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Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) Excellence within Higher Education: The journey of Welsh Business Schools

A handbook exploring the challenges facing
Business Schools and highlighting best practices
from Welsh Business Schools.



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Summary

This handbook explores the development of equity, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) within Welsh Business Schools in response to the changing landscape of higher education. It highlights the current state of play and emerging trends of the campus environment for both students and staff.

We also present a framework for EDI that can be used as a basis for discussions within institutions to explore its impact on students and staff. Several case studies are illustrated to demonstrate how this framework can be operationalized. These also show the positive action taken by institutions in embedding EDI within their business schools and promoting communities of inclusion.

The handbook is the outcome of a HEFCW-funded QAA Cymru Collaborative Enhancement Project, consisting of continuous discussions and reflections between participating institutions and the delivery of two workshops held at Swansea University during May and June of 2024. Further information on this project can be obtained from Swansea University.



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Introduction

Context

The Higher Education (HE) sector in the UK has grown significantly over the last two decades, shifting from a system focused on domestic education provision to one oriented towards the education of international students (Bolton, 2024). This move has been driven by various factors, including structural changes in HE funding and the emerging demand for global graduates.

Although Wales’ HE sector has retained a core mission to support their local communities as anchor institutions, Welsh HE Institutions (HEIs) are not immune to these structural shifts and so a drive for student expansion in Wales has been accompanied by a rise in the diversity of student cohorts. This includes economic, social and cultural diversity as well as a wider inclusion of those with protected characteristics. This change in the composition of students and staff cohorts in Wales has promoted a change in strategic priorities towards wider participation and equality of opportunity in Wales (Miles, 2022; Morgan 2013).

Business Schools

Management education has experienced significant changes, both within the student and staff cohorts. Business Schools (BSs) have experienced a high degree of success in creating high-impact, attractive degree programs which can offer enhanced graduate employability while also being relevant to a wider national and international student cohort. While BS staff and students have experienced difficulties during these times of significant expansion, the developments towards more diverse cohorts have offered a catalyst and a living laboratory for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives. To maintain academic standards and a positive student experience in this context, BSs have had to engage their more diverse student cohorts meaningfully by developing policies and initiatives to allow all student voices and communities to be heard and recognised.

This handbook explores the various challenges facing Business Schools and offers insights into a variety of practices that have emerged in response.

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Emerging issues

During the project workshops, student and staff participants reflected on their own experiences and that of their peers. These opportunities provided insight into the current conversations that were arising within the student and staff communities. The following themes were at the forefront of these discussions:

- The language and terminology of EDI
- Intersectionality
- Neurodiversity
- Mental health
- Transition of students
- Training, awareness, wellbeing and workload
- The student/ staff community
- Welsh language

During our discussion, what was evident is that although the above themes were highlighted by nearly all participants, their lived experiences were different – demonstrating the need to appreciate local context and personal circumstances.



The 4 Es

A FRAMEWORK FOR EMBEDDING EDI WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Education

To be valued
Awareness, Language,
Expectations,
Communication, Respect,
Empathy, Values

Empowerment

To take action
Opportunities,
Representation,
Communication,
Support

Experience

To be respected
Voices, Representation,
Belonging, Community,
Expectations

Environment

To be seen
Visibility, Transformative,
Collaborative,
Community

The above framework was developed by participants during the project and requires all to reflect on what each term means to them, and how students and staff can make a difference. The following case studies demonstrate how these themes have been embraced by Welsh Business Schools.

CASE STUDY 1

LGBTQ+ALLIES NETWORK SWANSEA UNIVERSITY



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The School of Management with the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences (FHSS) in Swansea University, has established a LGBTQ+Allies Network, which is a joint venture between the Student Information Office (SIO) and the Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) Team.

In the first iteration of the Allies Network, the primary area of focus was to improve the student experience of our Trans and Non-Binary Students and promote visibility. The rationale for this arose from discussion between the SIO and EDI Team, who recognised that whilst there has been development and a societal shift in recent years regarding LGB terminology & culture, the same cannot be said for Trans & Non-Binary matters, as most cisgender people are unfamiliar with the lived experiences of a transitioning or transgender person.

Since June 2022, the School with FHSS has offered annually, a training session named 'Stonewall Training to Academic & Professional Services Colleagues', which takes place in June to coincide with Pride Month. Colleagues who complete the training are added to our 'Allies List' of identifiable staff, who students can feel comfortable and safe to express their preferred gender, pronouns or sexuality. This list is published to our students, titled 'Making Connections: LGBTQ+ Students' which contains information, resources and social opportunities for new LGBTQ+ students joining the School and Faculty.

