

The Development of Teaching for Social Justice in the Irish Higher Education Sector

Insights from the DISCs Project

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NATIONAL FORUM
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DISCs

DISCIPLINES INQUIRING
INTO SOCIETAL CHALLENGES



DISCs Project Team

Karl Kitching (UCC, PI)
Gyunghee Park (UCC)
Audrey Bryan (DCU)
Bernie Grummell (MU)
Margaret Keane (MU)
Morag Munro (MU)

With Additional Research Assistance in 2021 from

Temitope Akinlade (UCC)
Clinton Falana (UCC)
Melanie Groening-McKenna (MU)

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DISCs Project Advocates 2019-2020

Julie Butters (UCC)
Jonathan Evershed (UCC)
Sarah Foley (UCC)
Declan Jordan (UCC)
Joseph Whelan (UCC)
James Gallen (DCU)
Niamh Gaynor (DCU)
Catherine Maunsell (DCU)
Regina Murphy (DCU)
Jane O'Kelly (DCU)
Gary Sinclair (DCU)
Eamon Darcy (MU)
Karen English (MU)
Patricia Kennon (MU)
Mary Murphy (MU)
Angela Rickard (MU)
Fergus Ryan (MU)

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Introduction

This document is designed to support policy development in the field of teaching for social justice in the Irish higher education (HE) sector. It offers guidance to higher education sectoral and institutional leadership on embedding teaching for social justice across HE disciplines. This guidance is based on lessons learned from a National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning-funded project based across University College Cork (UCC), Dublin City University (DCU) and Maynooth University (MU) called ‘Disciplines Inquiring into Societal Challenges’ (DISCs). The project ran from 2019-2021 and as such, was deeply affected by the pandemic. It was focused on the development of 17 Project Advocates, i.e., staff who teach in a variety of disciplines in the three institutions. The project developed a series of resources, most significant of which is the DISCs website <https://discs.ie>. This site has curated several resources including recommended readings, workshop slides, DISCs Advocates’ professional journeys, a self-assessment tool for those working to develop their practice, narratives of the impact of the pandemic on various communities which can be used for teaching purposes, and a practitioner companion to the current document titled *Guidance on Teaching for Social Justice in Irish Higher Education*.

The project collected data on the Advocates’ experiences and, with the support of USI, also ran a national survey of HE students’ experiences of social justice and equality themes in the classroom and on campus. From this work, and our broader experience in working with and in Access, EDI and Learning and Teaching central University supports, we regard it as critical to resource meaningful collaboration between these teams, in order to in turn develop and resource an institutional strategy on teaching for social justice across disciplines. But we also consider it crucial that meaningfully addressing unreasonable and unequal working conditions for staff who teach needs to be part of such a strategy. The guidance document is structured in three parts. First, we consider the cultural and structural context of higher education in Ireland and internationally, and how contested and marginalised ‘teaching for social justice’ is in this context. Second, we look at some key findings from our own research with students and staff who teach in Irish HE on the question of teaching for social justice. Third, and most importantly, we offer strategic insights on the development of teaching for social justice within and across Irish HE institutions in a way that aligns with the national professional development framework for staff who teach in HE.

Teaching for ‘Social Justice’ in the Current Higher Education Environment

The concept of ‘teaching for social justice’ in HE is contested, as it draws in questions about personal and institutional priorities/politics and working conditions¹. But it may broadly refer to progressive efforts to: secure equitable outcomes for diverse and typically under-represented students; engage diverse students and communities inclusively in inquiring into real-world local and international problems of injustice and inequity, and; work collectively towards equitable working conditions for all HE staff. Clearly, the leadership and culture of HE institutions will play a significant role in whether these efforts succeed. Higher education policy and institutional leadership in Ireland and in many countries has, in recent decades typically involved adopting a managerial approach. Managerialism is not simply about ‘good leadership’: it is about incorporating business values into the organisation and culture of higher education². Managerialism focuses on outputs (e.g. raising student numbers or high publication rates) before inputs (e.g. staffing programmes to meet student numbers). As part of a wider neoliberal worldview, it regards institutional competition as a means of ‘driving’ innovation (e.g. institutions compete for state funding for once-off equality projects, instead of adequately funding long-term structural and cultural change).

