

Inclusion in higher education: an exploration of the subjective experiences of students

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There is a paucity of literature which explores students' subjective meanings of inclusion in higher education (HE). Much of the focus is on the social exclusion debate, where HE is seen as a mechanism for the promotion of social equality. There is some research which explores students' experiences, but this mostly involves those students who have acquired a label. Contemporary research in teaching and learning suggests that effective pedagogy should benefit all learners and should not require additional practices for separate groups. Based on this premise, this research seeks to begin an exploration of the meaning of inclusion to students participating in higher education. 251 students from a UK health and social science faculty participated in the research and responded to statements which elicited their subjective meanings of inclusion. Student understandings of inclusion are discussed through the emergent themes of 'the imperative of relationship' and 'flexible practice enables participation' and understood through the lens of socio-cultural theory.

Key words: inclusion, higher education, students' voice, socio-cultural theory

Introduction

In common with all complex socio-psychological phenomena, inclusion is a challenging concept to fully understand because conceptions of what it constitutes vary and individuals experience it differentially. The research reported here focuses on student understandings of what inclusion means to them in the context of their studies in higher education (HE) in a UK university. Ontologically it situates inclusion as a contributory factor in the educational trajectory of all students and seeks to understand inclusion through the voices of students.

Research around inclusion in HE, both in the UK and internationally, can broadly be divided into understandings of the experiences of those labelled with a disability and HE as a vehicle for social inclusion. There is a plethora of international research which discusses the social inclusion/social exclusion debate in HE which follows the sociological tradition (Outhred, 2012). Roche (2016) using the framework of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reviews a range of literature which demonstrates that higher rates of participation in tertiary education results in greater social equality. Macro policies which are designed to increase both the number of people and the diversity of people in university are discussed in research from across the globe. Biewer et al., (2015) examine pathways which are more likely to enable the inclusion of those labelled disabled in HE across

Europe. They demonstrate that a combination of individual experience, family resources and social policy underpin inclusion narratives. They note that even in countries which have developed and established policy around inclusion, the resources at the disposal of an individual predict inclusion. Gale and Hodge (2014), in their examination of Australian HE, argue that the widening participation in HE policy is driven by the economic imperative to reproduce existing middle class values. But they argue that the privileging of those values may result in a failure to include all those enrolled, because the culture which emerges will not necessarily enable students who inhabit different cultures with diverse values to participate. Tienda (2013) echoes this position in her discussion of racial diversity and inclusion in the USA. She notes that the ongoing legal battles which contribute to policy and practice may serve to obscure the challenges that heterogeneous groups present to pedagogy, pointing out that diversity does not inevitably lead to inclusion. HE student rolls may include students from a range of socio-economic groups, ethnicities and genders but that does not mean that all will be integrated within the institutions, or that all groups will desire to be outside of their homogenous peers. The opportunity to participate and collaborate in the valued practices of the university may not be extended to all. The very culture of HE may result in some students feeling lonely and marginalised. Such research tends to explore the social practices which construct experience.

Other research focuses more on the experiences of individual students. Martins, Borges and Gonçalves (2017) report data from a study in Portugal which focused on students labelled with a disability that illustrates the challenges those students and perhaps others may face. Staff participants showed reluctance to develop practices that might serve only one or two students and a number of respondents reported a lack of knowledge and expertise surrounding education of non-traditional students. They report goodwill amongst staff but as O'Donnell, Tobbell, Bradshaw and Richmond (2012) have pointed out in their study of academic staff's understanding of inclusion in HE, accepting inclusion as a principle does not necessarily result in a concomitant search for and performance of new practices. The notion that diverse student bodies involve a greater workload for staff also emerges from work around international students. Barron, Gourlay and Gannon-Leary (2010) and McDonald (2014) both report research carried out in UK universities where staff express the extra burden that students from different cultures may present.

