

Liberation And Learning

**What it means and how you can
campaign on it**

NUS Scotland campaign pack

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Introduction from your liberation and education officers

Despite all our efforts, and success so far, to increase the diversity of the student population, often the curriculum students learn from is still underpinned by a focus on white, western, and male values. There's too often little understanding, or reflection, of the students studying, or their needs and values, meaning what we learn bears no reflection of our students.

We want to see an education where curriculums are diverse, and provide an understanding of liberation principles to students through the context of their course. We want students to graduate with this understanding, and for this to shape the way that they think about the world and their behaviours around diversity.

This is a long-term project, but one that we think could radically transform our education system by closing attainment gaps and keeping more students in their studies, transforming workplaces, and diversifying teaching staff. Only by ensuring that teaching and learning is understanding, and reflective, of the students taking a course can we hope to ensure that they identify with it, and can shape their learning in a way that speaks to them.

By transforming learning in our colleges and universities, we can make students feel they belong in academia. We can make society better. The voices of those who have been historically oppressed are still not being heard. We cannot expect to have a proper understanding of our world without learning about their experiences, or seeing things through their eyes.

The student movement has long said that education is for all but for too long we haven't used our influence to make that the case within teaching spaces. This project seeks to break down that divide, and ensure that we genuinely improve access and diversity across our institutions. It's a project that we're excited about seeing carried forward, and look forward to working on it with you.

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Setting the Scene

NUS has done a lot of work over the last few years on Liberating the Curriculum – making the curriculum more inclusive for all students. We want to build on this work. NUS Scotland believes that we need to go further than simply liberating a curriculum and instead liberate learning for all students. This resource is designed to give you understanding of the challenges around liberating learning, as well as tools, arguments and examples of how this works in practice.

Below we set out some of the ideas and concepts around the liberating the curriculum, and our vision for what it means. At its core, it can be broken down into two distinct, but intertwined, outcomes:

- 1. Access and structures:** Ensuring that all students, regardless of their profile, have access to the same resources and facilities as their peers, and that they feel safe and welcome, and have equal chances of success.
- 2. Content and learning:** Issues of liberation, equality and diversity are part of the curriculum. We ensure that curriculum content reflects our diverse population and encourages social inclusion and mutual understanding of different perspectives.

What does Liberating Learning mean?

NUS Scotland defines 'Liberating Learning' to be an inclusive learning experience, that takes account of and celebrates diversity, while equipping students to understand, critically evaluate and challenge structural oppressions within and created by society.

NUS Scotland believes that if our education experiences in colleges and universities were liberated, then students would become more empowered to challenge structural oppressions. As a result of students using and acting on a liberated way of thinking, wider society would change to become more equal for all people.

The definitions of liberation, equality and diversity are important to understanding this project. They all have important distinctions:

Liberation means working to challenge and reverse the effects of structural oppression in society; a 'freedom from limits on thought or behaviour'. For NUS, liberation means providing space and resources for students who self-define into that group to work and campaign for their own liberation, on their own terms.

Equality means that all individuals and groups of people are able to contribute, experience, and succeed fully in whatever it is they want to do, not bound or restricted by limits and barriers. In this case, the curriculum should not disadvantage any student or group of students because of their background or characteristics.

Diversity means that the curriculum should represent the diversity of contemporary society and facilitate an environment in which all students feel welcome and see themselves reflected in the learning community.

For our learning and teaching, being liberated means that curriculums, structures and cultures embody all the elements of the definitions above.

Why does this matter for you and your students?

We believe that an inclusive curriculum and liberated learning experience would ultimately make a better learning experience for all students. Specifically it would also help to close attainment gaps, particularly BME (black and minority ethnic) attainment gaps.

There is currently a 16.1% gap between the numbers of 2:1 or higher degrees awarded to BME students.¹ As a result of this extremely worrying figures, NUS surveyed Black students to find out what they thought of their education experience. From the survey 42% said that their course curriculum did not reflect the issues of diversity and equality and 33% said they felt unable or uncomfortable bringing their perspectives as a Black student to their lectures and/or tutor groups.²

In academic year 2014-15, non-disabled students were more likely than disabled students to receive a first or 2:1 in their degree. There was only one subject, business and administrative studies, where this wasn't the case.³ In some subjects the attainment gap was 7.5% between non-disabled students and disabled students being awarded first or 2:1 degrees.