The resulting, declining ratio of core state funding to private funding has exacerbated several crises. One of these is the rise of casualised contracts which pay largely only for hours taught. Evidence indicates casualised

¹ For further discussion of the contested nature of ‘social justice’, see the DISCs literature review at <https://discs.ie/resources/litreview>

² Lynch, K., Grummell, B. and Devine, D. (2012) *New Managerialism in Education: Commercialization, Carelessness and Gender*. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

staff are no less motivated to improve their teaching, but experience limited professional learning, support and career development³, while also being paid far less, being less free to engage students beyond class time and lacking opportunity to conduct research they can teach from. But even though casualisation is a gendered (as well as classed, racialised) problem, responses to it are largely absent from recent policy efforts on gender equality in senior HE ranks⁴.

A much longer tradition of scholarship on the origins of HE shows that universities in particular have historically adopted, at best, contradictory approaches to questions of staff, student and societal equity. Institutionally-led initiatives on access and participation have existed for decades, and are arguably increasing with the advent of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), Community Engagement (CE) and Universal Design institutional supports. While these initiatives have had some success, their existence and prioritisation typically depend on whether they are broadly perceived as supporting rather than challenging institutional values of meritocracy (i.e. individual effort and talent largely explains success) and measurement, competition and self-promotion (e.g. in league table rankings)⁵. Similar contradictions pertain to the recent global turn towards improving the quality of HE teaching. This ‘quality’ turn, while valuable in many respects, is not shielded from an institutional view of students as consumers. Institutions may often advocate a “generic, skills and competency-focused view of teaching” which downplays more difficult questions about “disciplinarity, sociopolitical context and student need”⁶. These issues create specific problems for staff who teach and for students. Alongside the unsustainable and insecure nature of HE work, diluted messages about equity in HE may undermine staff inquiry with students, colleagues and communities into how social justice questions can be brought alive in the classroom, the wider HE institution and with external communities. With these issues in mind, the forthcoming subsections briefly outline what existing research says about teaching for social justice interventions like DISCs, and findings from a national student survey, and from our Advocates’ reflections on DISCs itself.

Learning from Initiatives to Support Teaching for Social Justice

There is a significant body of research on teaching for social justice, which is commonly associated with the critical pedagogy tradition. But questions of social justice – contested and often ill-defined as they are - tend to occupy a marginal position in scholarship on teacher education for HE. In turn, initiatives which prepare people to teach for social justice in primary and secondary schools tend to be better researched than those focusing on staff who teach in HE. We conducted a search of literature on the topic published between 2009 and 2019⁷.

Unsurprisingly, this ‘review emphasised the necessity of a whole-institution approach, where teachers are supported to develop inclusive teaching practices in a planned, collaborative way - not just with their students, but with the wider communities they may be part of. Other studies emphasised the need to create opportunities for teachers to productively examine their own discomfort and position regarding racism in education in a sustained way that avoids projecting discomfort on to the bodies of staff or students of colour (e.g. by painting them as the problem). Much research problematised how teachers may hold broadly liberal values around accepting difference, rather than examining how patterned inequalities make up the ‘business as usual’ of

3 McComb, V., Eather, N. and Imig, S. (2021) Casual academic staff experiences in higher education: insights for academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development* 26(1): 95-105.

4 Ivancheva, M., Lynch, K. and Keating, K. (2019) Precarity, gender and care in the neoliberal academy. *Gender, Work and Organization* 26: 448-462. O’Keefe, T. and Courtois, A. (2019) ‘Not one of the family’: Gender and precarious work in the neoliberal university. *Gender, Work and Organization* 26: 463-479.

5 Rizvi, F. and Lingard, B. (2011) Social equity and the assemblage of values in Australian higher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 41: 5-22.

6 Gourlay, L. and Stevenson, J. (2017) Teaching excellence in higher education: Critical perspectives. *Teaching in Higher Education* 22(4): 391-395.

