Chapter 4 Valuing diversity and equal opportunity
Jo Tait (developed from earlier chapters by Barbara Hodgson and Gill Kirkup)

I can't assume that I know who my students are any longer. They really are coming in with a wider range of ability and expectations than ever before. This makes preparing to teach a lot more complicated ... but sometimes more rewarding, too.

I know that my institution has an equal opportunity policy and even a detailed strategy to ensure that we meet legislative requirements, but I don't see how this connects with my teaching and could not tell you exactly where it impacts on a student's experience.

Equal opportunities are so embedded in my everyday practice that I would struggle to demonstrate my commitment to policies separately from the way I do things anyway.

The previous chapter ended by considering some of the explicit values that underpin the work of teaching professionals in higher education. This chapter encourages you to think in more detail about the ethical issues that are implicit in such value statements and what they mean in practice. We hope that reading and engaging with these ideas will help you to develop your own understanding of these principles in ways that will influence your work with students and your relationships with colleagues. How you understand this chapter will, as always, draw on your own experiences in your own place of work.

Recent UK legislation to support principles of equality aims to ensure that institutional practices are explicitly aligned with the policies of each institution – that what we say we value is reflected in what we do in practice. Section 4.1 introduces current legislation that, if you work in the UK, will almost certainly impact on your work. This information will form the basis for further exploration of policy in your organisation. (If your work is not UK-based, you should still find principles and values to help you to explore your own institution's policies in relation to the legislation appropriate to your situation.) As you engage with this section, we encourage you to consider the practical action points that will ensure compliance with regulations and expectations. Consider, also, how you can use such legislation to enhance your teaching in creative ways.

Section 4.2 focuses on practical experiences of diversity – the more positive or appreciative face of equal opportunity that can support enhanced teaching practices. We encourage you to think beyond compliance and to consider how others in situations not unlike yours have responded to the challenges created by equal opportunity and widening participation.

Section 4.3 provides examples of research and inquiry that have informed and challenged our understanding of widening diversity in student learning. As you engage with this section, consider the relevance of research in your context; how would you design an inquiry that would answer some of the questions you may have developed in your reading of previous sections?
4.1 Equal opportunities legislation

If we are to create an educational system that embodies equality of opportunity, equal opportunities must become part of the day-to-day practice of teaching, assessment and student support. A minimum level of compliance would mean simply obeying the law: knowing which pieces of legislation apply to higher education and what they mean in your day-to-day work. This sounds simple but it is surprising that, after more than 25 years of equal opportunities legislation, many higher education staff are still unsure or unaware of what might be considered inappropriate or even illegal behaviour. However, the situation is more complex than that for most of us. All higher and further education institutions (at least in the UK) have equal opportunities policies that put obligations on staff and students to create an environment that supports diversity. The concept of equality of opportunity has a long philosophical and political history – one which leads to different interpretations of what is meant by the term, even among its supporters. This section begins by summarising the current legal position. As you read this, consider what the rules and guidelines mean for your practice, and also note any questions that occur to you or any areas where you recognise that you need to search out more detail. Follow up this initial briefing by exploring the web-links associated with each aspect of equal opportunities legislation.

Racial equality

The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 is concerned to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of race in public life. Its brief includes voluntary and private sector organisations that are associated with public bodies such as universities. Such discrimination may be direct or indirect or may take the form of victimisation.

Direct discrimination occurs when one person is treated less favourably than another on racial grounds. Examples might include refusing a service to people from a specific ethnic minority group or ignoring racial harassment of employees or students.

Indirect discrimination occurs when the following three conditions are met:

- a rule is applied equally to everyone but it can be met by a considerably smaller proportion of people from a particular racial group;
- the rule is to their disadvantage;
- the rule cannot be justified on non-racial grounds.

All three conditions need to apply. An example of indirect discrimination might be, from school education, drawing the boundaries of a catchment area for a popular school in ways that include a predominantly white residential neighbourhood but exclude an estate with a high proportion of ethnic minority families and a road where there is a hostel for asylum seekers. Although the lines on the map are race neutral, the outcome is to deny many ethnic minority children entry to the school. Without a non-racial justification, such measures will be unlawful.
Victimisation occurs when someone is disadvantaged because of one of the following:

- they have made a complaint of racial discrimination;
- they are thought to have done so;
- they have supported someone else who has made a complaint of racial discrimination.

This aims to protect ‘whistleblowers’ who raise questions about racial discrimination within their organisation. An example might be where an employee is refused a training opportunity because they backed up a colleague’s complaint of racial discrimination.