Women make up 56.1% of the student population, yet they continue to be hugely underrepresented in traditionally 'male dominated' subjects. For example, they make up just over 10% of the students studying engineering or technology. Women are more likely to receive a first or 2:1 degree award for their subject.⁴

¹ <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/student-recruitment-retention-attainment/student-attainment/degree-attainment-gaps/>

² http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12350/NUS_Race_for_Equality_web.pdf

³ <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2015/>

⁴ <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2015/>

These statistics give a clear picture of how unequal education is at our colleges and universities. Moreover, there is, as a result of these statistics at the undergraduate level, then a similar, if not greater, trend among academics. Across many subjects, the diversity of teaching is skewed, and fails to reflect the diversity of the student population, because of a cycle of underrepresentation.

By changing the curriculum and the learning environment, and creating a liberated learning experience, NUS Scotland believes that we can help to reverse these statistics.

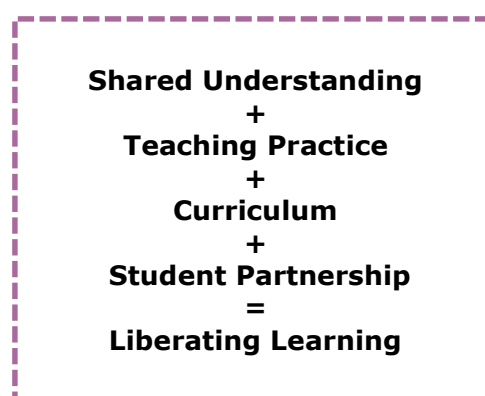
A liberating learning experience could increase retention and student satisfaction, because students would be more able to identify their own life experiences reflected in their chosen subject or discipline. This self-identification would enable students to participate and engage more with their learning, and this ability to participate combined with the acceptance among their peers would make them more likely to complete and succeed in their chosen subject area.

If a liberated learning experience can be truly realised then students would become empowered to challenge structural oppression and inequality in society, while studying and after graduating. This would in turn lead to less occupational segregation and more equal workplaces.

Just as importantly, if we can change the way we reflect and represent the proudly diverse student population we have, then more students from those backgrounds and experiences may be empowered and encouraged to progress to higher levels, and possibly into academia.

Education can change the way we think, our behaviour, and how we orient ourselves in the world. Liberated learning can make a positive change that goes beyond students' associations, college and university campuses; over time it can make society more equal.

Perfect Equation



There is a perfect equation to achieve liberating learning at your institution. The equation includes four different elements. Thinking about the liberating learning campaign in this formula makes it easier for students' to break down the different aspects of the campaign, and have successful wins.

Shared Understanding

It is vital that there is a shared understanding between the students' association and the institution about what liberated learning means and what it looks like in practice. This may mean explaining the definitions of liberations, equality and diversity, as set out at the beginning of this resource, to senior managers.

It may mean exploring how the institution currently defines equality and diversity and what differences exist between their definitions and policy procedures, and the definitions central to this campaign. Without a shared understanding of the importance of the aims of this campaign, it will be impossible for the students' association to make lasting changes to the education experience at their institution.

Teaching Practice

Teaching practice refers to how courses or subject are taught. Often in universities this is referred to as pedagogy. That could be through lectures, seminars, labs, peer study groups, one to one tutor meetings, independent study, assessments, exams, projects.

These teaching practices can unconsciously favour one group of people over another. For instance, there is research that shows that on average perform better at continuous assessments, and men on average perform better on exams.

Curriculum

Curriculum is the content and learning objectives of a course. While teaching practices refer to how a subject is taught, curriculum determines what sort of content will be covered in the course.

Many academics and college lectures will argue that the learning objectives cannot change because the course has to cover particular elements/aspects in order for students to be able to complete the course and progress to the next one. NUS Scotland would argue that the curriculum can change without deviating from the main objectives of the course, ensuring that differences or diversity are reflected in the curriculum.