In June 2024, two years on from its inception, the LGBTQ+ Allies Network is working on re-branding and improving visibility. At its core, the first iteration of the network was to create and promote safe spaces where our students can be their authentic selves – while we have dedicated and enthusiastic staff who are trained, willing and able to support students, we feel they are not visible enough. With this in mind, we have created Safe Space logos and branding for use on office doors, laptops, water bottles (stickers), lanyards and badges for our staff ID cards. We plan to launch a communications campaign to complement the re-brand, so students know what these logos mean when they see them on staff offices and belongings. The rationale for this is that we not only hope our LGBTQ+ students and staff will feel safe and seen, but this will also bring LGBTQ+ inclusivity to the forefront of the School, Faculty and student body, continuing healthy dialogue.



CASE STUDY 2

BEYOND TOKENISM: AN EXAMPLE OF BEING DISABILITY CONFIDENT BANGOR UNIVERSITY



Bangor University recently joined the Disability Confident scheme, demonstrating its commitment to disability inclusion among its staff. Currently, 11.2% of staff members at Bangor Business School (BBS) self-identify as disabled. Although there is no formal process at the school level for disability inclusion, there are many informal practices within the school to raise awareness of disability inclusion and the rights of disabled staff members.

This case study showcases an example of a newly recruited disabled staff member in the school and the practices implemented to make them feel welcomed and valued.

Firstly, during induction meetings in the school, all new staff members are briefed about their expected responsibilities. During this stage, individuals are given opportunities to express their preferences for working methods and any potential adjustments required. The school has made this process friendly to ensure that new staff feel trusted. Secondly, thanks to the ongoing conversation about Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in today's business world, the school has several avenues to engage with key stakeholders, such as local high schools (potential applicants for courses), university open days, and the business school podcast. During these events, disability is included as a topic, and some activities are led by disabled staff members. This approach makes the events more inclusive and engaging for stakeholders. Finally, some teaching sessions and assessments are based on the topic of disability employment, led by a staff member who self-identifies as disabled.

Being a Disability Confident employer is not just about making a statement, but about fostering a sense of trust in its disabled employees. At the school level, there is a sense of family among staff members. The Bangorian culture brings a sense of togetherness to both old and new staff, making it feel safe to discuss disability and address issues faced by disabled staff.



CASE STUDY 3

IMPROVING WELLBEING THROUGH SPACE AND PLACE CARDIFF UNIVERSITY



Wellbeing has been cited as the ‘grand challenge’ of our generation for contemporary organisations. This includes universities which of course have to act in support of both student and staff wellbeing.

The relationship between space (especially outdoors) and wellbeing is well-evidenced. This prompted colleagues at Cardiff Business School to consider how two of their key spaces could be transformed in order to enhance wellbeing within the department.

First, a *Green Team* of professional services and academic staff was formed who came together in their spare time to clear an area at the rear of one of Cardiff’s buildings to create a ‘Wellbeing garden’. The garden contains a wide variety of plants and flowers, along with a hoverfly lagoon, hedgehog and bug houses and a herb garden where colleagues and students can help themselves. It also includes a range of comfortable seating options, including a Happy to Chat bench for those that would like to some company. The Garden is well used by students, especially at revision time, and staff from across the University come to sit in it at lunchtime.

Second, the team turned its attention to a vacant catering space in another of the Business School buildings. This has now been transformed into ‘the Lounge’, a well-used and relaxing chill out space for students which has quiet spaces, booths, vending facilities, and an outdoor area with glass pods and recycled garden furniture.



CASE STUDY 4

PEER-TO-PEER: A USER-FRIENDLY APPROACH TO FACILITATE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT BANGOR UNIVERSITY



Bangor Business School (BBS) receives significant numbers of international students, many of whom join from partner universities midway through their courses (some in their second year, others in their third). These students often face challenges in adapting to the UK higher education system. Common hurdles are understanding plagiarism and referencing, conducting literature searches, and structuring assignments.

To address the academic and social challenges encountered by our international students, BBS offers a Study Buddy support scheme in supplement to formal training and tuition. This initiative connects students with peer-tutors who are current BBS students and provides guidance based on personal experience, helping students acclimate and develop their academic skills. Peer-tutoring programmes can be particularly effective at facilitating academic and social adjustment to university study, and the sharing of experience has benefits for tutees and tutors.

First, we announce the scheme to existing students and recruit experienced candidates to participate as tutors. These mentors receive training and hourly compensation for their support. Secondly, in collaboration with our academic and professional colleagues, we advertise the scheme through various channels including 'shout-outs' during relevant lectures. A dedicated room is reserved for two hours drop-in per week during term time, where students can seek assignment and study-related assistance from the study buddies.