However, more recent research contests this notion of dual pedagogy. O'Donnell (2016) in her work exploring organisational development to inculcate a culture of inclusion in HE, points out that many initiatives targeted at groups seen as different, for example care leavers and parents, would benefit all students. She gives the example of the provision of a named contact for care leavers who can act as an information source and mediator throughout their studies and suggests that all students would benefit from this. She states '...a truly inclusive culture would be one in which such practices were extended to all students.' (p. 109). May and Bridger (2010) argue that inclusivity in HE can only be achieved by simultaneous attention on individual experience and institutional practice. However, there is little research in HE which explores what students understand inclusion to be and what students think it means for themselves to be included. This is not to deny the research which explores the experiences of students labelled with a disability (see Hutcheon & Gregor (2012), which represent disabled student voices in HE), or international students (Leask & Carroll (2011) argue that cross-cultural interaction should be part of all students' university experience) or mothers (for example see Haleman (2004) who discusses the participation of single mothers in HE and macro policy which serves to militate that participation) etc. Rather, the point follows from O'Donnell's argument that inclusive education is just good practice. Such a claim challenges the need to label individuals and groups because practice is led by the needs of the student. Inclusion is not understood in this case as an 'alternative' approach but rather is an inextricable part of organisational practice.

There is more focus on the social aspects of inclusion in research carried out in compulsory education but even here it is difficult to unpick how inclusion or exclusion is experienced at either an individual or organisational level. Nilholm and Göransson (2017), in their review of high impact international research around inclusion in schools, note that extant research variously refers to inclusion as a concept that underpins all participation in education to those which explore the experiences of those labelled with a disability. They propose that research positions can be categorised between arguments that celebrate difference and demand whole community shifts to include all and those which argue for specific and appropriate support for individuals, however they might be labelled, to enable inclusion. How these broad concepts may be operationalised in policy and behaviour in schools specifically, and in education more widely, is more difficult to determine. This issue is further evident in Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl and Petry's (2013) exploration of the social dimensions of inclusion in the secondary school context. They attempt to operationalise inclusion in the secondary school through four themes: relationships, interactions, perceptions of those with (sic) SEN (special educational needs) and acceptance by classmates. This work follows that of Koster, Hakken, Pijl and van Houten (2009) who, in their review of the primary school literature, state that many researchers fail to define what they mean by the social aspect of inclusion or define it inaccurately. They contend social participation is the most useful term to understand inclusion and generate a model which includes friendship groups, loneliness, collaboration in tasks, bullying and a number of other factors as underpinning defining elements to inclusion. These reviews suggest that inclusion can be understood as participation in the social structures of the educational institution.

However, whilst social inclusion is used widely in social policy research and is often understood by its antonym social exclusion (Silver, 2010), most contemporary educational theory would understand learning as a quintessentially social process. As such, the term inclusion in the educational context would be underpinned by assumptions of social interaction. As such, any attempts to operationalise the terms would per force feature the social structures of an institution. The key to understanding inclusion from a student point of view is how they participate in those structures.

The enablement of participation is key in contemporary, socio-cultural understandings of learning from Vygotsky (1978) through Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1999) to Wenger's (1998) communities of practice theory. Learning here is understood as the exercise of identity in context and a multiplicity of factors (including but not limited to individual dispositions, interpersonal relationships, institutional practices, cultural imperatives and government policies) interact in non-predictable ways to construct individual experience. Thus, understanding what inclusion means in HE would involve decisions around the 'who' - that is the whole community or just those enrolled in university, and all students or those who have a disability or international student label. Together with the 'what' - that is the research focus: outcomes, experiences, practices, relationships, behaviours, support; all those things that make up the operation of a university.

It is the goal of this research to explore how students, that is all students regardless of any label acquired, understand inclusion in their studies in HE. We wish to know what makes students feel included and how they think shifts in practice might enable feeling included.

Methodology

This research was driven by the teaching and learning group in a health a social science faculty in a UK university. The group wished to create an environment in which everybody felt included. A literature

review revealed that there was little literature to inform how this might be achieved. We therefore decided to undertake research to explore inclusion in higher education.

The aim of this research was:

- To explore what inclusion means to students studying taught and research degrees in a health and social science faculty.

The initial research team comprised academics from different disciplines including social sciences and health, academic skills tutors and student support staff but the absence of student researchers seemed incongruent with our research topic and goals and we therefore invited students from across the School to participate. All students from first year undergraduates to final year PhD students were included in the invitation and the final team represented both health and social science students and undergraduate and postgraduate students. The team quickly acknowledged that since the goal of the project was to allow students to freely express their understanding of inclusion, the unavoidable asymmetry of staff – student relationships might intimidate student participants to reply in particular ways. We therefore identified the student team members as the data collectors.

Because of the paucity of existing literature exploring the meaning of inclusion to higher education students we wanted to maximise the number of participants to achieve as wide an understanding as possible. However, we did not want to impose a priori meanings from the literature surrounding compulsory education and so rejected research tools such as questionnaires and searched for a method which would allow free expression balanced with maximum participation.