Student Partnership

Student partnership is the final part of the equation. Any changes that a college or university makes should be done in consultation and partnership with its students' association. But it is even more important that changes to the learning experience are done in true partnership.

At the end of the day it is students that are receiving the education and they are the best ones to tell the college or university if the changes have made a positive difference to their experience. A working partnership relationship is crucial for achieving a successful liberated learning experience.

What does liberated learning look like in practice?

Curriculum Content

One of the main ways that liberation, equality, and diversity can be embedded in the curriculum is through incorporating these issues into the content of the course. This is easier for some subjects than others, but there is scope in all subjects to make the curriculum content more reflective of diversity and more thoughtful about issues of liberation. However, it is important to avoid being tokenistic.

Diversity should be embedded into the mainstream curriculum, rather than being singled-out as separate from the main curriculum. Some elements of curriculum content that can be considered are:

- **Course topics:** Wherever possible, course topics should include the perspectives of minority groups and women.
- **Suggested readings:** Suggested readings should feature writers from a wide variety of backgrounds. Alternative perspectives to the 'mainstream' narrative should be considered.

- **Case studies:** Case studies are used across many disciplines and are an easy way of incorporating diverse views. Instead of stereotypical examples, the people featured in case studies can be more nuanced and reflective of the diversity of the learning community.
- **Identity as part of the curriculum:** By incorporating issues of identity into the curriculum, all students are given a chance to consider the way that their identity shapes their learning experience and how this relates to their place in society.

Inclusive Assessment

As discussed above, there are issues within the curriculum and different forms of assessment and what this means for certain groups of students, and how much they can achieve. Inclusive assessment is based on the principle that all students should have a way of demonstrating that they have achieved the learning outcomes of their module or course.

Inclusive assessment does not make assumptions about the needs of certain students; instead it considers the strengths and weaknesses of all students. Inclusive assessment uses the full range of assessment options available and often students have a choice from a range of assessment methods.

The Scottish Funding Council and Universities Scotland have produced a [Race Equality Toolkit](#) which gives guidance on how universities can engage with equalities legislation. It encourages lecturers to **ask themselves the following questions** to ensure the classroom environment is welcoming and inclusive to students from all ethnic backgrounds. These could easily be adapted to apply more broadly to diverse groups of students.

- Are all students valued equally regardless of their ethnicity, culture, faith and diverse backgrounds?
- Do other learning environments, such as the virtual learning environment (VLE), promote and assist equality and diversity?
- Within the context of race equality, how can the quality of lecturer/student relationships affect the learning environment in the class?
- Is there consideration of how being in a minority in a student group might impact on learning and teaching?

Anonymous Marking

Anonymous marking, sometimes called 'blind marking', is a system of assessment where the student's name is unknown to the assessor. The most common form of anonymous marking involves assigning students a number which is used instead

of their name to identify their work throughout the assessment process. Research suggests that anonymous marking can help to reduce both the fear of and the likelihood of discrimination. Anonymous marking does not solve the problem of discrimination, but it is an important component of liberating the curriculum.

Anonymous marking can benefit students in a variety of ways:

- **Freedom from discrimination and prejudice:** Research has shown that marks for both women and Black students can improve upon introduction of anonymous marking.
- **Marks based on the quality of work:** Anonymous marking ensures that students know the mark they receive is a reflection of the quality of their work. It also reduces suspicions of bigotry against lecturers and minimises potential conflict, safeguarding both staff and students.
- **More clarity about the causes of discrimination:** The removal of the possibility of bias at the assessment stage can provoke a more thorough investigation into attainment gaps.

Inclusive learning environment

The atmosphere of the learning environment is important so that all students feel welcomed as full members of the learning community.

NUS's Race for Equality report indicated that Black students felt their questions or concerns were treated with derision due to a perception from staff that they had less academic potential than their peers.

Women's educational paths are too often determined before they even walk into the classroom. From societal perceptions of women's roles and interests to the dearth of women in the higher echelons of academia, entering education and having a real choice about what you study is a pipe dream for thousands of women.

