WP programmes, we present the pragmatic, conceptual and attitudinal ways in which participants were impacted by the Micro. Then, we discuss the need to focus on reflexivity, agency and critical analysis of power structures to prepare staff to better support students from historically underrepresented groups to do well at university.

The micro

The Micro *Practising Inclusion: Working and Teaching for Social Justice* was developed over 9 months and informed by extensive consultation with and feedback from a

range of stakeholders (e.g. potential participants, diversity groups and learning designers). The three first authors, who led the development of the Micro, are migrant women, from diverse cultural backgrounds and social classes, and some with experience of living with a disability. The Micro has been taught to HE academics and professionals from several HE institutions since 2022 by the third author and other facilitators who are Australian-born women from different social classes. In addition to the three first authors, the research team comprised a second-generation migrant Australian-born woman and an Australian-born man.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Micro was designed as a fully online experience with self-paced learning activities, asynchronous peer learning tasks, three synchronous teaching sessions, and two assessment tasks. The microcredential format was chosen for greater flexibility and reach of participants. Its current prominence as a short course was also a decisive factor as it allows for a more distributed model of professional development; where individuals learn for a short time period away from their work context, but bring the knowledge back to effect change in their organisation or community (Vrasidas and Zembylas 2004).

The Micro is a six-week course that requires participants to engage in 10–12 h of learning material and activities per week. Throughout, participants are presented with content and activities that support learning and reflecting on the political dimensions of HE and the role of structures, systems and staff in reproducing inequalities for marginalised people.

After a series of introductory tasks where participants get to know each other, the facilitators and what to expect from the Micro, participants are led through Module 1, *Contextualising inclusion and exclusion*. The module helps participants reflect on why inclusion matters in HE and introduces them to the key concepts of equity, human rights and social justice in the broader social context as well as how they relate to HE.

In Module 2, *Framing Issues and Concepts*, participants get to reflect on issues of culture, diversity, identity and the plurality and hierarchy of knowledges. The module guides participants through the complex and constantly changing ideas and practices of how to build foundations for becoming an inclusive practitioner.

Module 3, *Situating Experiences and Identities*, engages participants in learning about the HE experiences of and assumptions about people from groups that have historically been marginalised and excluded from HE in Australia. Given Australia's historical developments as a settler colony and its prejudicial treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Tavan 2005), participants are required to review and reflect on learning materials about First Nations Peoples of Australia, from a socio-cultural perspective and in the context of HE. Participants are then given the choice to explore at least two out of five elective topics: (i) Cultural, Linguistic and Religious Diversity; (ii) Low Socio-Economic Status and First in Family students; (iii) Women in HE; (iv) LGBTIQA+; (v) Ability awareness and living with impairment.

Module 4, *Valuing and Practising Inclusion,* provides an overview of various principles and practices of inclusion (e.g. physical, virtual and symbolic). This module places an emphasis on the need for inclusive practices that are strengths-based and approaches that foster genuine representation, participation and communication, and how these support greater access, retention, contribution, progression and attainment of people in WP programmes.

With Module 5, *Getting Ready for Change*, participants focus on acting for change. The content and activities provided aim to help put the knowledge developed in previous modules into practice. This module starts with how to be an active, ethical and effective ally. It then guides participants through learning content and activities about planning for change in daily and professional life and evaluating inclusive practices, projects and programmes.

Module 6, *Social Justice in Action*, gives students the opportunity to revisit topics of interest from Modules 1–5, reflect on their learning throughout the course, and critically consider the challenges and pitfalls of inclusive practices in HE.

Throughout the course, asynchronous activities are moderated by the facilitators who respond to discussion threads and provide feedback on comments and questions. This is supplemented by two-hour long synchronous online sessions during weeks 1, 2, 4 and 6 to discuss and further reflect on content and activities. Participants submit assessment tasks in weeks 3 and 6. Task 1 is a free-format, reflective piece about their position concerning diversity and inclusion in their professional and social contexts. Task 2 is a report on a plan to enhance or introduce diversity and inclusion practices in their work team or subject.

