

Advocating for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Postgraduate Pedagogies

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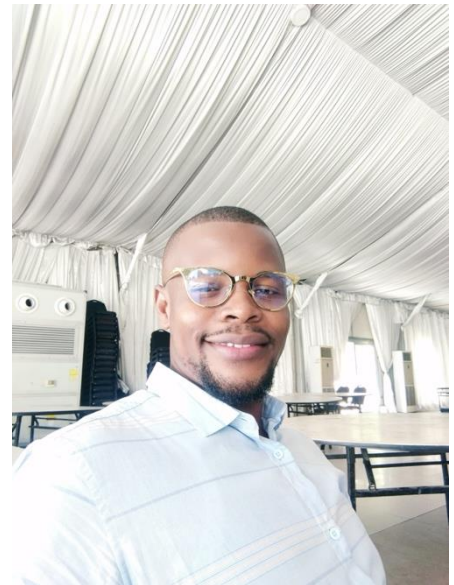
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Nwachukwu's research explores contemporary issues in philosophy of education, such as access to quality education, the individual, society, teaching, learning, curriculum, inclusion and diversity. He is particularly interested in the intersection of these issues with African philosophy and culture. As a passionate researcher, lecturer and advocate for quality education, he is committed to using his research and teaching to promote social justice, and cultural understanding.

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Abstract

I have come to the realization that equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are critical components of a good postgraduate education. However, EDI can be difficult to achieve, especially in postgraduate pedagogies that are frequently characterized by hierarchies and power asymmetries. This review paper explores some strategies and practices that can be employed by postgraduate teachers to advance EDI in postgraduate pedagogies. These include: confronting unconscious bias, privilege, promoting representation and embracing students' voices, and implementing support structures to address the unique challenges faced by students in postgraduate pedagogies. Furthermore, I will discuss the benefits of implementing an EDI-focused approach in postgraduate education. This will highlight how EDI can foster interdisciplinary collaboration and inclusive education system that will consequently lead to a more diverse and representative academic community, contributing to the development of inclusive practices in various professional fields beyond their institutions. The study uses secondary sources, such as journal articles and focused research findings on the topic. The sources used aim to highlight existing issues in postgraduate pedagogies as related to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion-EDI. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for concerted efforts from postgraduate teachers to prioritize and advocate for EDI in postgraduate pedagogies, because an EDI-focused postgraduate education can become a catalyst for producing graduates that will contribute to the development of inclusive practices in various professional fields beyond their institutions, and this will truly reflect our diverse and multi-cultural society through the ideals of education.

Keywords: Diversity, Education, Equality, Inclusion, Pedagogy

Introduction

Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in postgraduate pedagogies are critical elements for promoting a just and equitable educational environment. It is about ensuring that all learners (postgraduate students) have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background or identity. While many previous and present works discuss postgraduate pedagogies from the angle of postgraduate research-PGR students who are also staff and deliver teaching, this study focuses on the teachers. Warwick University has worked tirelessly to increase inclusion, equality, and diversity among postgraduate students, but this topic has received less attention at various other universities around the world. Warwick-Booth, (2022) observed that despite efforts by higher institutions to widen inclusion, diversity and equality in Higher Education (HE), evidence suggests that exclusion and inequality in postgraduate educational experiences, progression and attainment remains an issue for some groups, as a result of their social divisions. Similarly, Watson, et al (2023) reported that HE in the UK and across the globe continues to prioritize EDI, but stark inequalities still exist, and non-inclusive cultures persist. This has repeatedly led to exclusion, and can create barriers to learning, interdisciplinary collaboration is frequently characterized by hierarchies and power asymmetries between teachers and the students, and development of inclusive practices in various professional fields beyond the institutions. (Dignath, Rimm-Kaufman & Kunter 2022) EDI is used in both undergraduate and postgraduate learning but the specific application and focus in postgraduate learning makes it distinct.

