

## PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

### Principles of inclusive curriculum design

Anticipatory  
Flexible  
Accountable  
Collaborative  
Transparent  
Equitable

### Generic considerations

- cost and financial considerations;
- embedding student and staff well-being;
- promoting student engagement;
- use of technology to enhance learning;
- responding to different approaches to learning;
- avoiding stereotypes and celebrating diversity;
- making reasonable adjustments.

### Introduction

It is the responsibility of the every member of staff within HE to respond to the requirements of equality legislation. The basic principle that can and should be universally responded to is that **it is attitudes, barriers and other forms of discrimination within the system rather than individual characteristics or deficits that are the cause of disadvantage**. Employing an inclusive approach is underpinned by the adoption of other principles of inclusive curriculum design, summarised in the adjacent text box and discussed in the introduction section of this guide available at [www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/inclusion/disability/ICD\\_introduction.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/inclusion/disability/ICD_introduction.pdf)

May and Bridger assert, in respect of developing an inclusive culture, “making a shift of such magnitude requires cultural and systemic change at both policy and practice levels” (2010: 2). In essence this change is represented by a shift in focus from responding to the ‘needs’ of individuals or specific groups of students to an approach that anticipates and plans for the *entitlements* of the evolving student population. Thus the onus is on institutions and subject communities to change and adapt their policies and practice rather than expect this of individual or specific groups of students.

There are many generic considerations of inclusive curriculum design, summarised in the adjacent text box, which are discussed in the introduction section. The focus of this section is on subject-specific considerations for those in those subjects aligned to philosophical and religious studies. Here examples of innovation and effective practice are provided to demonstrate that effective practice for one group can and should be effective practice for all. The examples, resources and ideas included in this and other subject guides have come from the sector. They were obtained directly in response to a general request made to the sector during 2010, from a review of the HEA Subject Centres or from recommendations made by colleagues teaching in the specific subject.

Where there are examples in other subject guides that may be particularly relevant or worth reviewing for further adaptation these are flagged. However, notably inspiration and ideas for curriculum design can come from many sources, therefore reading strategies employed and ideas in other subject areas can be a useful source of new ideas.

### **Inclusive curriculum design: subject-specific considerations**

#### Using staff and student expertise to enhance learning and teaching

Adopting a holistic approach to ensure all students' entitlements are addressed allows academic and central support service professionals to share their expertise. Centrally provided student learning support is by its nature generic and therefore there is a need for subject-specific measures that assist all students to develop and hone the skills required to study Philosophy and Religious Studies in higher education. A project that brought together Philosophy lecturers, disability advisers and subject centre representatives was initially focused on supporting students with specific learning difficulties, those from non-traditional backgrounds and mature students but had the broader aim of "enhancing the achievement of all students" (Bremer *et al.*, 2006). The project developed a methodology that could be replicated in other subject areas as well as subject-specific recommendations.

Drawing on focus groups with all participants, disability advisers visited a number of HEIs to review and observe Philosophy modules. They then worked with academics to provide subject-specific strategies, which were implemented and evaluated. The project was designed to identify how professionals can collaborate to meet the entitlements of all students. The principles cover four areas that can be applied more widely to the teaching of Philosophy and Religious Studies as well as other subjects.

1. Effective teaching and learning in lectures – conveying information, including the:
  - importance of signposting;
  - emotional involvement in the lecture to support positive engagement.
2. Effective teaching and learning in seminars – student participation enhanced by:
  - providing clear week-by-week information about guided reading including guidance to motivate and direct reading;
  - limiting the scope and set achievable tasks;
  - emphasising learning as a co-operative process.

3. Effective reading strategies that:
  - encourage reading and “to do so with the care and attention that is necessary for a genuine philosophical comprehension of a text”;
  - limit the scale and focus the purpose of reading;
  - “Recognise and address the problems that students will have with specific philosophical terms and modes of articulation, showing them how it is possible to determine the meaning of terms by close and careful scrutiny of a text”.
  
4. Effective writing strategies that:
  - demonstrate that writing is “a significant aspect of doing philosophy”;
  - provide opportunities to develop a habit of planning through seminar activities.

Other strategies supported by central support staff working with academic departments include:

- simplifying module documentation to encourage students to read it;
- using a student scribe to produce a seminar report, which was circulated to all students.

The aim of this activity was to improve note-taking, provide an opportunity for tutor feedback on note-taking, encourage other students to review seminars, and to give informal feedback to the tutor about students’ understanding of the seminar material.

Although there were some concerns that higher levels of support may promote ‘spoon feeding’, Bremer *et al.*, (2006) concluded that “those students who are willing, but not necessarily able at first, to gain higher marks do benefit from such measures”.