Literature review

Since the 1980s, most universities in Western countries such as Australia, the US and the UK, have been compelled through government policy to increase enrolments of students from historically underrepresented groups. Such policies can be seen as a powerful mechanism to address socio-economic inequities by providing greater opportunities to access university and obtain higher qualifications (Awang-Hashim, Kaur, and Valdez 2019; Pitman 2020). However, from a neoliberal perspective that sees the university sector as key producers of a skilled workforce that support the country's economic growth, WP programmes can be seen as the government's mechanism for increasing the number of productive graduates – the business case for WP – rather than for improving access for those historically excluded from universities – the moral case for WP (Benson-Egglenton 2022; Tham, Raciti, and Dale 2023; Younger et al. 2019).

At first, the opening of the doors to underrepresented students did not coincide with pedagogical change. This meant that while more underrepresented students were enrolled at university, teaching practices remained steeped in the cultural conventions of the elite, which replicated the broader oppressive structures that reproduce social inequity (Adams, Briggs, and Shlasko 2022). To address this issue, there was a push for universities to change how they had been educating students (Adams, Briggs, and Shlasko 2022). This led to some universities taking on the role of advocates of change and social justice, and WP programmes being designed for inclusion (Grant 2021; Harman 2017) or developing a sense of belonging to prevent inclusive practices from becoming assimilationist (Boeren and James 2017; Harman 2017) or running counter to Indigenous principles of self-determination (Behrendt and Vivian 2010).

Evidence shows that, over the years, WP policies and programmes have resulted in a greater diversity of students and higher success rates for students participating in HE through these programmes (Bingham and O'Hara 2007; Ní Chorcora, Bray, and Banks 2023; Younger et al. 2019). Yet, research reveals that underrepresented students in HE

still have unequal learning opportunities and outcomes (Ní Chorcora, Bray, and Banks 2023).

While some research has found that completion is linked to the motivation of students targeted by WP programmes to do well and improve their economic prospects (Bingham and O'Hara 2007; Contreras 2011; Elliot and Brna 2009), other research reveals that course design and learning support are key factors in ensuring they succeed in HE (Ní Chorcora, Bray, and Banks 2023) as well as physical and structural changes (Cooper, Ralphs, and Harris 2017; McNaught, Whithear, and Browning 1999; Ní Chorcora, Bray, and Banks 2023). In addition, some studies highlight the importance of 'belonging' for HE students' achievements, and its close connection with the acquisition of specific cultural capital (Donovan and Erskine-Shaw 2020).

However, more research is still needed to clearly establish the level of success of WP programmes in attracting and retaining students (Holland et al. 2017; Park and Kitching 2020; Tham, Raciti, and Dale 2023). Pitman (2020) argues that to make a difference in this domain, HE staff need to be trained to use the strengths of diversity and inclusion in their classrooms and institutions. Park and Kitching (2020) suggest that to improve HE staff's inclusive practices, professional development needs to integrate social justice perspectives, assist academics to understand the political nature of education and the implications of intersectionality – looking at the effects of prejudice for people who belong to more than one category of difference (Crenshaw 1991) – as well as challenge staff's tendency to explain away discrimination (Park and Kitching 2020). Further, there are no comprehensive professional development opportunities of these kinds for all HE staff to take part in. Currently, only HE staff interested in EDI take responsibility for educating themselves through one-off subjects, short courses, non-formal training or networking, and developing their inclusive pedagogical knowledge and skills (Awang-Hashim, Kaur, and Valdez 2019).

Methods

This qualitative study explored the impact of participating in the Micro for the first cohort of HE staff. It analysed data collected through two rounds of in-depth interviews.

Ethics, recruitment and participants

Ethics approval was obtained from the university's human ethics committee. Data collected has been de-identified and pseudonyms used in what follows to discuss participants' experiences and insights.