7 Full discussion of the review and search terms is available on the DISCs project website at <https://discs.ie/resources/litreview>

education. For example, Ching's HE study⁸ sought to support educators to adopt an 'equity-minded', inquiry-based approach to their teaching, which helps students navigate not just the module curriculum, but the hidden curriculum, i.e., institutional values and norms which exclude certain students. This study showed how challenging it is in a HE culture that promotes individualised narratives of student success to shift educators towards collectively analysing how their teaching could change to reduce or eliminate student inequalities. Finally, institutional barriers to social change featured strongly in the literature as undermining sustained efforts to teach for social justice. A key barrier was a lack of explicit and meaningful prioritising of equality across the stages of teacher development.

Our Research with Students, and with Staff who Teach in Irish HE

A majority of the over 1300 third level students we surveyed in December 2020 to January 2021 felt very strongly about the importance of teaching for social justice. However, many felt that their academic programmes and institutions could do more to ensure meaningful promotion and integration of social justice principles, themes and practices. While the DISCs project itself was a time-limited intervention, it sought to address some of the above concerns, in part through the recruitment of 17 Project Advocates. The Advocates sought to develop their teaching from a social justice perspective through public goal-setting, whole-group, small group and online workshops, reading and reflective writing, and peer feedback. The Advocates (10 women, 7 men, all White) applied to be part of the project. They reflected a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, degrees of teaching experience and levels of job security. In spite of disruption to in-person workshops and peer teaching observation caused by the pandemic, the space created by the project to collectively learn about and share practice was considered valuable.

The methodology that the project employed was very reflective and was very effective as a result... it was really, really nice to find people who committed to the idea of a university as a vehicle for good. And were prepared to put the time and the work into thinking about what that means for them in their context. (Interview 1)

One of the most meaningful things through the DISCs project, for me, was getting to meet, and talking with, and hearing from colleagues in other contexts. And that then challenged me to think, well to what extent could I do that? (Interview 9)

There was a call for more opportunities for reflective, interdisciplinary and interinstitutional spaces of this nature. For some, the project highlighted a gap in existing HE/teacher education on addressing very real equity and social justice issues in their classrooms and institutions.

I completed the (local institutional) Teaching and Learning Cert(ificate)... there was good parts to it and everything. But yea I mean it doesn't have any sort of critical edge... So you know you could see how something like the Teaching and Learning Cert could benefit from... something like the DISCs project. (Interview 4)

I did the (local institutional) Certificate in Teaching and Learning... There was no social justice pedagogy in all of that. It was all about Howard Gardner and ways of learning, which belongs in there. But there was no mention of power or power relationships. There was no mention of the post-colonial roles of universities. (Interview 12)

In my 18 years of teaching in multilingual... diverse classrooms, never had any training on (equity issues in classrooms). I feel a complete hypocrite when I'm working in this system. You're saying to the students "question, question, question" but yet we can't question the system, the foundations that we're working in. (Interview 16)

8 Ching, C.D. (2018) Confronting the equity "learning problem" through practitioner inquiry. *The Review of Higher Education* 41(3): 387-421.

Advocates were asked to identify areas of practice and reflection to prioritise during the project. It is difficult to disentangle the changes some made from the remote teaching adaptations forced by institutional pandemic responses. Nevertheless, several reported trying new approaches, or enhancing their existing efforts, to address social justice issues. Some felt they had grown in capacity to engage students on sensitive issues, to take account of what students are going through when communicating expectations, and/or to rethink the resources they use. Most indicated a gradual deepening of their consciousness about students and social justice issues. The comments below reflect some of the more practical efforts made:

(We did) walking debates... one I did was around climate justice and the role of technology in that. And you know kind of asked the students to literally take a stand. You know in the feedback that kind of came back was something that you still really enjoyed and I think there was a sense of curiosity around what we were doing. But also then listening respectfully to each other's points of view. (Interview 2)

I have come up with some exciting, new assessment types for next semester. And these include using reflective journals with students so that I can get a really good feel, and get them to actually engage and think about what their own thoughts and feelings are about the social justice issues that we cover. (Interview 10)

(I created) a reading list of, for students to do a book review... But when I got together the books that I wanted, eleven out of the twelve were male authored... bringing the subject and the issue (of gender) out into the open I found quite useful... that's just one example of the practical kind of way that you know you'd be trying to deepen the curriculum and improve the syllabus. But you know not always successfully... but at least doing it much more openly and discursively with the students (Interview 7)

Many noted a variety of institutional barriers (workload, time, funds, job security) to meaningfully progressing their practice. But there was also a desire to exercise greater collective agency to confront institutional conditions and share social justice ideas.

