

Common Awards Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

Common Awards have developed a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy that aims to work towards creating learning environments that celebrate diverse cultures, theologies, knowledges and identities. It encourages Theological Education Institutes (TEIs) to work together and learn from one another to build training processes that recognise the gifts of all students and staff, whilst celebrating the diversity of God's people both within and outside of the classroom. It aims to advance equality through inclusive practice and pedagogy and encourages a culture of learning where students can feel as though they are not only included but that they truly belong within theological education institutes

Belonging in Theological Education: A Strategic Action Plan for Diversity and Inclusion (Common Awards) 2020-2025

Background

Common Awards is a partnership shaped and enriched by inclusion and diversity, it is made up of multiple independent Theological Education Institutes (TEIs) that train people from various denominations for different roles through numerous models of learning and education. The Common Awards theological statement outlines a shared commitment to embrace such diversity in the learning process, stating

We are being conformed to Christ in this way not as isolated individuals but together, as the Spirit unites us into the one Body of Christ. As members of that Body, we participate together in God's mission in the world. The work to which we are called is therefore the work of Christ, and the work of every member of Christ's Body together; it is the work of all the baptised, of all God's people. The Spirit calls and empowers each person to participate in this shared work differently, by giving each one diverse gifts to bring to the shared life of the Body in the world, each one a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.¹

The Common Awards partnership therefore holds a unique opportunity to discover the ways in which we can enable and strengthen the diverse gifts of individuals that God has called into training, and to do so collaboratively. This requires critical conversations that explore systems and structures of learning in order to enable theological education to deliver pedagogies that embrace the diversity of the Body of Christ. In order to do so we must be willing as TEIs to approach teaching and learning from a standpoint that includes an awareness of ethnicity, language, sex, (dis)ability and class. As such, questions of diversity and inclusion can bring about difficult conversations, particularly in situations where our learning environments are failing to address and embody inclusion and diversity.

Durham University's bid for the Common Awards contract of partnership outlined a commitment to

provide theological leadership in issues of curriculum development, to connect the partnership to the Department and to the national and international research networks in theology, [and] to stimulate research into areas of future theological research needed by the church in its mission...²

Such theological leadership and research needed by the church in its mission demands an acknowledgement of the context in which the church in the UK finds itself today. A context that is rich with diverse God-given gifts and identities, that is informed by multiple cultures and enlivened by the exciting possibilities and challenges of the voices of all God's people. In order to allow each person to

¹ A Vision for Theological Education in the Common Awards (2016), <https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/theology.religion/common.awards/CATheologicalVision.pdf> p. 4 (accessed 19 Nov 2019).

² Durham University, An Initial Application to Validate a Suite of Vocational Ministerial HE Awards (2012), www.churchofengland.org/media/1532339/durham%20university%20bid%20for%20validating%20the%20common%20awards.pdf, p. 7-8 (accessed 19 Nov 2019).

participate fully in God's mission in the world through theological education we must acknowledge where full participation is being denied and the gifts of the individual are not being fully embraced as a result of potential unconscious bias. Theological education though holds the potential to create learning environments that celebrate and embrace the gifts of every member of Christ's body.

The process by which we deliberate on how best to stimulate, encourage and enable the mission of the church through theological education is an ongoing and "unending social process."³ It requires an acknowledgment that the future theological research needed by the church in its mission must be shaped by the social realities of the church, inclusive of the experiences of those who it seeks to enable to flourish in their ministry and therefore must recognise where pedagogical practices and learning processes prevent students from being fully engaged on the grounds of ethnicity, disability, gender, and class.

This strategic action plan is therefore a live document, in that it will be reviewed and amended as we progress and learn as a collective. It aims to work towards creating learning environments that celebrate diverse cultures, theologies, knowledges and identities. It encourages TEIs to work together and learn from one another to build training processes that recognise the gifts of all students and staff, whilst celebrating the diversity of God's people both within and outside of the classroom. It aims to advance equality through inclusive practice and pedagogy and encourages a culture of learning where students can feel as though they are not only included but that they truly belong within theological education institutes.

Defining the terms:

- **Inclusion** is to foster a learning environment that allows and enables people with different backgrounds, characteristics, abilities, opinions, and ways of thinking, to work together, grow together, and flourish.
- **Diversity** is to recognise, respect and value the differences and the gifts that everyone has, and to embrace them in their fullest.
- **Belonging** is to go beyond the politicalised necessity of inclusion and to be truly embraced, appreciated and empowered.