To avoid coercion, the fifth author who was not involved in the design and teaching of the Micro recruited and interviewed. Out of the 26 staff enrolled in the Micro, 13 volunteered and participated in the first interview and 11 in the second.

As described in Table 1, all but one participant identified as female. They worked in metropolitan ($n = 10$), regional ($n = 1$) and multi-campus metropolitan/regional ($n = 2$) universities in professional ($n = 6$) and academic roles ($n = 7$) (Table 1). Participants had diverse roles including directors, support officers, project coordinators, PhD candidates, casual tutors, and full-time academics.

Table 1. Participant demographics (*n* = 13).

Pseudonym	Position category	Work type	University type	Gender	Field/Discipline	Interviews
Fern	Professional	Full-Time	Metropolitan/Regional	Female	Equity	1 & 2
Mei	Professional	Full-Time	Metropolitan/Regional	Female	Equity & Inclusion	1
Keiko	Professional	Full-Time	Metropolitan	Female	Inclusion	1 & 2
Raine	Professional	Full-Time	Metropolitan	Female	Equity & Inclusion	1 & 2
Seema	Professional	Full-Time	Regional	Female	Equity & Inclusion	1 & 2
Selena	Professional	Part-Time	Metropolitan	Female	Social Justice	1 & 2
Josefin	Academic	Full-Time	Metropolitan	Female	Humanities	1 & 2
Trish	Academic	Full-Time	Metropolitan	Female	Health	1
Deb	Academic	Full-Time	Metropolitan	Female	Health	1 & 2
Charlie	Academic	Full-Time	Metropolitan	Female	Health	1 & 2
Rena	Academic	Full-Time	Metropolitan	Female	Humanities	1 & 2
Altan	Academic	Full-Time	Metropolitan	Male	Science	1 & 2
Carys	Academic	Casual	Metropolitan	Female	Business	1 & 2

Data collection

Participants were invited to take part in two semi-structured interviews of between 40-60 min. The literature review informed the questions for the first interviews, which aimed to capture and evaluate the immediate impact of the Micro on participants upon graduating. Follow-up interviews were conducted 3 months later. This second round of interviews included questions informed by the analysis of the first interview dataset to capture longer-term impact and changes to EDI practice specific to each participant. This enabled a seamless conversation between participant and interviewer and created a more personalised atmosphere. The interviews were transcribed using voice recognition software. The transcripts were manually checked for accuracy against the recording before being de-identified.

Data analysis

Drawing on philosophical hermeneutics, we adopted an iterative, immersive, individual and dialogical approach to analyse data, which asserts that subjective experiences need to be included in the analysis and that meaning-making is a cultural process (Miles and Huberman 1994; Trede and Loftus 2010). Concretely, the authors independently read the transcripts to identify key themes, messages and meanings. We then compared each other's initial interpretations and through critical interrogation of these interpretations established a shared set of codes and themes.

Data were coded using NVivo12 in two stages. The first stage adopted an inductive approach where the fourth author coded the interview dataset. This approach helped identify participants' perceptions and experiences of impact and learning through the Micro. The second stage of coding was carried out by the second author who used a deductive approach to review and match the analysis of the data collected by the first interview with themes of social justice, equity and inclusion learning and practices.

Results

Our analysis shows that various levels and forms of learning and change occurred for participants in their practice of inclusion in HE. Participants challenged their

understandings of social conventions, acquired more scholarly ways of thinking about social justice and equity groups, deepened their repertoire of practising inclusion, and felt better prepared to be an ally. The findings are clustered around three broad themes: rethinking assumptions, acquiring new skills and concepts, and advocating for change.

Rethinking assumptions

A major impact on participants was how the Micro challenged some of their taken-for-granted assumptions, which resulted in greater awareness of and sensitivity to the lived experiences of historically underrepresented people.

Challenging socialisation

Participants realised that their previous understanding of diversity was directly related to their socialisation. They felt challenged in how they had been educated to think about and relate to diversity, which had significant implications for how they perceived and conducted themselves with students and colleagues.