Data Collection

The final methodology involved short interviews targeted at individual feeling and experience. After a number of pilots, we identified three statements which the student researchers would use to elicit experience. The statements were prefaced with a straightforward definition of inclusion to provide all participants with an understanding of the phenomenon. The definition of inclusion was selected from a number proposed amongst the group. We wanted a definition which averted the gaze from inclusion as a response to disability and so trialled a number of definitions until we found one that participants found easy to interpret and associate with their own experience. The researchers read out loud or allowed participants to read the following definition:

“... a sense of belonging: feeling respected, valued for who you are; feeling a level of supportive energy and commitment from others so that you can do your best.” (Miller & Katz, 2002, p. 32).

With this in mind, participants were asked to complete the following statements:

- I feel included in my studies when ...
- I think it's difficult when ...
- One thing that would make me feel more included is ...

Overall, more than 250 students participated in the research and this generated 721 statements. Not all participants responded to all three statements but the range was from 227 responses to 'one thing that would make me feel more included ...' to 251 for 'I think it's difficult when ...'. All responses were either written by the participants themselves or recorded verbatim by the researchers.

To ensure the integrity of the process all team members, including students, participated in a training course. Data collection protocols were agreed, and everybody was given an opportunity to practice and reflect on the type of data which might emerge. In addition, each staff member acted as a supervisor for groups of student researchers so that they were supported through the project.

Because of issues of anonymity we did not ask participants to identify which course they were studying but student researchers were encouraged to collect data from peer groups to ensure participation from across the School. In addition, in order to include participants who might be out on practice placements, we collected data over a three month period.

Analysis

Initially each statement was coded by one member of the team. This generated initial codes. However, following this initial coding and using Anderson's focussed problem approach (Anderson, 2002), all the authors of this paper engaged in independent coding of all statements. The individual coding was examined, compared and discussed. It was clear that there was little agreement in coding using the original codes but rather that there were two emergent meanings which underpinned all coders' decisions. As a result of this exercise two overarching themes in the data were identified, which encompassed the underpinning meanings of the original codes and more authentically captured the emergent meanings and subjective understandings of inclusion:

- The imperative of relationship;
- Flexible practice enables participation.

Findings

In this section we present and discuss the findings from this research. We provide a wealth of quotes from our participants because we want to foreground the voices of the students who participated. In presenting quotes, we have identified those which represent the meanings of a number of respondents and a mix of quotes which represent international students, undergraduates and postgraduates. The themes represent individual experience and organisational practice, although we recognise these are not mutually exclusive. The data are analysed through the lens of socio-cultural theory in order to try and understand participation and so learning in the university.

The imperative of relationship

A remarkable outcome of this research was the primacy of relationship in students' understandings of what being included means to them. Comments on relationships, or structures which enabled relationships, pervaded through nearly all the data. Students identified relationships with peers and relationships with staff as making them feel included and the absence of such relationships as problematic. In response to the statement 'I feel included ...' students gave examples of teaching events which allowed them to speak to fellow students or staff:

There is a lot of interaction between staff + students. Practical based learning.

I am in tutorial, due to it being a smaller group and you're able to get to know the tutor. Also, in laboratory, again as it is a smaller group and you can interact with another.

For many students, inclusion means being able to talk and to have face to face contact which means they are part of the learning; it is not being done to them but with them. They also like to influence fellow students:

In tutorial as it is a smaller group of people compared to being lectures as the group is too large to feel included, whereas tutorial you have chance to have an input in the topic that is being discussed. Also, when in labs sessions as you have a

chance to talk to a lecturer of expertise in that area and get help which makes me feel included.

I feel included in my studies when I am taking part in seminars. The reason for this is because I get to share ideas with other students whereas you cannot in lectures. I also enjoy the group work that we do in seminars and group projects, it makes you feel included as you are part of a group and you are able to help each other.

... when we are doing group presentations. I know it's a nightmare working with some people, but it can be fun.

A fundamental part of any relationship is the interaction between the parties. Good relationships are underpinned by positive communication. These data suggest that inclusion is experienced through personalised communicative acts:

I have one to one meetings with my course leader/personal tutor.

When I was in my first year and I didn't really know the campus, everyone was really helpful when I was looking for which room I needed to go to. We were told "don't be afraid to ask anybody anything because all students were in exactly same place as you are now at one point and that's why everyone is happy to help," and it's true, I find being on campus it's so friendly and makes me feel safe as well.