### Developing independent learning using study groups

The rising number of students allocated to seminar and tutorial groups can make it difficult for all students to participate and make effective use of the session. Independent study groups were introduced on two core philosophy modules at the University of St Andrews as a way of facilitating small group learning and to augment the type of focused inclusive discussion that may be limited in seminars with larger numbers of participants.

Seminars of 15 students were divided into three study groups. Initially each group was allocated a different reading. A report from each group was circulated before the seminar. However, students lacked confidence discussing the articles they had received reports on, so the same reading was allocated to all

groups and set questions were posed to structure the reading. Key messages from this activity were that:

- outside impetus is required to start the groups off (e.g. booking rooms, monitoring reports);
- students who didn't want to participate were allowed to opt out;
- reports were non-assessed to enable a “friendly, low-pressure environment”;
- independent study groups could be rolled out to support all modules (Hawley, 2002).

### Developing autonomous, practical and effective reading strategies for a text-based discipline

Philosophy in particular is a subject many students will not have studied prior to higher education and may therefore be unprepared for the amount or type of engaged reading that is required. Many students are unprepared for the volume and type of reading expected on undergraduate Philosophy and Religious Studies courses (Crome, 2007). There are also reasons why large amounts of independent reading will be daunting and anxiety provoking such as specific learning difficulties or the limited availability of accessible formats. All students will have competing pressures on their time and would benefit from guidance about how to identify appropriate texts and make effective use of their reading time.

Research conducted by Manchester Metropolitan University confirms that many Philosophy students will therefore need to be strategic in the scope and extent of their reading (Crome, 2007).

The first-year module ‘An Introduction to the Problems of Philosophy’ was therefore revised to “structure the curriculum so that it is possible to complete it successfully without imposing a huge reading burden, and set assignments that allow students to demonstrate the depth of their comprehension rather than the breadth of their erudition”. The result was a number of interlinked strategies, such as:

- explicitly demonstrating effective reading strategies and promoting their use by all students, which was supported by providing annotated course and reading materials and by posing specific questions to guide reading for seminars;
- adopting a range of assessment practices to test and reward a variety of skills, such as presentations, short essays, long essays and book review.

Responding to staff concerns that a guided and direct approach may induce a passive approach to learning, Manchester

Metropolitan University encouraged students' autonomy and responsibility for their learning by emphasising the centrality of reading skills in Philosophy programmes and highlighting the transferability of effective reading strategies. This approach avoided disadvantaging students lacking awareness of the importance of reading and introduced all students to manageable and effective reading strategies.

### *Supporting religious and cultural diversity*

An inclusive approach to devising curriculum content in Philosophy and Religious Studies entails including a range of relevant examples and other forms of content as well as challenging stereotypes contained in materials and held by students. This requires those devising Philosophy and Religious Studies curricula to be aware of and responsive to the backgrounds and other characteristics of their students.

### *Responding to sexual stereotypes of fundamentalist and charismatic leaders in Religious Studies*

LGBT access to Religious Studies is challenged by the position taken on homosexuality in many faiths, which 'introduces ethical and value-laden perspectives that are difficult to challenge in view of the objective and neutral stance that Religious Studies advocates in the face of ultimately unquantifiable theologically driven behaviours, beliefs and attitudes' (Collar, 2002). Collar suggests a 'response tactic' for Religious Studies would be to introduce phenomenology at an early stage in a degree programme as "an active social foundation skill to enable an accepting learning environment?" Students and staff should be encouraged to take responsibility for examining and challenging their own attitudes, assumptions and stereotypes about the need for an inclusive learning environment to ensure that challenges made to others are undertaken in accord with 'rules agreed by the group'.

### *Making the facts fit: using examples relevant to one's student audience*

A lecture on genetic screening prepared for international students' induction initially considered cystic fibrosis (a condition common among Caucasians). The session was revised to focus on b-thalassaemia, a condition felt to be more relevant to the international audience (Jamieson, undated).

### *Tackling controversial subjects*

Studying Philosophy and Religious Studies will frequently involve discussing and debating controversial topics about which students may hold very personal and deeply held beliefs

and opinions. The diverse range of experience and beliefs students bring to the classroom offers many opportunities to Philosophy and Religious Studies teaching as students will often be passionate and engaged. However, this enthusiasm has the potential to be exclusionary and to create barriers to the full participation of all students.

McCormack (2010) warns of the potential of freedom of speech in seminars to defame, incite hatred or cause distress to some students. He also highlights the impotence of students and staff being able to “consider matters from outside their own religious beliefs to properly engage in their discipline”. Strategies for minimising the likelihood of causing distress include:

- discussing social and disciplinary norms explicitly and using discussion with students as the basis for ground rules for individual and group conduct;
- clear information about the range and nature of the content to be covered in modules allowing students to make informed decisions about programmes and modules (McCormack, 2010).

The Education, and Sociology, Anthropology and Politics subject guides include examples of how to deal with controversial subjects.