For example, Deb, an academic in a health-related field who taught postgraduate students, wanted to learn more about inclusion to improve her subjects' design. In the process, her attitude towards students changed as she became aware of some of the difficulties they faced: 'I think I did come away being a little bit more aware and I suppose sensitive to some of these things that are out there with the students.'

Another important challenge to participants' understanding of equality and equity occurred through an increased awareness of why and how inclusion matters, and a more nuanced engagement with categories of difference, and notions of inequality and inequity. Charlie, another academic in a health-related field, is a case in point:

> Inclusion is not about the demographic of a person because I don't know what's going on in all my students' lives. I mean, I know that this student has mental health issues. I know that this student is first in family, but there's things that go on in people's lives that we have absolutely no idea about […] I'm linking it [inclusion] much more to equity, rather than equality [,..] to see as a teacher who are those students that need the extra input and assistance and strategies around their learning.

Another example is provided by Trish, another academic with extensive expertise in researching health, but new to teaching:

> I guess just making that extra effort to not just be inclusive of the ways that are obvious, like through accessibility services and all that, but to just […] make difference more normal than exceptional.

Also, Carys was inspired to think about what 'fairness' is. As a PhD candidate and casual academic in Business who had joined academia after working in the corporate sector, she wondered how fair processes in assessments could benefit all students.

Similarly focused on assessment tasks, Josefin, a research-intensive academic in a humanities-related field, found that the Micro helped shift her mindset about diversity and inclusion away from a deficit approach towards the benefits of a strength-based approach:

then diversity becomes a strength, rather than something that is to be overcome, actually the diversity of our experiences of our perspectives, of our respective strengths, we can harness those into a really good end product that we're submitting rather than something that we need to overcome for each of us to get good individual marks. So, diversity as something to be embraced and welcomed and mobilised rather than avoided or in fact, disparaged.

Sensitivity and awareness

Another important learning outcome that participants of the Micro noticed was their growing sensitivity and nuanced feelings towards aspects of diversity. Participants observed a shift in their thinking based on newly gained insights or deeper meaning-making. They reported that the many lived experiences and concepts they were exposed to in the Micro helped them appreciate 'differences', what that meant for students, learnt how to speak about them, and to adopt different practices for and with them.

Deb reflected on how different lived experiences led to different understandings. In particular, she realised how being resilient and overcoming obstacles was different for some of her students. She found herself becoming 'a little softer' and approaching certain situations with less judgement and a greater inclination to listen.

The reflexivity and newly gained sensitivity around 'difference', also led to a shift in how participants discussed various aspects and issues of diversity. For some, this resulted in a change in how they perceived underrepresented students, no longer as being fixed categories of difference. For instance, Seema, who worked in a professional role, learnt that inclusion is not about adapting to individual learning styles but about creating inclusive environments for learning. Also, Raine, a professional staff member working in an equity and inclusion role, stated:

I think that when we try to talk through being an ally and an advocate, it can sometimes seem really fraught and it can sometimes feel like there's a sense of aggression or anger that underscores those conversations, and I think that my main take away is I just feel like it's really softened me and the way I relate to those terms.

Although many of the participants noticed an increase in awareness and sensitivity, they also recognised some of the limitations of their learning and EDI practices, as Josefin stated:

So, there are certain things I will never understand. I might have the best intentions, but students don't necessarily know that, particularly if they are: first in family, […] Indigenous, […] from a migrant community, LGBTQI.

Josefin's comment about her capacity to understand the lived experiences of some of her students raises a significant issue. It problematises the effectiveness of empathy and appreciation for diversity. It brings to the surface the challenge to relate things that occur at the micro level (i.e. individual students' experiences) with what happens at the meso (e.g. pedagogical or group) and macro (e.g. structural and institutional). This comment may also point to the need at all levels of universities for an increase in academics and professionals with shared lived experiences of being from a historically underrepresented group.