I have found it a struggle as a mature student, a couple of the other students have made me feel included and lecturers who have taken the time to get to know me in lectures and seminars have made me feel included this has led to me feeling that there is more support and understanding.

Lecturers speaking to me, making me feel included, even out of lectures.

My personal tutor told me in a one to one meeting that they wanted me to know that my hard work hadn't gone un-noticed. They told me they knew I had a lot on my plate and that I should keep going as they felt sure I could get a first. This made me feel totally supported and recognised.

I am asked by the lecturer if I need help, so I know I am able to ask help if I am struggling confidently.

The responses to the statement 'It's difficult when ...' were not necessarily the opposite of 'I feel included when ...'. Some students find working with other students challenging and excluding:

When people in the class are not communicating, some people are shy. For example, sitting with new people, and working in groups with people you don't know well enough.

Group members take control of the group and ignore the ideas of the quieter members of the group.

...working in groups for an activity, as I am more of a quiet person, those with more dominating personalities take over the group.

...other students distract me in lectures watching videos on YouTube and playing games.

Students also report feeling excluded when they feel different to their peers:

...certain friends boast about the amount of work they have done.

On placement when everyone is loving theirs and you're having an awful time, you feel really isolated and alone, not sure where to go. But you're scared that if you quit or try to change, they'll put you back a year. That feels stressful and lonely. You feel like you're the only person it's happening to and that you're a real loser, it's all your fault - even though you might be trying really hard.

When you have a point of view that is opposite to the common zeitgeist and as a result your viewpoint almost gets swept under the rug.

At times lecturers talk about things I don't understand. I do not understand everything in this country that is difficult.

Feelings of exclusion also emerge when the opportunity for relationship is absent:

I think it is especially more difficult when you are from a different culture and in a country that does not yet feel like home. This is because it is difficult to initiate friendly relationships when there is no room for interaction during classes.

Lecturers who give short, unhelpful email responses, makes student feel as though they are bothering them.

... when I have to deal with difficult essays all on my own. It's difficult asking people for help a times.

Sometimes, I don't feel comfortable speaking to certain lecturers who look a bit authoritative to me. I want to ask something, but I don't and rather send email.

The data demonstrate the complexity of understanding and enacting inclusion. Inclusion, from this data, can be thought of as synonymous with access to relationships which empower. But the operationalisation of this varies. Whilst nobody in this research stated they wanted less contact with staff and peers, the nature of the desired contact which underpins relationship differs between people. From a meta point of view we might understand the answers through the lens of Wenger's (1998) community of practice theory – a good relationship which enables development, is one which allows the individual to feel they are participating in the activities which underpin learning, be they lectures, seminars or conversations with peers. Learning happens as a result of this participation. Full acceptance in an HE community can be understood as the individual being changed by their learning but also the context being shaped by that individual (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2011). Those people who contribute to group discussions and respond to peers feel included and able to influence the context, those who feel less able to contribute or intimidated by the social contact feel marginalised. This marginalisation emerges from a lack of control, of not feeling able to ask for help

or contribute an idea. Such feelings are contrary to participation and so undermine opportunities to learn. Taylor, Pearlstein and Stein (2017) note that effective relationships are formed as a result of positive emotional experiences and as such might predict participation. Those with positive relationships participate more easily. From this perspective, inclusion in HE can be understood as the experience of positive emotions which enable relationship formation.

Relationship is central to Vygotsky's (1978) notions of learning and is encapsulated through the vehicle of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This is a theoretical phenomenon which posits that the teacher and learner collaborate psychologically and practically to enable the learner to perform in a more complex way than would be possible alone. Through collaboration and practice, the learner acquires the skill to perform solo – at this point learning has occurred. The ZPD emerges as a result of mutuality, mere propinquity of learner and teacher is insufficient. Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013) have argued that a supportive learning relationship is preceded by a positive inter-personal relationship. Such relationships require constructive contact. In the data above students express the desire for lecturers to speak to them in formal and informal contexts, they want to feel comfortable about asking questions. In fact, they desire to be treated like human beings. This suggests that in order for learning to happen, which would perhaps be the goal of inclusion in an institution of higher education, there needs to be opportunity for all participants (staff and students) to engage in the quotidian acts which construct inter-personal relationships. Many of the responses in this research called for more opportunity for face to face contact with both staff and fellow students and demonstrate that where that contact is personalised and accessible, inclusion is inculcated. Inclusion in HE, from this perspective, means being part of a positive learning relationship.