It's difficult to always find time to dedicate to stuff like this in the way you might wish to... I think that's a problem that existed already that was exacerbated by the pandemic rather than being caused by it... think you can't teach for social justice and inherently you are in an unjust system right? Not in any meaningful or sustained way. But I think the peer supports such as its been in this project has been great (Interview 17)

It's impossible to do as good a job as you would like to do, and it's just not recognised.... I would hate to see this (project) turn into a few publications and a report gathering dust. I would really like to see the project used to leverage a little bit of influence around, what is the purpose of higher education? (Interview 11)

Further data on the experiences of Project Advocates, and of students regarding social justice in the Irish HE classroom and environment is available in our companion *Guidance on Teaching for Social Justice in Irish HE* document.

Guidance on Developing Strategy for Teaching for Social Justice in Irish HE

This project is limited in its scope, and research in this field is in need of considerable expansion. Nevertheless, our experience of conducting an inter-institutional project with colleagues from multiple disciplines, combined with our literature review and data from staff and student data collection has generated some key strategic insights which we share below. These insights cannot exhaustively cover all of the social justice issues facing Irish HE and staff and students therein. It should also be noted that the DISCs website contains a large range of resources to inspire political and education leaders and teachers to engage with these issues.

As teaching is not simply a matter of technical skills and is never politically neutral, these insights adopt a stance focused on teaching as a public community act of service and inquiry, rather than a commodity to be traded. Our first two insights comes from the wider literature on the policy direction of HE nationally and internationally. These far-reaching insights might appear as beyond the scope of a ‘teaching and learning’ project; but the literature demonstrates that the exploitation of academic labour and marginalised communities locally and globally creates significant quality and equality concerns.

Comprehensively Address Teaching/Academic Working Conditions

- » Government needs to work more intensively and supportively with HE institutions and staff representatives to make teaching/academic work sustainable and secure for people entering the profession and for existing staff on successive casual, fixed-term and part-time contracts. The goal must be to ensure all staff can be equally cared for, and present for and engaged with, students, and develop their professional knowledge in a consistent, evidence-based way⁹. This requires, at least, ending the considerable under-funding of the third level education sector and its aggressively managerialist and individualist orientation. It also requires addressing well-documented barriers to staff underrepresentation in all domains by gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic and disability statuses.

Explicitly Address Higher Education’s Wider Role in Local and Global Injustices

- » Campaigns to ‘decolonise’ HE have demonstrated that failure to address HE contradictions regarding equity and injustice (discussed earlier) excludes the students most affected by such contradictions¹⁰. Decolonisation relates not only to addressing HE’s historic implication and tacit approval of colonialism and White Eurocentric supremacy (e.g. in unethical research, associations with slavery and resource extraction). Decolonisation also addresses ongoing Western HE elitism (e.g. ‘dumping’ western knowledge on the Global South and ‘extracting’ students from these contexts), connections to publicly unaccountable donors and organisations associated with injustice (e.g. institutions remaining silent on human rights abuses), an overemphasis on individual employability and ‘student success’ in a deeply unequal and inaccessible labour market, and curricula which are silent on these issues, and that fail to use diverse academic knowledge bases. It is critical that any strategy on teaching for social justice works to critically evaluate and reframe the institution’s priorities, and relationships to injustices in these and other domains, in a spirit of intellectual freedom and inquiry.

Co-ordinate Internal Institutional Expertise on Teaching for Social Justice

- » Access, and Learning and Teaching departments are now well-embedded centrally in Irish higher education institutions, and EDI and Civic and Community Engagement are in a phase of expansion. Student Unions and Societies play the pivotal role in representing students’ experiences and perspectives. But it is unlikely that these parties systematically work together on teaching and learning

9 Clarke, M., Kenny, A. and Loxley, A. (2015) *Creating a Supportive Working Environment for Academics in Higher Education*. Dublin: The Teachers’ Union of Ireland and the Irish Federation of University Teachers.