Acquiring new capabilities and concepts

While some participants were already quite knowledgeable about EDI practices and saw the Micro as a refresher course, others gained new capabilities and concepts. Specifically,

many developed a new repertoire of knowledge and skills in social justice learning, accessible design, storytelling, intersectionality, and Indigenous ways of knowing.

New skills and tools

At a more pragmatic level, some participants developed a better understanding of inclusive design practices and tools. This included making online content accessible and designing inclusive assessments and learning activities to better support students. For example, Mei, the director of an equity and inclusion professional service delivery unit, was prompted through the final assessment of the Micro to rethink assessment design from a learner perspective:

> the possibilities are kind of endless, but it was a good thing as well because it […] made you actually think about what do I wanna do and what's gonna work for me and kind of: 'OK, so how are we doing this in our programmes'.

Raine, who had not experienced sharing knowledge and insights through stories before, was still reflecting on how she might make use of her newly acquired knowledge of the power of *storytelling*:

> I think that the microcredential was really affirming in a lot of ways but the crucial thing that I'm still grappling with is one of the central things that came out of the microcredential is that stuff around storytelling and sharing one another's stories.

Deb was inspired to try new teaching strategies in class to ensure the participation of all students without pressure:

> Things like giving them time to discuss amongst themselves and then come forward so they don't feel like they're being put on the spot, so they feel like they've had the opportunity to share and not just […] be picked.

Similarly, Carys was keen to apply her understanding of reflexive practice as a pedagogical tool:

> It's continuing your reflective thinking. It's when people give you feedback, you're not just putting it into a little box. You know it's actually in your mind, part of a broader reflection.

Acquiring new skills and tools shows how what might seem like a minor type of learning can be a gateway to participants being able to critically appraise their practice and become more conscious and purposeful inclusive practitioners. As these quotes suggest, the acquisition of new EDI skills and tools can lead to significant changes in how students are better supported in their learning and/or deeper learning about underpinning concepts.

Social justice and related concepts

Our analysis revealed that some participants developed critical knowledge about equity and social justice as core concepts. For example, Keiko reflected on her learning about the concept of social justice:

> The big hook for me was social justice. That was something that I felt if there was a gap in my understanding of how these all fitted together, it was probably in that space. […] I had never really consciously included that [concept of social justice] before in my internal definition or my internal workings, and since doing the course it's now become much more obvious to me

that [social justice] is incredibly important. […] I'm doing what I can to make that far more overt.

Other participants mentioned a more critical understanding of the concept of equity and associated groups. Seema's comment on equity groups illustrates this point well:

Instead of us talking about what we thought were the equity groups within the cohort we were able to go: well let's actually look at these categories that the government thinks are equity students and look for who might be included in that and look for how our group of students compares to this government data.

Others still found that engaging with these concepts had given them the language needed to speak about issues of equity, diversity and so on without feeling like they were 'stepping on toes or like getting things wrong', as Selena, a part-time professional staff member working in a social justice role, stated.

Although many of the participants had previously encountered the term 'intersectionality', some strengthened their understanding of it as a specific form of discrimination. They were able to crystallise this knowledge and how it impacted students by learning about its origins as a political concept aimed at highlighting the complexity of inequity and prejudice rendered invisible by the use of narrow categories of difference. As a case in point, Rena, a new academic in humanities, stated:

What I've really taken from that subject is this lens of intersectionality and being able to see what are all of these complex overlaps that inform the students that are in my class, their needs, and how they're gonna engage in the subject.

Some of the participants who already understood these key concepts found a strengthening of their existing knowledge and readiness to change their practices. For instance, Keiko commented:

there was some possible theoretical basis for the work that I hadn't experienced, I hadn't come across before and that's going to be very helpful for me going forward, but … And it wasn't that I didn't learn a lot, I just came away going, yeah, I really, really believe in this work.