A Strategic Action Plan for Diversity and Inclusion in Theological Education

Inclusion and Diversity Advisory Group

- Common Awards will form a Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Group (DI-AG) to drive and encourage change that will promote good practice within Common Awards TEIs. The Advisory Group will offer support to Common Awards initiatives on diversity and inclusion as well as hold Common Awards to account in order to make sure progress is being made and to help shape the development of this strategy.

Belonging through Training and Learning

- Common Awards will offer e-learning support on inclusion and diversity for TEI staff and students, which will include video lectures on Unconscious Bias training for tutors, administrators, and church leaders.
- Common Awards will also develop and implement a Common Awards e-learning course that will be intended to be part of the induction process for TEI staff and students, it will be made available on the Hub. The course will raise awareness and help develop and strengthen understanding of diversity and inclusion.

³ See, Mike Higton, Theological Education between the University and the Church: Durham University and the Common Awards in Theology, Ministry and Mission, *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, Vol. 10. No. 1 (May 2013: 25-37, 29.

- Common Awards will also produce podcasts, video interviews and webinars with church leaders and academics, in order to highlight the theological necessity for an inclusive and diverse learning environment. The interviews and webinars will cover a range of topics – focusing on ethnicity, sexuality, class, gender, and disability – including mental health.
- Common Awards will continue to review learning, teaching and assessment practices in order to develop and ensure an inclusive curriculum.
- The Common Awards website will include a dedicated page for diversity and inclusion learning and good practice, which will also share links to student initiatives and networks.
- Common Awards will work alongside Nation Ministry Team, Dioceses and ecumenical networks to develop a clergy mentoring system, where students will be able to connect with ordained individuals for similar demographics who are able to offer support

Researching the Barriers to Belonging in Theological Education

- Focus will be given to diversity and inclusion in research symposiums and initiatives of Common Awards in order to develop a greater understanding of theologies, pedagogies, and good practices as a means of helping to support and implement this strategy.
- A postdoctoral research associate has been appointed to the Common Awards team in order to research and develop greater understanding of the barriers to inclusion that exist in theological education for students from different backgrounds and develop greater strategies to overcome them. The postdoctoral research associate will be meeting with stakeholders, inclusive of students, staff and church leaders, in order to gather evidence to support strategic action. Research papers for publication are also intended to be produced from this work.
- Common Awards will conduct a diversity audit that will help gain a greater understanding of the contexts in which students are learning, and distinct TEI settings, the audit will lead to the development and implementation of sustainable practices and processes that will aim to improve diversity and inclusion. Thereby feeding into the long-term strategy for improving diversity and inclusion in TEIs.

Fostering inclusion

- Common Awards will work with TEIs in order to inform policy and good practice, and encourage a culture of transparency, and good communication, where adequate training and reporting mechanisms are in place for situations of discrimination and harassment.
- Common Awards will encourage TEIs to have designated Inclusion Officers to help support TEIs in their work on promoting inclusive learning environments, training will be offered from Common Awards to support the work of Inclusion Officers.
- Isolation and marginalisation are common realities for many ethnic minority students and staff in the UK, therefore Common Awards in collaboration with TEIs will seek to find ways in which all students are given a 'voice' and support.
- The student and staff bodies of Common Awards TEIs across the UK includes a high proportion of students with different learning abilities – focus will therefore be given to developing good practice to bring about an inclusive learning environment and prevent incidents of loss of dignity.
- Common Awards will work with TEIs to ensure accessibility and inclusive practices to accommodate the needs of students and staff with different abilities.

Engaged pedagogy

- A commitment to diversity and inclusion demands that we give focus to our curricula in order to guarantee representation of international scholars and sources, therefore Common Awards will commit to reviewing shared content and make use of the Hub to share resources with TEIs in order to make the most of diverse resources in learning and help decolonialise our curriculums.
- Common Awards will continue to assess our assessment methods and implementation, making informed changes where necessary to ensure an inclusive approach. In this way student needs will be greater reflected in the pedagogy.
- Research will also be conducted in the area of identity and pedagogy in order to develop further strategies for inclusive and engaged pedagogies in theological education that take into consideration protected characteristics.

Celebrating Diversity and Inclusion Awards

- Celebrating good practice is fundamental to bringing about positive transformation, therefore Common Awards will award TEIs with Common Awards Diversity and Inclusion certification in order to encourage and recognise commitment to encouraging and engaging with students and staff through good practice in relation to ethnicity, gender, disability and class.

Note:

Consultation on this strategy has taken place with:

1. The Common Awards Team
2. The Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Group
3. The Common Awards Management Board
4. National Ministry Team
5. TEI Forum
6. Quality and Formation Panel