Feedback from both the study buddies and the international students has been overwhelmingly positive. The scheme provides an opportunity for students to seek help from peers who may be more approachable than academic lecturers. Additionally, study buddies can share subject knowledge from previous years, enhancing the new students' understanding of course design and structure. Here are quotes from recent study buddies reflecting on the scheme:

"I am really thankful for this opportunity as it not only helped other students but also provided me excellent work experience. This opportunity has polished my communication skills as I was able to meet and discuss students from different cultures and backgrounds."

"One of my best opportunities in university to help with others."

CASE STUDY 5

EXPLORING CULTURE

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH WALES

University of
South Wales
Prifysgol
De Cymru

As part of our commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) at the University of South Wales (USW), we support Muslim students and staff in practising their religion. In addition to the prayer room provided in the university Chaplaincy, USW has established additional prayer rooms across various campus locations.

Given the demographic shift, a significant number of postgraduate full-time students in the South Wales Business School (SWBS) come from Muslim backgrounds. The Friday Jummah Prayer, which must be offered in congregation, is of utmost importance to them, unlike the usual daily prayers. To accommodate this, the postgraduate programmes in the Business School have been adjusted to ensure sufficient time for students to attend the Jummah Prayer on campus. This adjustment aligns with the break times for other students and staff, ensuring that the teaching schedule is not compromised.

During Ramadan, the university provides iftar meals every evening for the Muslim students on campus. Volunteers, including students, staff, and staff family members, sign up to support this initiative. Muslim students are able to break their fast communally with other students.

To celebrate Eid, USW also organises Eid prayers in the morning, which are attended by the wider Muslim community in Treforest. Following the prayers, an Eid breakfast is held in the university canteen. These events support students in celebrating Eid, whilst attending their classes on the same day.

These initiatives significantly raise awareness about the cultural and religious practices of Muslim students among the wider University community. By promoting understanding and respect for diverse religious practices, SWBS not only supports its Muslim students and staff but also enriches the University's cultural fabric. These efforts exemplify the University's commitment to creating a welcoming and supportive environment for all its members.



CASE STUDY 6

BECOMING AN ANTI-RACIST BUSINESS SCHOOL

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY



It is clear that inequality, disadvantage and discrimination remain prevalent in society and are reflected in organisational structures, behaviours and practices, including those in universities and Business Schools.

Informed by its own research conducted by Professor Emmanuel Ogbonna CBE and the COVID-19 report on the impact of race on COVID outcomes that he produced for Welsh Government, the Business School has established a Race Equality Committee, which Prof. Ogbonna chairs. The Committee is comprised of student and staff representatives, including the Dean of the School, and reports directly to Management Board.

The Committee aims to ensure that the School's workplace culture, learning environment, education curricula and teaching practices are diverse, inclusive and non-discriminatory, while addressing attainment gaps and amplifying BAME voices within the School.

Initiatives introduced by the Committee include a Race Equality Book and Film Club, which enables colleagues and students to come together to reflect on issues and actions. In addition, the Committee prompted a collaboration between the Business School and Business in the Community to deliver anti-racism training and development across the School. Almost 200 colleagues have completed the first session on Let's Talk about Race and a further 60 are onto the second stage on Allyship.

Finally, we have launched an anti-racist reporting tool so that any student, staff member or colleague can report an incident online anonymously by using our form.

The way ahead

During preparation of this resource, students and staff reflected often on how EDI is a journey, with many twists and turns. As the Higher Education landscape continues to evolve, continual reflection by institutions is needed to ensure that emerging issues are addressed, ensuring that everyone feels a sense of belonging and our campuses remain inclusive.

It was clear from our discussions that context and local circumstances are hugely significant in determining approaches to EDI. In this handbook, we have shared various examples of where partner institutions have engaged with students and staff, to develop their awareness and create a culture of acceptance and empathy. These examples allow us to share practice – not necessarily best practice – so that we can learn from each other. We hope that these illustrations can provide a catalyst for your own EDI conversations and initiatives.



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Other resources

Books

Grace, S. and Gravestock, P. (2009). *Inclusion and Diversity*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Michelle, M. (ed.) (2013). *Supporting Student Diversity in Higher Education*. London: Routledge.

Websites

Advance HE - www.advance-he.ac.uk/edi-resources

Chartered Association of Business Schools - www.charteredabs.org/policy/edi

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) - www.hefcw.ac.uk

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) - www.qaa.ac.uk