For the other participants who had an existing grasp of the theories and key concepts, they reported that their participation in the Micro had been less impactful in terms of changes to their practices.

Indigenous knowledges

Overall, the participants had a good level of awareness and sensitivity towards Indigenous knowledges and practices. They, however, gained a deeper understanding of the importance of considering, valuing and integrating Indigenous knowledges in their work. Rena stated:

I have had lots of conversations with colleagues around Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous practices and First Nations perspectives, and that was taking place before this Micro. But I felt I came out of the elective with a much deeper appreciation for the nuances of that.

For some, this more nuanced understanding prompted them to rethink their practice. For example, Fern who noted that she was aware of the need to include Indigenous perspectives, remembered this eye-opening moment:

> *We do have First Nations perspective in everything we do. Like for example we had a little working group to assess some proposals for monies and when I looked at who I would normally put on the group, I went, oh, I don't have a First Nations person.*

These quotes imply that there is a need to continually reflect on who we work with and how we are inclusive. But they also point to the challenge to be genuine, as Rena describes:

> *I know it's a really complex space, but a lot of what I've heard is a need to build in Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous practice into our curriculum, which is great, but at a certain point there comes a recognition that just because the content's in there doesn't mean it's being delivered in a way that reflects and is respectful, so we actually need real life humans in the room.*

The need to engage with these concepts and theories in these areas was also mentioned. In particular, Seema recognised the importance of research and scholarly grounding, a dimension that some professionals felt was lacking in their practice and professional development opportunities.

These findings highlight how even for experienced EDI practitioners, acquiring new skills and tools, and constantly learning and refining understandings of concepts can be as important to practising inclusion in HE as reflecting on and challenging our social norms and conventions.

Advocating and acting for change

A third type of impact on participants was their capacity to act with greater confidence and to clarify their personal and collective understanding of what it means to be an inclusive practitioner, including how to deal with complexity and the need to continually learn.

Confidence

Increased confidence was the most frequently reported outcome of participating in the Micro. Participants spoke about confidence in terms of having a sense of 'permission' or 'validation' to talk about diversity and inclusion or raise these discussions as important issues at work. The increased confidence also pointed to a welcomed strengthening of participants' readiness or commitment to addressing issues of diversity and inclusion and to advancing equity and social justice in HE. For example, Seema whose professional role had recently broadened to focus on inclusion in general rather than on supporting students' accessibility needs, found that her participation in the Micro had been timely in ensuring she was meeting the new expectations of her role:

> *there were so many little things that I think overall have given me confidence to advocate in stronger ways or pursue actions that I think will make a difference, or bring certain issues to attention.*

Participants who had been ambivalent about stepping outside of what they saw as their professional remit to speak up on broad issues of social justice and equity, felt confident that it was appropriate for them to act and make decisions about issues of diversity and inclusion. For instance, Fern, a professional, had been seconded from a role supporting university committees to a role advising on equity targets and the distribution of HE

Participation and Partnerships Programme funding. While she had no background in equity practices, she was passionate about equity issues and worked closely with two colleagues who specialised in disability access, inclusion, and reconciliation. Fern felt that participating in the Micro gave her the vocabulary required to turn her passion into a profession:

> *I must say that I feel like I don't know whether I'm becoming more vocal or just my presence is being seen, but people are coming to me now, so I've been able to give a bit more advice on diversity and equity matters including with the managers of diversity and equity who look after the staff side of things.*

This form of empowerment to act was also discussed by Carys:

> *It's about empowering us. And we're being empowered by being able to just look, be aware that there are other ways of doing things, other options and so it's that empowerment through learning.*

In the case of Fern and Carys, we can see that their increased confidence and sense of empowerment is linked to their capacity to see themselves and their knowledge as powerful agents for change.