As well as outlawing these three forms of discrimination, the Act places a general duty on public authorities to promote race equality. This means that universities are also under a legal obligation to promote equality of opportunity and to promote good race relations between people of different racial groups. To support this move to what is called ‘mainstreaming’ race equality – ensuring that the responsibility for equality becomes a practical and shared responsibility across institutions – there are a range of guidelines and a Code of Practice. Your institution will almost certainly have published a race-equality scheme in which it sets out a plan for meeting and monitoring its obligations.

http://www.cre.gov.uk/index.html provides a direct link to the Commission for Racial Equality website where you will find a range of information and details of how to order A guide for institutions of further and higher education (2002). Designed to help further and higher education institutions follow the code of practice, it is aimed mainly at the governing bodies of further and higher education institutions that are bound by statutory responsibilities. However, the guide will also be useful for students, parents, community groups, contractors, partners and others who want to know what they can expect from further and higher education institutions, and what these institutions might expect from them.

http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ers/toolkit/toolkit.htm links you to Leeds University’s ‘Anti-racist toolkit for higher education institutions’. This toolkit aims to assist institutions in the process of anti-racist and race equality planning and action by providing conceptual and methodological ‘tools’.

It is intended to be primarily an ‘organic’ online resource that will be regularly updated.

http://www.ecu.ac.uk provides a link to the UK Universities’ Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). This is the first full-time office devoted to promoting equality and diversity in higher education, working in partnership with universities and colleges of higher education, unions, and agencies across the country. The ECU’s remit is staff in higher education, but it explicitly recognises that often equal opportunities issues cross student–staff boundaries.
Activity 4.1 Your institution’s equal opportunity policies

Does the college or university with which you are associated have a race-equality scheme or strategy? Were you aware of it before reading this section? Track it down – many organisations locate such information on an intranet site – and start asking yourself what the scheme or policy means in relation to your teaching role or in your relationships with colleagues. Consider where you may have responsibilities for maintaining awareness in, say,

- recruitment (of students or staff),
- course design and presentation,
- social interaction (in the classroom or in meetings),
- assessment.

Note, too, your reservations about such policies. Are they sufficient, do they work in practice, or do you think they are too interventionist?

Before moving on to the next section, take some additional time to hunt down your institution’s policy and strategy on disability. In the UK, legislation now requires that an institution should have both, in some form.

Disability and special educational needs

From September 2002, UK higher education institutions and the individuals who work in them must comply with the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act 2001 (SENDA). The underlying principle of the legislation is that disabled students (who now make up at least 5% of the student population) should receive full access to education and other related provision, and should have the same opportunities as non-disabled students to benefit from whatever provision is available. However, the Act also stipulates that higher education institutions as responsible bodies have an anticipatory duty towards the requirements of all disabled people, and need to make reasonable adjustments for those who might otherwise be substantially disadvantaged. There is an expectation (HEFCE, 2001) that strategies will be developed that detail institutional policies and provision for disabled students and that plan the necessary changes under this legislation in ways that model good practice.

Take some time to look through your institution’s action plan or strategy for meeting the SENDA requirements, and ask the sort of questions that were suggested in Activity 4.1.

In some institutions, new strategies will include rolling programmes of staff development across an institution or within faculties and departments. Naturally, we would encourage you to take advantage of any local opportunities to learn about your institutional response to these initiatives; this is an important part of your personal and professional development. One of the great strengths of the legislation is that it emphasises institutional and individual responsibility for the learning experience of students: some introductions to the SENDA legislation have emphasised that this means that you have to ensure that your course, your web environment or your seminar provides equality of access to all students. Of course, your institution and your faculty have a
responsibility to support you: what does this individual responsibility mean in practice?

A useful self-audit tool and checklist has emerged from an HEFCE-funded project (Waterfield and West, 2002). The material suggests that academic departments need to consider the implications of the legislation in all of the following areas:

- admissions,
- course development, programme planning, approval and review,
- preparing documents for printing, visual display and electronic dissemination,
- lectures, seminars and tutorials,
- fieldwork,
- laboratories, workshops and other practice-based environments,
- placement learning,
- assessment,
- professional bodies,
- positive communication.

We have made these checklists available on the H850 website to enable you to instigate your own informal or reflective audit of at least one area of work in which you are involved. Even better, you might find a colleague with whom to discuss your thinking.