The Challenge of Hierarchies and Power Asymmetries in Postgraduate Pedagogies

It is well documented in the literature that postgraduate education is frequently characterized by hierarchies and power asymmetries between teachers and the students. Hyatt & Hayes (2020) address power imbalance as a model that needs reconfiguring. They note that the traditional relationship between postgraduate students and teachers in terms of its power differential is often characterized as an asymmetric, hierarchical expert/novice dyad, which can trap such relationships in a one-way transmission mode that does not support collaboration. They further suggest how this power imbalance can be rethought and disrupted in postgraduate

pedagogy, to build a more collaborative, collegial 'decentred' approach to postgraduate education. Janks (2010) discusses issues of power and identity within university and school classrooms and the need for balance to create and foster an EDI friendly environment. Bartlett & Mercer (2000) used an experiential and feminist methodology to discuss postgraduate pedagogy through analyzing the relationships between postgraduate teachers and students. Their study revealed that the hierarchical model and power imbalance was often combative, oppressive and patriarchal. The challenge for education is not only to embed understanding of these issues in various programmes, but also to embody them through their own teaching.

Hierarchies and power imbalances present a number of challenges to achieving EDI in postgraduate pedagogies. It creates unsafe and unsupportive learning environment because teacher of postgraduates holds a great deal of power in the relationship dynamics, treats students with bias based on their social background, race, gender and they can often be resistant to change. Asymmetric power dynamics frequently result in the marginalization and discrimination of students from underrepresented backgrounds, including those based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and so on. This suggests that minority students are more likely to suffer discrimination, bias, and prejudice from their PG teachers and peers, which can limit their academic and professional chances. There is a vast body of research that reveal a highly concerning outcome for Black, Asians and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students in postgraduate education. A report by Hancock, Wakeling & Chubb, (2019) highlighted how sex, ethnicity and socio-economic background interacted in creating inequalities in access to postgraduate studies. The report also states that, in the UK, "graduates who are female, of Black African, Black Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi ethnicity, or are from lower socio-economic backgrounds, have low or exceptionally low rates of progression to doctoral level study. This gap reflects the inequalities in postgraduate education, which can make it difficult to adopt EDI initiative that question the established quo. This eventually leads to a culture of exclusion with little or no collaboration, where students are not provided with a support system to excel in their studies and even in professional careers. Burke (2019) citing the report by Universities UK (UUK) states that substantial inequalities persist and the attainment gap exists across UK HE institutions. This reveals that the

rate of progress is slow and HE has a long way to go. As a result, addressing power inequalities through equality, diversity, and inclusion activities in postgraduate education becomes critical for building a fair, inclusive, and stimulating learning environment that benefits both individuals and society as a whole.

Strategies and Practices Needed to advance EDI in Postgraduate Pedagogies

In the light of the challenges that hierarchies and power imbalances presents in postgraduate pedagogies, institutions are expected to develop its own strategies and practices to EDI and unique approach to embedding inclusive practice within existing structures, cultures and strategies (Moody, Galvin, & Kumar, 2021).

Florian & Pratt (2015) stated that the ideal place to focus on embedding an equalities perspective in postgraduate education is in the pedagogical approaches to teacher education and professional development where issues pertaining to teaching diverse groups of learners are taught and can be modeled. This implies that postgraduate teachers should be uniquely positioned to adopt EDI-focused strategic approach.

The postgraduate teachers should possess an appreciable level of self-awareness, knowledge and understanding of their teaching practices, especially in relation to equality and diversity and the ways in which this can pave the way for transformational teaching. It has been established that bias and privilege are a reality in postgraduate education between teachers and students. These biases can have a significant impact on students' learning experiences, and it is important to confront them in order to create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment. Poitier (2022) notes that global conversations about inequities in HE have grown significantly. These conversations include critical discourse about the impact of inequality that manifests in socio-cultural and political structures and our HE institutions. As HE institutions consider ways to improve equality, diversity and inclusion, postgraduate teachers must be deliberate in the tools and techniques used to drive equality, diversity and inclusion.

It is also important to create a safe space where students feel comfortable talking about their experiences without the barriers of bias and privilege caused by power imbalance in the teacher-student relationship.