As much as the above comments show a growth in confidence that fuelled participants' willingness and eagerness to apply their new learning to practice, this was not the case for all participants. Altan, the only male in the cohort, a full-time academic in Science, was unsure how to incorporate his learning into his teaching practice and discuss some of these issues with his students. As for Fern, being aware of the larger systemic hurdles created a certain form of paralysis that she struggled with:

> *That's probably my biggest struggle at the moment. How do we make sure we can provide the support and services for all of our equity students when we've only got limited buckets of money that we've got to try and report on for those specific cohorts?*

Complexity and lifelong learning

Participants came to grips with the fact that complexity and ambivalence permeate issues of diversity and inclusion and EDI practices, and these issues need to be explicitly tackled. For example, Rena explained:

> *You know we don't shove their feedback and tricky requests under a rug, we call it out, we acknowledge it, and we talk about it, and we acknowledge the need for that but also the complexity.*

The complexity of identities, lived experiences, needs and pathways were recurring points of discussion raised by participants. The Micro opened participants' eyes to the tensions between the need for clarity and simple approaches and the reality of people's lived experiences of being seen as diverse. For example, Selena stated:

> *[I] probably had this understanding that things had to be like mutually exclusive like that you couldn't be two things at once or multiple things at once. So, a big thing was for me just getting down to understanding human identity formation and that things can be multiplicitous.*

Participants explained that the nature of complexity and uncertainty highlights the fact that inclusive practice is not a finite process and requires ongoing revisions of

actions. Lifelong learning emerged as a necessity to perform the role of an inclusive practitioner. Rena reflected:

> I think realising that the learning is never done, I think you know in taking part in a subject like this or any professional learning and development, it's easy to fall into that trap of thinking, '[…] once I've got that and once I understand this then I'll be so much better off, things will be so much easier'. But I think so many of my own assumptions were challenged and unwound, and I think it's that constant process of learning and unlearning and relearning.

Participants were instilled with an understanding that to be an inclusive practitioner required being an active learner and engaging on an ongoing basis with a wide range of people and in various professional settings (e.g. organisational roles and hierarchies, workplace and industries). Josefin talked about this in terms of having open dialogues:

> So, let's open up dialogue, let's talk about things. And being mindful of those intersections as we do engage in dialogue and I think, yeah, I don't necessarily think that's limited to a classroom, so if this is it for me in the academy, and I go into another work for like another industry, these are still things that you know if I'm ever in a position of power. I'm supervising somebody or multiple people these are things that I can enact.

These findings highlight the need to support EDI practitioners in developing their confidence to act and be advocates who understand issues of power, but also to be deliberate in their engagement with learning throughout their career.

Discussion

The findings show that participants strengthened their capacity to practice inclusion at work and were better prepared to engage with students from underrepresented groups. Our analysis highlighted the breadth and nuances of social justice learning and that it is an iterative lifelong learning process. Some participants felt affirmed in their practices, others reflected on their professional identity, and others still gained critical insights into the potential of their role and/or themselves to enact change and greater confidence to champion EDI at work.

These impacts of taking part in the Micro are significant given the participants had an existing drive to operate as agents for change and work within an explicit or implicit social justice framework. As such, these findings can be seen as having surfaced what is essential and effective in preparing and strengthening HE staff to genuinely support students from underrepresented groups. In turn, this has implications for the design of EDI professional development courses, which we propose should simultaneously foster three dimensions: (1) reflexivity to challenge a range of taken-for-granted assumptions; (2) a deeper understanding of structural power and inequity in HE and society more broadly; and (3) the capacity to enact change.

The first dimension is about fostering *reflexivity to challenge assumptions*, a foundational building block in social justice education (Adams, Briggs, and Shlasko 2022), with a special focus on exploring diverse perspectives and concepts of inequity, including intersectionality (Park and Kitching 2020). As described in 'The Micro' section, the content and activities offered in Modules 1–6, the facilitated sessions and the assessment tasks helped participants critically review their levels of empathy and their understanding of the complex issues and decisions that need to be made when practising inclusion in

HE. Also, participants' critical reflections on inequity and intersectionality helped them shift their understanding of diversity as isolated and fixed labels or categories of difference to uncover the lived experiences of structural barriers and combat reductionist views of underrepresented students.