Despite our deliberate foregrounding of disability and race and other equal opportunity issues in a separate chapter, it is important to recognise that good teaching is, by its very nature, responsive to the particular needs of any individual student. As you consider what adjustments you might need to make in your practice to comply with legislation, reflect on the many ways in which such changes might benefit all students and their ability to learn more effectively.

http://www.skill.org.uk

Skill (National Bureau for Students With Disabilities) promotes opportunities for young people and adults with any kind of disability in post-16 education, training and employment across the UK. The site features a useful selection of case studies that you might want to browse or share with students: http://www.skill.org.uk/info/case_studies/index.asp

http://www.natdisteam.ac.uk

The National Disability Team (NDT) is contracted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department for Employment and Learning for Northern Ireland (DELNI) to undertake the service of a national team to improve provision for disabled students in higher education.

http://www.techdis.ac.uk

The TechDis service aims to improve provision for disabled staff and students in higher and further education through technology. Achieving this takes several routes. TechDis provides advice and information resources via extensive web-based databases and an e-mail helpdesk. These resources should be the first port of call for anyone in education who has a question relating to disability and technology.
The TechDis staff also pursue outreach into the community by delivering presentations and facilitating workshops at cross-institutional events. Staff development workshops are held monthly on a range of issues relating to disability and technology in education. TechDis are also developing stand-alone staff development resources on a range of themes to enable particular issues to be discussed in more detail within institutions and departments.

Gender

The checklists and regulations detailed above could apply equally to discrimination on the grounds of gender. The Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 are still in force in the UK, so more recent legislation may appear to take precedence and to have more currency. In talking with younger colleagues, I recognise that legislation that took effect in earlier decades has influenced culture in such a way that young women students are unlikely to experience direct discrimination on grounds of gender. Those who campaigned to ensure gender equality may wish to celebrate this minor achievement in terms of law, but would still want us to draw attention to the more subtle discriminatory practices that can pass unnoticed in the social process of learning.

Employment and collegiality

Legislation as we have described it refers, in the main, to the experiences of students: this is quite appropriate. We are sure, however, that it is equally important to consider the same issues in recruiting and working with staff at universities. Legislation requires universities to treat staff equitably, but such policy can also be envisaged as part of a responsibility to provide positive models for a more diverse student population. Of course, such change takes time and, in the UK, the Bett Report (Bett, 1999) highlights the urgent need for universities to take action so that they can demonstrate a better balance of gender, race and disability through all levels and activities, and to ensure that, for example, female staff and those from less-represented races are not being discriminated against in selection and promotion processes.

In recognition of this, UK universities have a body called the Equality Challenge Unit whose responsibility is specifically staffing of universities. The website is listed above, at the end of the section on racial equality.

4.2 Appreciating diversity

Alongside the equal opportunities policies that are detailed in the previous section, UK government has set up a broad initiative that encourages universities to think positively about diversity. The responsibility to create and support a diverse learning and teaching environment represents a considerable revolution in values from the previous focus on the less complex opportunity rights issues. Since 1999, widening participation agendas (with targeted funding) have encouraged institutions to devote energy to attracting a wider range of students from more diverse backgrounds. The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) highlighted the fact that some population groups are particularly under-represented in higher education, 'notably those from socio-economic groups III to V, people with disabilities and specific ethnic minority groups'. In the UK, there is a strong link between widening participation and clear participation targets for higher education of 50% – half of those aged between 18 and 30
should have the opportunity to benefit from higher education by the end of the decade. On 25 June 2001, Diana Warwick, Chief Executive of the Committee for Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP, now re-branded as Universities UK), launched the programme of funding initiatives and interventions by listing the benefits of widening participation.

Bringing education to people who in the past were excluded from it allows more people to realise their potential.

Educated people are more fulfilled people, who are likely to make for a better society.

Widening participation means more fairness, less waste of talent, and more opportunity for more people.

Graduates earn more, all the evidence points to that. And the fact that there is a greater proportion of graduates in the labour market has not meant that graduates earn less: there is still a substantial graduate pay premium.

Besides, universities are more interesting places – better places – when all sections of society are represented within them.

The full text of Warwick’s speech can be found at http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/speeches

Of course, it is recognised that education alone will not remedy the class divide, and that higher education is not suited to everyone. Financial considerations – student loans and the introduction of fees, as well as the perceived value of a degree in terms of projected graduate income – have all challenged these positive initiatives.

Your institution may have a widening participation or access officer or unit. The sorts of strategies that universities have evolved often include the following:

- sub-regional or distributed delivery of courses;
- making available marketing information on prospective student groups (by post-code, for example) and support for targeted marketing;
- staff development activities and resources;
- increased opportunities for flexible study:
- part-time routes,
- distance learning options,
- additional learning support,
- outreach activity to community groups;
- audit policy and practice across institution;
- seeking and managing European Social Fund or similar sources of subsidy.

One of the positive advantages of widening participation has been the ways in which it has encouraged institutions to reflect on the usefulness and the relevance of curricula and programmes. As individual practitioners, increasing awareness of the diversity of students in our groups has required us to question traditional classroom practices such as lectures and seminars, broadening our approach to take account of different learners and different expectations. If compliance with the law is
at one end of a continuum, considering how we can design learning environments to celebrate and use the diversity of our students, their approaches to learning, their coping skills and the different experiences they bring to their learning provides a positive perspective at the other end.