Changing the structure of postgraduate pedagogies is another way to combat unconscious prejudice and privilege. It involves broadening the curriculum, hiring more diverse faculty, and developing more inclusive learning environments. Therefore, institutional effort is required to achieve this beyond the postgraduate teachers.

Institutions should improve the representation of all groups, especially those that are underrepresented. Underrepresentation of some groups in HE seems to be consistent across institutions. For example, underrepresentation is recorded across minority ethnic groups such as students from Asian, Black and mixed or multiple ethnic backgrounds, also some students are marginalized and underrepresented based on gender, social and economic background. Williams et al (2019) observed that underrepresented groups like minority ethnic students and those from low socio-economic backgrounds tended to be excluded more than their White and socio-economically advantaged peers, placing them in a disadvantaged position when it comes to postgraduate studies. Underrepresentation of students from different groups represents a barrier to creating diversity and inclusion in postgraduate education. But promoting representation will create equal access to opportunities, ensuring that all groups are invested in the process and that their voices are heard. Diversity and inclusion initiatives that impact the experience of underrepresented groups are more likely to make headway when the progress of institutional programs and objectives are dependent on real and sustainable EDI changes (Vaughan & Murugesu 2020). Broad representation of underrepresented groups can help to build relationships with these groups and make sure that the institution is responsive to their needs.

Institutions should also embrace students' voices; this is important for creating a more equitable and inclusive learning environment and can provide all students with the opportunity to succeed. This approach can improve the quality of postgraduate education by incorporating students' perspectives into the process. This approach

will help to ensure that students are engaged in the process and that they feel like they have a stake in the process, where students feel like they are heard and respected, and create a more democratic learning environment.

Another key approach to implementing and improving EDI is through implementing support structures that address the unique challenges faced by students in postgraduate education. This remains a core idea for improving EDI in postgraduate education. As Warwick university scholar Strongylakou (2022) pointed out, the postgraduate teacher should often question their role inside the classroom: “am I a teacher or a facilitator? This question is important to know whether the teachers are there to just teach their modules or facilitate understanding, support and experience of postgraduate education beyond the classroom”. Ono-George (2019) highlights the prevalence of racism and negative experience of students and staff of colour in HE institutions and the need to not only change the pedagogy but also decolonize the institution. The advocacy for equality, diversity and inclusion should not end in the classroom. Getting the necessary support is key for postgraduate students to navigate the opportunities and experiences of postgraduate education (Lindner 2020). Active supports structure may include mentoring, sharing resources and opportunities that will help postgraduate students in their studies and career. This will provide the students with a huge repository of rich experience that places them in a good position to make incremental changes in their study and professional fields.

Benefits of Implementing EDI-focused Strategies in Postgraduate Education

Students benefit from EDI-rich environments because they are exposed to a wide range of perspectives and experiences, which can help them enhance their learning outcomes and build critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Students are more motivated and engaged because they have a strong sense of belonging and value (UNESCO, 2017).

Firstly, postgraduate students' academic performance improves because they feel included and tend to perform better academically. Beyond academic performance, an EDI-responsive learning environment automatically exposes students to a

broader range of career opportunities based on an established intercultural and diverse community that offers support and encouragement throughout the educational process, fostered by diversity and inclusion (Wolbring & Lillywhite 2021).

Implementing EDI-focused strategies can also foster interdisciplinary collaboration and inclusive education system that will consequently lead to a more diverse and representative academic community, contributing to the development of inclusive practices in various professional fields beyond their institutions. Postgraduate pedagogies should aim to increase and democratize student involvement and collaboration as part of a broader strategy in fostering an inclusive and diversified postgraduate education. Such EDI-focused approach minimizes the impact of teacher bias, drives student engagement, improvement and collaboration.

Conclusion

Creating a learning environment that is welcoming, supportive, and inclusive for all learners is central to postgraduate pedagogies. The need for concerted efforts from postgraduate teachers to prioritize and advocate for EDI in postgraduate pedagogies should be emphasized, because an EDI-focused postgraduate education can become a catalyst for producing graduates that will contribute to the development of inclusive practices in various professional fields beyond their institutions, and this will truly reflect our diverse and multi-cultural society through the ideals of education.

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