The second dimension is understanding HE's – and other institutions – *structures as sites of power*, which is arguably at the heart of being able to change the vicious cycle of perpetuating inequity (Park and Kitching 2020). Participants reported that a deeper understanding of key concepts and related language of social justice and equity – especially addressed in Modules 1 and 2 – had prepared them to address systemic issues of inequity and contribute towards making their organisation more just and inclusive – which they are encouraged to do with assessment task 2. While it proved a challenge for some participants to zoom in and out of the personal (e.g. students' lived experiences, their position in HE), organisational (e.g. cultures and conventions) and the social (e.g. dominant structures and processes) to understand HE's socio-historical role in reproducing inequity and how as staff they might be contributing to this, staff's understanding of this is essential if they are to actively promote diversity and support the inclusion of students and colleagues.

The third dimension is the need to translate critical reflections and knowledge about mechanisms of reproduction of inequity into practices that promote and enact equity and social justice in HE, as conveyed through Modules 4–6, role modelled through the facilitated sessions, encouraged to do with both assessment tasks. Leach (2011) suggests that for academics and professionals to practice inclusion at work, they need to be able to advocate and act for structural change. This requires turning insights into action and, therefore, *building staff's capacity to act*. As our study found, participants' self-reported heightened confidence to act and sense of permission to speak up was based on their increased engagement with the scholarship of social justice, the acquisition of new skills and tools, and the reframing of their assumptions.

Limitations and recommendations

Because of funding constraints, the study was conducted over a short timeframe. While we asked them to imagine what might or could happen in the longer-term, the impact captured was restricted to participants' self-report of what had happened immediately after graduating and three months after the course. As such, a follow-up study on the longer-term impact of the Micro should be explored.

Also, the limited number of study participants meant that while the insights gathered into the learning and change possibilities the Micro had to offer as an EDI professional development course were promising, more research is needed to further explore how to prepare HE staff of different levels, with different areas of impact and different levels of previous knowledge to be inclusive practitioners. Additional research is, therefore, needed to examine the impact on a wider number of HE staff – especially those who operate outside of a social justice framework – in preparing them to genuinely support underrepresented students.

Another study limitation was the lack of data about participants' personal backgrounds and positionality. This would have enabled a more nuanced discussion about impact based on the interplay between Micro design and facilitation, participants' identities and lived experiences, and their pathways and motivations for taking part in the Micro.

Finally, the fact that participants in EDI professional development are self-selected and self-motivated individuals, this means that our findings are about the impact on the 'converted' to inclusive practice and/or social justice. This issue is, however, not limited to our study as HE staff are encouraged but not required to take part in such courses. To achieve real impact for students, these courses need a larger uptake across all HE institutions and for staff of various levels of seniority, roles and contract types. In addition, due to the complex and ever-changing nature of EDI, these courses need to be constantly updated and designed as a lifelong learning activity. For this, we recommend embedding such courses in staff training programmes and the practice being recognised in career promotion.

Conclusion

This study has contributed to the WP literature by exploring the impact a professional development course on practising inclusion in HE had on academic and professional staff's inclusive practices. We found that it better prepared novice staff to work with under-represented students in ways informed by social justice and equity, and gave validation to the more experienced inclusive practitioners to mobilise and act for change at work. While we found that participants developed a more nuanced and sensitive practice and a commitment to and greater confidence in practising inclusion, it also highlighted some of the challenges of advancing inclusive practice and social justice education, including the capacity to zoom in and out between micro, meso and macro factors, such as empathising with individual students with a wide range of needs and preferences or being critically aware of structural barriers and how to overcome them by building on the strengths of differences. The study is a reminder that practising inclusion is a situated, dialogical and adaptive practice. It can only be meaningful and impactful through critically engaging with a wide variety of people, their lived experiences and the scholarship of practising inclusion.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

Funding

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