Participant responses suggest that students believe that it is the responsibility of the institution to develop a context which allows for and indeed encourages social exchange. Students suggest that the university should:

[Organise] more ice breakers as this would allow people to get to know more about others on the course. Also, ways of including people, perhaps a seating plan, as this means people won't be left out if friendship groups have already been made.

[Enable] more interaction with staff and students and opportunities to discuss studies on an informal basis.

Have places and days organised to meet up and study all together.

[Encourage] international students ... for feedback and ... to be involved in both class and activities that are not carried out in class, involving other students. This will especially be effective if it is emphasised during tutorial sessions.

Constructing an inclusive learning environment involves more than the delivery of knowledge and the provision of learning materials. In fact, very few students referred to the content of their learning when defining inclusion. Almost without exception the responses involved the subjective experience of social activity. Students believe that an inclusive learning environment helps them to engage in social exchanges and so make relationships. O'Donnell (2016) points out that where there is a discontinuity between academics' understandings of their roles and the priorities of inclusion, achieving change may be challenging.

Flexible practice enables participation

The previous theme demonstrated that HE students seek inclusion through relationship. The operation of that relationship varies between students and it is this variation which we address here. One very powerful response to 'I feel included in my studies ...' was:

I'm allowed to work in my own way.

In essence that is what many of the respondents are saying – inclusion means allowing me the space to do things in a way that works best for me. Communities of practice theory foregrounds the notion of identity in understanding learning. Individual learners enter education communities with their own particular identities which underpin their understandings and behaviours. In order to participate and so learn, those identities need to shift in ways which enable participation in the valued practices of the new community (Tobbell et al, 2011). But participation is moderated by practice. Not all identities fit easily into a given community. For example, when asked what they found difficult many students commented on the challenge of multiple simultaneous deadlines:

...deadlines are close together. It is too stressful as at times, there's one every week. This reduces my motivation in my course.

When everything is due on the same day and there is not enough time to focus on everything equally.

A reified practice in HE is the student responsibility to manage their time appropriately. Deadlines are published at the beginning of the academic year to facilitate self-management. However, students do not seem to find this practice enabling. This echoes Tobbell et al.'s (2010) work with postgraduate students who also complained of many simultaneous deadlines. When the practices of the institution do not enable learning, students do not feel included.

The lecture represents a typical teaching activity in universities. The notion of gathering a large number of students together and delivering information to them is a long standing and valued practice. It is not necessarily one that is valued by all students. Many respondents commented on the almost hostile environment of the lecture:

...we have lectures with around 200 students, there you don't feel very included due to the large group. You just blend into the group.

...we are in large quantity groups in lectures and others cause distraction by talking or making comments it's hard to concentrate as I feel its irritating and rude to tutors.

Teachers don't allow 1-2-1 time, e.g. in a classroom with lots of people.

These responses contrast with those about seminars where students feel they can exercise their autonomy:

We are in small seminar groups, after a couple of seminar sessions when familiarised with members in the seminar groups I felt included because I felt able to share my ideas/suggestions confidently and have comfortable discussion with my peers, and especially in [Tutor name] I feel included and engaged when sharing ideas

I am in seminars with less people and easier to speak in front of group and when lecturers ask lots.

Indeed, many students identified inclusion as the opportunity to contribute and influence. Not only to the contact teaching but also in respect of their own study:

We are asked to give our thoughts on a certain topic.

Lecturers listen to you and your learning styles e.g. a lecturer added more real life scenarios in to help students understand.

They ask us our opinion on matters.

I can give my thoughts and opinions on a topic, as this makes me feel like my opinions and ideas have value.

We don't get to choose our own modules and are just told what we're going to study. This is difficult because I don't enjoy most of the modules I'm taught, and I find it difficult to understand them. We're just expected to excel in a topic we don't enjoy and thoroughly understand.

Feelings of control and autonomy are argued to underpin behaviour and when control and autonomy are low, students may experience pressure and anxiety (Crocker & Knight, 2005). Whitburn (2013) in a study with visually impaired students in mainstream schooling, concludes '... by enhancing students' access to learning and social opportunities, as well as by stepping back and giving them greater autonomy, their inclusion can be increased.' (p. 14). Autonomy is not synonymous with independent learning; it is the freedom to choose how to act and to be. It does not mean that students should be encouraged to do it alone which Turner and Tobbell (2016) suggest is a dominant practice in HE, rather it involves providing an environment where students can give their views and collaborate if they want to. Students gave other examples of where practice was more flexible and so made them feel included:

A lecturer came out to my placement to meet with me as he knew that I was really struggling with it. He was only obliged to offer email support so seeing a friendly face from [university name] made me feel that I was still a part of the university and supported by it even while struggling on placement.