In the classroom women are often invisible; curricula are dominated by the writing and ideas of men with women's issues and thoughts seen as an optional add-on if they are mentioned at all.

Students can also contribute to the atmosphere of the learning environment. For instance, the Equality Challenge Unit's report into the experience of LGBT staff and students in higher education found that over 46 per cent of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students surveyed had received homophobic or biphobic remarks from other students. Respondents stated that these comments affected on their confidence, stress levels, or ability to concentrate. When such comments are made in an academic setting, lecturers may not be equipped with strategies for dealing with these comments.

As a result these views are not challenged, and consequently some students may feel excluded.

Because of these issues, it is important that teaching staff are comfortable addressing issues of liberation, equality, and diversity.

Case studies

This is a relatively new area of work with limited case studies to point to. However, we have found some case studies that we think embody the principles of liberation and learning, exhibiting the changing attitudes and behaviours having an impact on society. These case studies have been selected to help students' associations to understand what can happen in practice and be inspired.

Smith College, Massachusetts: Liberative Pedagogies and Engineering

This example of research in a women's college around liberative pedagogies [ways of teaching] and engineering to improve recruitment and retention of women into STEM disciplines. This work focused on power relations within the classroom with the aim of transforming structural barriers to women in STEM subjects, and on the way engineering was thought of as being sexist, in favour of men over women.⁵

⁵ p. 37, International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology, 2009, Vol. 1, No. 1 38

<http://genderandset.open.ac.uk/index.php/genderandset/article/viewFile/25/28>

The main principle used was developing sensitivities to power in the classroom, for example challenging the often passive relationship students have with the teacher.

As a result one of the changes they made included de-centralising western and male contributions to STEM, choosing to set assignments on the contributions of women and those from a different racial background. Read the whole academic paper [here](#).

University of Louisville School of Medicine: LGBTQ+

The medical school at the University of Louisville is [currently piloting new content](#) for training future medical professionals on the unique health care concerns faced by people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender nonconforming or born with differences of sex development (DSD).

The medical school is hopeful that by changing the way they teach and covering LGBTQ+ challenges future doctors and nurses will be more in tune to LGBTQ+ patients and their concerns. This would hopefully lead to LGBTQ+ people having more confidence in their medical services and less likely to hide medical conditions for fear of stigmas.

University of Toronto Mississauga: The Body, physical difference and disability in ancient Greece

[Recent research into disability](#) in the ancient Greco-Roman world has revealed the potential of this area to broaden understanding of life in ancient times. The course challenged students to think about the following:

How did the ancient Greeks understand and explain the causes and consequences of disability (medically, socially and religiously)? What accommodations, if any, were made for people with disabilities? How were people with disabilities treated within their community? How do modern ideas about disability differ from the past and can we judge an ancient society by our own norms?

Shades of Noir

[Shades of Noir](#) is a programme supporting race equality in the higher education arts sector. It offers varied resources to teaching staff. Successes include pilots of blind marking; enhancement of the curriculum at University of the Arts London; and the first all-black exhibition of UAL's most high profile alumni.

As a result, the University of Arts London has seen a 4% increase in the retention of BME students.

Resources

Campaign Top Tips!

- The students' association can **support class reps** to push for questions about liberation to be added to course evaluation and a requirement that must be met when new courses are formed.
- The students' association can **run workshops** with class reps to make them aware of the different aspects of liberation and learning. See the tutor notes for a 2 hour workshop session below.
- The students' association can support class reps to **challenge their courses** to become more liberated. Use the challenging questions below as a starting point.
- Class reps could **talk to classmates** about liberation and learning and become conscious of bias. Use the Challenging Qs check list to help facilitate and answer questions.
- The students' association can **survey its class reps** to find out what they think about liberation and learning and whether this changes through their course. This survey could happen at the beginning and end of the course/module. See sample survey for further ideas.
- The students' association could **collect evidence** from students on how inclusive they think their institution is to all students.
- The students' association can work with NUS Scotland to campaign for liberated learning to be **added to Outcome Agreements**.
- The students' association could lobby for **equality and diversity training** for all staff at the institution.
- The students' association could lobby governing board members or the learning and teaching committee to **make liberated learning a strategic priority**.
- The students' association can work with their institution to explicitly **link the elements of liberated learning into graduate attributes**.
- **Watch out for changes the institution might be doing already**, that could help part of your campaign aims. If the college or university is planning a curriculum review then that is an opportunity to start talking about incorporating the principles of liberation and learning into the curriculum review. Or the institution might be planning to redesign course evaluations and the students' association could suggest a question about the liberated learning experience.

