

## Art, Society, and Inclusion: Breaking Barriers in the Gallery

*An EDI Diversifying the Curriculum Blog Post by Professor Graeme Kirkpatrick*

The funding received was to organise a class visit to the Whitworth gallery on Oxford Road for a third-year undergraduate course on 'Art and Society'. The rationale for seeking support came from student feedback in previous years, which indicated that some students were at a disadvantage because they had limited prior experience of the art world, including galleries. In most cases this reflected the class background of the affected individuals, with middle class families being more likely to take their children to art exhibitions.

A post-graduate student helped to organise the visit, liaising with the gallery and arranging for one of the curators to meet with us in one of their teaching spaces. The researcher surveyed the students before and after the visit to try and get a measure of its effectiveness. The results strongly supported our feeling that the intervention had been successful.

There was unanimity in the surveys that the gallery visit had enhanced learning by helping students to get a clearer sense of what the 'art world' is made of. Nearly all student feedback on the course (that is, not the surveys specific to the visit) identified the trip as one of its best features. Moreover, all the students said that the visit had helped them to understand equality and diversity issues as they affected the art world. This was largely to do with the artworks on exhibition at the time, and the talk from the gallery curator, who emphasised that he saw his mission as creating socially inclusive experiences.

All those who said they had reservations about studying a course with 'art' in the title commented favourably on the visit in the survey. Moreover, those with stronger reservations expressed particularly positive views, emphasising that for them the visit provided 'context on where art is placed in society'. This group included two students who self-identified as working class and two of those (3) who 'preferred not to say'.

Overall, the gallery visit achieved its objectives in terms of supporting and enhancing the participation of students from non-middle-class backgrounds. It also seems that all the students found it was an opportunity to develop their thoughts about equality and inclusion through experiential learning.