

The Education Academy

Decolonising DMU Toolkit

# Building an Inclusive Classroom: A focus on how we teach

# What is the issue/ problem this resource will help to address?

At DMU, students of colour represent 54% of the student body with a large proportion of these students using English as an additional language. The diversity of our student population is further enriched by the 2,700 plus international students who join us each year travelling from more than 130 countries. Each student brings with them their own unique identity, lived experience and differing expectations of academic culture and learning. These differences can lead to a deficit model of understanding student learning and performance, which continue to persist, focusing:

*on the attributes and characteristics of the student as the main contributing factors for attainment differentials... the model does not therefore allow for an examination of societal or institutional structures and the discrimination that exists within them... ownership, accountability and responsibility for the inequalities in attainment similarly are not placed with the institution, only the individual.*

([UUK/NUS](#), 2019, p.16).

This has further implications, including: perpetuating negative stereotypes of students; viewing their skills and behavior as inferior and in need of remedial action; and disregarding the role of universities and minimising the impact of structural conditions (Smit, 2012). It is important to recognise these attitudes and behaviours as both conscious and unconscious, as well as implicit, and having a significant effect on the student sense of belonging (EHRC, 2019).

## Barriers to success - key findings

Singh (2011), Stevenson (2012), UUK/NUS (2019) and Tate (2020) identify the following barriers to success for students of colour.

- A reduced sense of entitlement to other additional forms of support.
- A tendency to avoid help-seeking strategies and using the 'get-by' method to cope with their studies.
- Hesitancy to ask questions in classrooms for fear of reinforcing prejudiced expectations about lack of ability.
- Prejudiced attitudes associated with linguistic competence.
- Lack of support and opportunities to integrate with other students leading to feelings of isolation, discomfort and a sense of not belonging.

These key findings provide an important insight into the challenges faced by students of colour. These themes are also highlighted within Decolonising DMU's [Freedom to Achieve Project Evaluation Report](#) which confirms issues and challenges around sense of belonging, student integration, academic skills support, development opportunities, and the transition to UK Higher Education for international students.

## How should the resource be used and by whom?

Inclusive classrooms must consider a reflexive approach to *how* we teach as well as *what* we teach. This resource should be used by academic staff to develop their inclusive learning and teaching practice in the classroom. The UDL framework at DMU aims to provide students with equal learning opportunities and experiences, and remove barriers to learning.

By building on UDL principles through a decolonial lens the following practical suggestions can help staff support students overcome cultural and language barriers.

## The resource

### Creating a sense of belonging: key practical suggestions

#### Relationships

- Learn to pronounce student names correctly: don't be afraid of getting it wrong or asking more than once. Avoid anglicising student's names without their consent. [Mynameis](#) provides some important resources on the lived experiences of individuals with non-western names and why mispronouncing a name can undermine a student's identity.
- Have a knowledge of, and respect cultural differences. Get to know your students and provide opportunities for students to get to know each other. You can do this by using non-threatening icebreakers, encouraging students to share their thoughts in a non-judgemental way and promoting micro-affirmations (Singh, 2020).
- Develop a "buddy system" for all learners in a class. Identifying a "go-to" peer may help students feel less intimidated asking questions, discussing issues, or inquiring about expectations/norms (Hess, Moore and Ableser, 2020). Avoid singling out or pressuring students into taking on this role, it should be something they want to do.
- Avoid creating an expectation of students keeping their camera's on in an online classroom. They may not feel comfortable sharing their personal situations in front of their peers/tutors or may be experiencing bandwidth issues. [This blog post](#) by Gabi Witthaus explores the question of 'how do we know our students are engaging if they don't turn on their webcams?' and considers alternative ways to measure student engagement online.

#### Content

- Use a diverse range of examples, voices and resources in your teaching content, for example in reading lists and lecture content to enable representation and a sense of belonging for students. For resources and guidelines to help broaden your classroom examples plus decolonising the reading list see the [library's work on decolonising](#).

#### Inclusive language

- Use clear, precise and accessible language in the classroom, in study materials and lecture recordings. Be mindful of academic jargon, colloquial language and cultural context of metaphors (Singh, 2020). Explain key terminologies and specialised vocabulary instead of assuming your students already know this.

## Academic support

- Signpost students to learning and skills support provided by [Library Learning Services](#) (this includes Librarians, CLaSS, Maths Learning Centre, Studiosity and Drawing Centre). International students can also access English language and study skills classes from the [Centre for English Language Learning](#).

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