Title: “Better Textbooks, Better Graduate Outcomes: Diversifying OER texts as part of curriculum renewal”

Abstract:

Dr Lambert is an Honorary Fellow at Deakin University researching topics related to social justice, digital participation and success of under-represented learners. She is the chief Investigator of the Australian National scoping study of OER textbooks funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE.)

This webinar will share the findings of the Australian National OER texts scoping study which found that social justice principles relating to the cost and socio-cultural relevance of University readings matter to Australian students and staff.

The study found that OER texts can be a transformative strategy to address digital access, learning material costs and inclusive experiences for Higher Education students. Australian staff are beginning to use OER and open-access reading lists to address the injustices of uneven resourcing and negative racial, gender and disability stereotyping in the curriculum.

While such inclusive texts are important for under-represented students to create belonging to the profession and the course, this study finds that incorporating diverse cultural viewpoints and knowledges into the curriculum benefits all students by ensuring their knowledge base is up to date and they are prepared for contemporary workplaces and roles.

Students who have experienced diversified reading lists with multiple knowledge perspectives believe that they are better prepared for their intended future professions. Similarly, staff consider more representative curriculum can enhance graduate outcomes for all students.

In this webinar Dr Lambert will focus on the student interviewee data which highlighted a need for Australian academics to modify or create new more socio-culturally inclusive texts as well as texts which better represent women in the professions. The students interviewed affirmed the idea that many or most of their textbooks lacked diversity of authors, views and perspectives.

Extended abstract:

Diversity matters – recognizable and representative justice in OER readings

The students interviewed affirmed the idea that many or most of their textbooks lacked diversity of authors, views and perspectives. When prompted to consider who was represented and who was missing, most students provided examples of under-representation of women and indigenous people as both authors and topics for the textbook. Some provided detailed examples of under-representation of Asian and non-white people, and of Euro-centricism. Some also provided examples of positive representation, however these were expressed as exceptions in particular books or topics.

The extent that students felt it was important that women, indigenous people and multi-cultural people were positively represented in their readings depended on the topic of study and also students’ own life experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Foundations topics were thought to be less important (“maths is just maths”) while for social sciences and “applied” topics such as health or environmental management, a diversity of authors, cultural examples and points of view was thought to be very important.
Similarly, the extent to which students noticed a lack of diversity in their texts and readings seemed to relate quite strongly to their own experiences of racism or gender/role stereotyping, or if they had undertaken some kind of cultural studies/diversity unit of study.

For female international students with life experiences of gendered racism, the question of who was not recognised and represented in their textbooks was very much front of mind. These students were able to provide very specific examples. S07 noted with a degree of irritation, that “barely women are mentioned. It’s all about the men. Even the textbook for retail management, which is a female dominated workforce, did not have women visible in it.” S02 agreed and noted the under-representation of women in her Business texts generally, particularly in Finance and pointed out that while there wasn’t an active exclusion of women, nor was there equal recognition for their achievements: “I do feel that business is kind of a male-dominated field like specially the finance field. So I do feel like there have been examples that have been you know,… they don’t want to exclude females. But they do not recognize them as well, kind of like that.”

S08 (science undergraduate student) noted a lack of LGBTQI+ representation and made the distinction between recognising others from different backgrounds, and actually hearing from them. “There’s been talk of people from diverse backgrounds, but very little input from people from diverse backgrounds. I’m a part of the LGBTQI+ community as well and there’s definitely been no mention of that at any point, which is somewhat disappointing but not exactly surprising.” Similarly S19 pointed out that surface approaches to recognition and representation didn’t really help, noting “I’ve had pictures and stuff, but they don’t really represent the cultural side or different views and stuff.”

Other students needed to be provided with an example before they could consider the diversity of perspectives presented in their texts. They had not considered this question before and had to cast their minds back and re-evaluate their texts retrospectively. The three male international student interviewees did not identify a lack of gender or racial diversity in the textbooks as some of the female students studying the same courses did. When asked to consider an example, such as whether the text would be improved with the inclusion of female or indigenous leaders in the field, the narratives of two of the three male students’ changed. One talked about how overjoyed they had been the first time they read a paper by a Vietnamese professor, a second reflected on their discomfort around a lack of inclusion and understanding of Indigenous communities in Australia.

S06 (female, MBA international student) when asked whose views were missing, said “I don’t know… black people, or different religions people are for example (missing) in business communication. I think the significant person that the textbook needs is Nelson Mandela.” Later in the interview when asked if the textbook would be improved by the inclusion of Asian women business leaders as examples, she agreed saying “Yes, I think it will be like the better part of the textbook because in the previous is already have men, men, and men again. So we’re familiar with this and we have like no challenge…”

S03 (male MBA international student) had also not seen any Indigenous examples in his texts and put that down to the fact that he considered Indigenous views and knowledges a recent ‘trend’. He said “I believe like there is no specific things of such kind so I don’t think so because like this textbooks were written a couple of years ago … They haven’t introduced the latest trends or such thing.”

Students who had undertaken a cultural studies unit were often able to quickly provide a comparative analysis of the level of diversity of readings in the cultural studies unit vs the other units they had taken. The cultural studies unit had a key learning outcome to be able to think critically and to negotiate and evaluate diverse points of views. Reading indigenous, black and female authors was part of an open-access reading list and classes modelled and practiced how these points of view contrasted and supplemented the kinds of knowledges coming from more traditional and indeed often older sources.
These students preferred the diverse reading list and could see that the points of view presented would assist them to be better teachers, nurses and counsellors. They were also very appreciative of the subject's open-access reading list which featured no materials that needed to be paid for. Everything was available online with no licencing restrictions. The students highly valued both the “openness” of the access (no cost) and the “openness” of the knowledge presented (recognition of diverse sources and points of view.) Some could clearly state how this combined to produce a fairer and more just educational experience.