When the Uni made provisions to support me with my dyslexia. Having extra exam time and knowing I can get extensions if I need it makes it feel like there's a level playing field with other students.

I felt very included as a member of the [Masters course] team when I was invited to the interviewing process for hiring a new teaching staff for the MSc course.

Giving extra choices such as to attend extra events such as seminars and lectures and also to have a say in my course content.

I can do practical based things; I like using EEG machines to help me understand how they work and what they measure.

When tutors answer questions as the lecture is happening and don't wait until the end.

We have our own classroom which means that we are not moving from one room to another.

Subjects consider other cultures.

Lecturers asking students what they want to get out of the lectures and teaching things the students are interested in.

Students being able to select the method in which they are assessed, this would lead to better grades and less stress amongst students and be a fairer method of assessment that includes everyone.

More opportunities to get involved with the university that are not just SU [Student Union] based as SU based activities often cost money and are always the same faces.

...when there are other activities. Not only lectures, seminars. International week to show other cultures and foods.

An environment which allows students to exercise their own identity is an inclusive environment. Rigid practices which require specific behaviours tend not to foster feelings of inclusion. Students also understand inclusive practice as being kept informed or having easy access to information, not just about the course but about wider social events. There were multiple responses which demonstrate this:

Teachers email regularly with updates.

When I'm emailed beforehand regarding lectures and informed about work beforehand.

Regular emails from lecturers about course content and what's coming up.

Easier access to information so I can be more included in events, conferences etc. Maybe a group page on social media for the school could be set up.

Interacting with students through the use of social media. This would especially help if we do not see each other enough throughout the week and when we are out on individual placements. Communicating with other students to share ideas. I learn better that way.

All students are provided with handbooks at the beginning of a study module which communicate the structure and timetable of their learning, moreover the modules are supported by a virtual learning environment which provides additional information. It would appear that this practice needs to be augmented with more regular communication. Emails or social media updates through the course of the module enhance feelings of inclusion amongst some students. Being included is a result of continuous communication, not just one-off document releases.

Conclusion

The goal of this research project was to understand what being included meant to students in higher education. Existing research in compulsory education emphasises the social aspect of inclusion and our findings from higher education support this. The primacy of relationship as a mechanism for inclusion was a significant emergent theme in this research. Such inclusive relationships were enabled by the experience of positive emotion which underpins the formation of effective learning relationships which is part of feeling included. Further, feeling included demands that students can

exercise their own identities, where the practices of the institution do not allow for this, inclusion is not fostered. Feeling included is also supported by continuous communication between learners and teachers, learners and the institution and learners and fellow learners.

It was not particularly the goal of this research to understand how institutions of higher education might construct inclusive environments, this would require an examination of process and organisational change. However, we do argue that a pre-requisite for an inclusive environment is an understanding of what inclusion means. We acknowledge that this research represents the voices of health and social science students in a particular university and we cannot know if these findings would characterise the meanings in other disciplines such as the natural sciences, engineering, computing, humanities and art and design for example. It may be that the meta psychological meanings of need for relationship and opportunity to exercise personal agency are generalisable but the exercise of these in terms of the teaching, learning and social context are different. We would not wish to decouple the actual experience of students from the meta psychological meanings because in constructing an inclusive environment consideration of both is essential. This would therefore call for further research in different disciplines. We further acknowledge, that the responses here do not represent a depth of individual meaning. Given the paucity of research which explores this topic in HE we were concerned to access a breadth of meaning. More in depth understanding through interview and observation could only enhance the knowledge base.

Finally, we recognise the challenge these data present to universities and other institutions. Student need for one to one attention and flexible practice is, on the face of it, inconsistent with current imperatives for mass higher education. However, feeling included is inextricably linked to effective learning and the identification of effective strategies is essential. Clearly, more research is needed across the student body to explore what inclusion means. Those meanings can then become part of the data which inform pedagogy and wider practice in universities. We are not proposing that this is a problem to be solved, but rather than the knowledge that relationship underpins engagement is a starting point for organisational practice.

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