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Exploring inclusive teaching practices of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Higher Education (HE): A call for systemic change

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Abstract

This brief communication underscores the critical importance of cultivating inclusive teaching practices in higher education (HE), particularly in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), as student demographics become increasingly diverse. Drawing on preliminary findings from a BALEAP-funded project, it advocates for comprehensive transformations across individual, departmental, and institutional levels to ensure effective implementation of inclusive teaching practices. Emphasising the multifaceted nature of inclusivity, this article highlights the need for a paradigm shift at the individual level, supported by continuous professional development and cultural competence enhancement. Moreover, it stresses the significance of systemic changes at departmental and institutional levels, including revisiting curriculum design and assessment practices. Finally, the article asserts that fostering inclusive teaching practices demands both independence and active collaboration among stakeholders, offering a roadmap for creating learning environments that value diversity and empower all students to succeed in HE. Through this lens, the preliminary findings and recommendations discussed offer initial insights into creating more inclusive and effective learning environments, resonating with the mission to support comprehensive learning development practices and pedagogies in HE.

Keywords: inclusive teaching practices; higher education; English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

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Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of higher education (HE), the significance of fostering inclusive teaching practices of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) cannot be overstated (Lawrie et al., 2017). As student demographics become increasingly diverse, encompassing variations in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language and abilities (Brooks, 2020), embracing inclusivity becomes not just a pedagogical choice, but a crucial requirement for equitable education. It is therefore essential, in this context, to recognise that investment in change should be applied comprehensively, at all levels.

This brief communication summarises preliminary findings from a wide-scale project (Bakogiannis and Papavasiliou, 2023) funded by BALEAP - the global forum for EAP professionals, reaffirming the importance of systemic transformation in the realm of EAP. The project explores how inclusive practices of EAP in HE could be effectively planned, designed and implemented, aiming to integrate inclusivity at all educational levels to ensure equitable learning experiences. Utilising qualitative and co-production methods, the project gathered insights from a range of stakeholders, including learning developers, to identify and understand perspectives and attitudes towards inclusive education, ultimately creating a set of actionable recommendations.

These recommendations aim to enhance the teaching and learning experience, thereby contributing to the broader mission of fostering comprehensive and inclusive learning development practices in HE. By addressing equality, diversity and inclusion, this project aspires to add valuable insights to the ongoing discourse in HE, aligning with the goals of learning developers in academic literacies, study skills and EAP to create inclusive and equitable learning environments that reflect diverse perspectives and foster student success.

A call for systemic change

At the heart of the matter lies the acknowledgment that inclusivity is not a one-size-fits-all concept (Mitchell, 2015). It encompasses a broad spectrum of considerations, including cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic and ability-based dimensions (Matus-Betancourt et al.,

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2018). Utilising authentic, socially conscious materials and resources provides students with opportunities for rich discussion and debate over local and global issues, helping them engage in meaningful dialogue and critical thinking, thereby promoting inclusivity in EAP instruction (Mortenson, 2022). Therefore, the first step towards fostering inclusive teaching practices of EAP involves a paradigm shift at the individual level. Higher education practitioners, learning developers included, must cultivate a deep understanding of the diverse needs and backgrounds of their students. Recognising and valuing this diversity is foundational to creating an inclusive learning environment.

Investing in change at the individual level involves continuous professional development that extends beyond traditional teacher training programmes (Florian and Camedda, 2020; Moriña et al., 2020). Workshops, seminars and ongoing dialogue are essential components for educators to enhance their cultural competence, language awareness and pedagogical skills. This investment not only benefits the tutors themselves but also flows through the entire academic community, fostering an ethos of inclusivity.

While individual efforts are crucial, systemic change, at both departmental and institutional levels, is imperative. HE institutions bear responsibility for establishing policies and frameworks that prioritise diversity and inclusion (May and Bridger, 2010). This involves revisiting curriculum design, assessment practices and the allocation of resources. For instance, integrating diverse voices and perspectives into course materials, and ensuring that assessment methods are equitable and accommodating, are crucial steps towards inclusivity.

Investment in change, however, should not be one-directional in approach, imposed from the top down or expected to emerge organically from the bottom up. Instead, it appears to demand a dynamic and multi-directional approach among all stakeholders – ranging from senior officials and top management staff to frontline educators, administrators and support staff – in which the active engagement and exchange of ideas, experiences and perspectives from all levels of the academic community is required (Paju et al., 2022; Nigam and Kumar, 2023). By fostering an atmosphere of open dialogue and collaboration, where input flows freely in all directions, barriers can be broken down, and meaningful and impactful change can be implemented collectively. As part of this dynamic and iterative process, feedback loops should be also established to constantly assess the impact of

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implemented strategies. This necessitates a culture of openness to constructive criticism and a willingness to adapt based on the evolving needs of the student body.

Independence should also be encouraged. In the context of inclusive teaching practices, independence refers to the autonomy and agency of educators to tailor their teaching methods to meet the varied needs of their students, with instruction being customised and differentiated (Gheyssens et al., 2023). It would, therefore, be beneficial to move away from pedagogical approaches that could potentially exclude certain groups, and instead provide educators with the flexibility to adapt their teaching approach, fostering an environment in which they can experiment with innovative methods to address and meet student needs This independence should not be misconstrued as isolation but, once more, rather as highlighting the need for active collaboration, open dialogue, shared decision-making, and coproduction of policies and practices that are not only well-intentioned but also effectively implemented, leading to more comprehensive and sustainable changes.

Conclusion

To sum up, fostering inclusive teaching practices of EAP in HE demands a multifaceted approach that spans from the individual to the institutional level. Investment in change should be comprehensive, involving continuous professional development for educators, the formulation of inclusive policies at the institutional level, and active collaboration among all stakeholders. Independence, coupled with active multi-directional collaboration, can ensure that inclusivity is not only a theoretical concept but a lived reality in higher education. The future of EAP lies in its ability to embrace diversity and create learning environments where every student feels valued, supported and empowered to succeed. It is therefore essential that a framework/set of recommendations for promoting inclusive teaching practices of EAP in HE – the end point of this BALEAP-funded project – is developed and disseminated, and which all stakeholders involved, from frontline educators to senior leaders within institutions, can use as a guide to good practice.

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