Class rep Liberation and Learning survey:

We have provided a sample survey for students' associations to adapt for their class reps. The aim of the survey is to find out what class reps know and think about equality, diversity and liberation in regards to their course. The survey results can be used as an evidence base to convince the institution to change the education experience to become a liberated learning experience.

1. What do you think '*equality*', '*diversity*', and '*liberation*' mean to you in regards to your course/subject area?
2. Do you think it's important for your course to consider '*equality*', '*diversity*' and '*principles of liberation*' in its content? Why or Why not? Please explain.
3. Can you give an example of when your course curriculum incorporated '*equality*', '*diversity*' and/or '*principles of liberation*'?
4. In what ways do you think your course could better incorporate '*equality*', '*diversity*' and '*principles of liberation*' in its content? And what do you think this would look like in practice?
5. What do you think your role as a class/course/student rep could do to help '*equality*', '*diversity*' and '*principles of liberation*' to be thoroughly incorporated into the curriculum of your course?
6. What support would you like to see from the students' association to achieve this?

Challenging Questions Checklist

This list of Challenging Questions is a tool that anyone can use to raise a conscious awareness of bias in society. The first step to creating a more equal society is for individuals to realise that society is currently unequal, particularly towards specific groups of people. Once individuals and groups realise that there is inequality, they can start challenging their own and others' thoughts and behaviours turning their unconscious bias into inclusive actions.

Do you think society is unequal? In what ways do you think society is unequal?

Did you think that the way your course is taught may favour one section of society over another?

Are you aware of the many ways individuals and students can challenge social norms?

Do you consider yourself to be in a minority or under represented group? If so how would you like to see your course become more inclusive for you?

Learning and Liberation Workshop Session

On the following pages we have provided a template workshop you could run. This workshop session has been designed for class reps to introduce them to Liberation and Learning as a campaign, and how they can participate in it.

The session can be run as an event by itself, as part of class rep conferences, or optional training for class reps. This workshop could also be run for societies that are interested in Liberation and Learning campaign.

	Introduction to Liberation and learning for class reps	Session Timing: 90-120 mins	
Delivery Method	Workshop – groups		
Aims	Introduce class reps to the Liberation and Learning piece of work and what this means in for class reps in their role.		
Objectives	In the session class reps will: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand definitions of equality, diversity and liberation• Understand that the way courses are taught can sometimes be oppressive of certain groups• Discover why designing courses to include viewpoints from other groups is beneficial• Discuss ways to class reps can be involved in making their learning more liberated		
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flipchart• Pens• Powerpoint up to SA• Liberation and learning campaign pack – case studies examples as hand out sheets		
Session Summary	Ice breaker	5 mins	
	Introduction to liberation and learning	10 mins	
	Definitions	30 mins	
	Discussion of key questions	30 mins	
	Role of class reps in changing their course	30mins	
Timings	Tutor Activity	Student Activity	Resource

5 mins	Ice breaker introducing name, course they're on and what they expect from this workshop session.	Listen & participate	None
10 mins	<p>Relevant student officer to introduce the session and the liberation and learning project and what the SA is working on.</p> <p>Things to cover are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hopes for improving education/making it more inclusive for everyone • can help with retention • make people in college or university better able to think critically about social structural oppression and how they as individuals can challenge those oppressions. 	Listen	Powerpoint slides if using them
30 mins	<p>Lead a discussion with the group about the definition and differences between equality, diversity and liberation, to check their own understanding and make sure everyone is on the same page.</p> <p>Can divide group into smaller groups of 3-4 people. Ask them to consider all 3 definitions, and come up with a sentence for their definition. Some groups may choose to draw what they think the definitions could be. But each group should be able to explain equality, diversity and liberation in a synched and understandable way.</p> <p>Small groups should have 15mins to come up with their own definition.</p> <p>Spend the next 15 minutes feeding back on each groups' definitions. A way to do this is to</p>	Participate in discussion	Powerpoint of definitions to reinforce learning once definitions have been established by the group.