10 Bhabra, G.K., Gebrial, D. and Nişancioğlu, K. (Eds.) (2018) *Decolonising the University*. London: Pluto Press.

issues within and across Irish HE settings. Our experience in running the DISCs project indicates it is critical to resource long-term, meaningful collaboration between these parties, so that they can lead on developing an institutional strategy on teaching for social justice which addresses concrete equity problems, rather than abstract aspirations, inside and outside the institution. This strategy should regard teaching as an act of inclusive community building through inquiry, rather than through individual upskilling and/or knowledge transmission.

Our further insights are focused on developing such a strategy. They are structured on the basis of one of the National Forum's key priorities: the [professional development framework for all those who teach](#). But they are also particularly relevant to the [Student Success](#) priority. It is important to note that these practices seek to encourage 'intelligent' forms of accountability to teaching as a community act of mutual inquiry, rather than encouraging narrow evaluation and surveillance of academic staff.

Personal Development: The 'Self' in Teaching and Learning

- » Encourage and resource those who teach to develop their own personal reflection on social justice issues for students, staff and wider communities at, e.g. by using domains 1 and 2 of [our self-assessment tool](#) at departmental level, [reading groups](#) focused on key foundational texts (e.g. those available on the [DISCs resources page](#)), and statements of one's teaching philosophy to be shared with colleagues and students, and to be regularly personally revisited.

Professional Identity, Values and Development

- » Resource and support time for collaborative and evidence-based approaches to teaching development to address specific equity problems within and outside the department, faculty/college or institution. Examples of such approaches can include teaching observations by a critical friend using domains 1-5 of our [self-assessment tool](#), interdisciplinary workshops on identifying equity problems to be addressed through teaching, and [community-based learning initiatives](#).
- » Instead of largely encouraging academic staff to reflect temporarily on 'unconscious biases', resource and support them to develop and use department-level data on student outcomes by socio-economic background, ethnicity and disability to dispel meritocracy myths about student success, and identify medium and long-term actions by their department to address inequitable outcomes and experiences. At national level, this should include greater efforts to ethically cross-reference student demographic data with their academic outcomes. Examples of action regarding unequal outcomes by race/ethnicity [are available at this link](#).

Personal Communication and Dialogue in Teaching and Learning

- » While our companion practitioner guidance document offers advice on communication and dialogue all who teach in this field, it is critical that each institution and department develops a clear [code of ethical teaching practice](#), shared with students, regarding teacher availability, department-level student support, and inclusive and diverse class participation and assessment which facilitate 'unlearning' problematic ideas as much as learning new things.

Professional Knowledge and Skills in Teaching and Learning

- » We support the move towards encouraging and in some cases, requiring staff who teach to have a HE teaching qualification. But teaching social justice topics inclusively, and engagement of uncomfortable issues around inequity must become a core, meaningful aspect of any HE teaching qualification. The current focus on Universal Design for Learning in Ireland is important, but is often not used to address the specific topics, problems and sensitivities explored in class/HE.

- » Multi-disciplinary workshops (as per the DISCs project) may enhance teachers' reflection on and knowledge of social justice issues by adopting different lenses, but only if this is mediated by those with experience in this field as part of a wider, long-term approach.

Personal and Professional Digital Capacity

- » As Ní Shé et al. (2019)¹¹ outline, [Teaching Online is Different](#) and thus requires structural change in order to be meaningful and equitable. The pandemic-accelerated requirement for digital teaching skills must be focused on improving accessibility and engagement for diverse students, and take a stand against increasing workloads, inequalities of experience for those working from home, pre-packaged formulaic online teaching platforms offering tips and tricks, and commodifying academic labour either for private profit or as a means of undermining on-campus education. In other words, a clear institutional focus on [critical instructional design](#) and on intentionally building inclusive communities online and in person is necessary.

¹¹ Ní Shé, C., Farrell, O., Brunton, J., Costello, E., Donlon, E., Trevaskis, S. and Eccles, S. (2019) *Teaching Online is Different: Critical Perspectives from the Literature*. Dublin: Dublin City University. Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.3479402