	<p>get one group to share their definition and then open in up to other groups to add anything different or ask any questions if they disagree with the definition.</p> <p>Try and reach consensus in the room about what each definition should be.</p> <p>Answers you're looking for:</p> <p>Equality: all individuals and groups of people are able to contribute and fully experience areas of life or education. This means that some groups/individuals will be given more resource time or space to tackle any disadvantages that they may have.</p> <p>Diversity: this means recognising, valuing and taking account of people's different backgrounds, knowledge, skills, needs and experiences. In education this means our curriculum needs to take into account a range of different viewpoints and people's experience.</p> <p>Liberation: the act of setting someone free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression' 'freedom from limits on thought or behaviour' NUS believes liberation means a group working towards its own freedom from oppression</p>		
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<p>30 mins</p>	<p>Lead a discussion around the following key questions about liberation and how it may make an impact on learning.</p> <p>If it is a big group break up the delegates into smaller groups of 3-4 people and give each group one question to discuss and answer. Then get groups to feedback to the main group giving time for feedback and sharing thoughts.</p> <p>You can split up the groups from the exercise before so class reps get to meet different people.</p> <p>If you're doing this workshop with class reps from several subjects it would be good for groups to be from the same subject or course.</p> <p>Choose from the sample questions below or add your own for groups to discuss. Some questions might not be relevant depending on who is in the room.</p> <p>Questions:</p> <p>Are your courses inclusive of all people? If not how could they be?</p> <p>Where are the women on engineering courses? Why do you think women may be underrepresented in engineering? Or other science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) oriented subjects. How could this be improved?</p> <p>How are black people currently represented in arts and creative industries? How could this be improved?</p>	<p>Participate and feedback</p>	<p>Flip chart and pens – write up ideas/ interesting thoughts</p> <p>Case studies from campaign pack can be used as a discussion point or an example of how Liberated Learning looks in practice for groups which are finding the questions challenging.</p>
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	<p>In what ways do you think your course could better incorporate '<i>equality</i>', '<i>diversity</i>' and '<i>principles of liberation</i>' in its content? And what do you think this would look like in practice?</p> <p>How are LGBT+ people represented throughout your course curriculum? How could this be improved?</p> <p>How are disabled and non disabled people represented throughout your course curriculum? How could this be improved?</p>		
30mins	<p>Discussion on the role as class reps to change this.</p> <p>Considering the last discussion and the thoughts that class reps had about how things could be changed, use this session to come up with concrete action points that class reps could do to campaign on this issue.</p> <p>There are several ways to hold this discussion.</p> <p>Depending on size of group ask for suggestions and write on flip chart all the ones that are given. Then work through what has been written, with the group pick the best and most realistic 2 or 3 that class reps could within their course and involving on students on the course.</p> <p>If the size of group is really big then split them up into smaller groups, could keep the ones from the last exercise and get them to come up with 2 or 3 realistic actions that they could do. Ask all the groups to share their action points. Mention</p>	Participate in discussions and come up with action points	Slides with list of things that SA think class reps could do. Can take this from Learning and Lib campaign pack.

	<p>that the other people in the group can be their support group to be accountable to or do joint action with.</p> <p>The SA can also produce/provide materials or set out some action points that they would like all class reps to do.</p> <p>Examples of the action points you're looking for are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • create a petition to get your course to recognise more diversity, class reps can encourage class mates to sign up and wider student population – then give petition and numbers to SA to take to the institution • Campaign for the module/course evaluation questionnaire to include a question around making courses more equality, diversity and liberation focuses. • Create leaflets or hold a talk for other students about the importance of education being holistic and inclusive to all people. • Take part in the liberation and learning survey from the SA for class reps 		
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