In the old elitist or 'survival of the fittest' system of higher education, universities expected that some students would fall by the wayside because, we might say, they were not 'of the right calibre' or they were 'lazy', etc. This blame the student culture allowed lecturers to maintain a teaching role that involved scattering knowledge in ways that either took root or didn't. The responsibility for learners simply involved students in retaining or memorising that information at least until the end-of-year exam, when recollection and, in the best cases, understanding would be tested, with a numerical grade to indicate whether a student had performed near or far from the pass mark. Changes to our concern for widening participation, for student learning, for the usefulness of what is learned and for the appropriateness of the content have influenced our thinking about assessment in quite radical ways; not least among these is a move to assessment and design towards outcomes of learning rather than content knowledge. Pack 3 of this course describes these changes and, while suggesting that you may make changes in your individual practice, reminds us that departments, faculties and institutions need to change programmes to support any initiatives that we, as individuals or small groups of enthusiastic teachers, might wish to introduce.

Accessible practice and disabilities

In view of the increased focus on widening participation and open access to higher education, it is almost certain that you will encounter students with specific disabilities and that you will need to make some preparations in yourself and in your teaching. The first step is to find out as much as you can about the particular needs of the person concerned. The following brief list may help you to consider the sorts of questions to ask, as part of this preparation.

Do recognise that there may be sensitive issues associated with the disclosure of a disability. Individuals are more likely to share their concerns in an atmosphere conducive to openness and honesty. It is important for you to be clear about institutional and staff uncertainties (including your own) but equally to recognise that the student will have his or her own concerns.

Visual impairment

This may range from total blindness to tunnel and blurred vision. Most students will have a preferred system for communication: for example, large print, Braille, audiotape or speech-synthesising software.

- Braille: although this can be useful to profoundly visually-impaired students, few individuals have been educated using Braille, and its usefulness is therefore limited. The RNIB will lend textbooks to students in Braille form.
- Audiotape: recordings can be made of lectures, and lecture notes can be spoken onto tape.
• Speech synthesisers: used by some students to provide auditory versions of electronically scanned text, and technology is advancing apace to make this a valuable tool.

Other things that may be of assistance include:

• clear and precise instructions;
• diagrams, written handouts and web pages that are clear and simple with strong contrast;
• verbal descriptions of the environment – if necessary, be prepared to guide a visually-impaired individual around the classroom;
• careful introductions of fellow students so that they can be located in discussions and seminars.

A guide dog is highly disciplined and should not be distracted or petted when working. Approach a guide dog only with the owner's permission.

As you prepare or deliver your teaching, try putting yourself in the place of a student, if you can find a suitable opportunity. Colleagues at the Open University who record written course material onto audiotape for visually-impaired students report learning a great deal about visual representations of aspects of a subject and their uses as they try to find verbal ways of describing diagrams, tables, illustrations, etc. and the interactions that the learner needs to have with them.

Hearing impairment

Hearing impairment can include profound deafness and other hearing deficits such as insensitivity to certain wavelengths and tinnitus. A wide variety of means of communication are used by the hearing impaired, for example, sign language, sign and speech, lip reading, hearing aids and speech recognition software. Find out, if possible, which mode of communication a student favours. Students will know what is most useful to them – be guided by them about the ways in which you can be most helpful.

In face-to-face situations you can help by:

• facing the student;
• speaking clearly: use a normal rate of speaking with natural breaks for pauses – a 10–15 minute break is necessary when giving large amounts of information;
• making sure that your face is well lit;
• preparing and distributing notes in advance, especially where specific terminology or names are involved;
• matching up spoken and written concepts;
• using written handouts and OHP material but, of course, not teaching to them exclusively.

Hearing impairment is no longer a disability when teaching uses text and images (either in printed materials or online) and computer-mediated conferencing that is text based. Audio aspects of web presentation (including video soundtracks) can also be provided in an alternative visual format, but the inclusion of webcast, real-time events may need to be carefully considered as lip-reading may not be possible.
Anyone using a hearing aid will benefit from a loop system which uses radio signals to transmit sounds via a microphone to the user’s aid. Check if teaching rooms that you use have loop systems and whether you can book them if you know that you have hearing-impaired students. Portable systems also exist which rely on the lecturer using a small radio microphone and the student having the receiving device.

On first meeting the individual, confirm with them their preferred mode of communication, particularly for those with sensory and speech impairments. If there is a third party to help or support the person (friend, helper, or sign language interpreter, etc.), ascertain the role of that person within the communication, but do not engage that person in communication when they are communicating for the individual.

**Physical disability**

Obviously, the physical environment has the greatest impact upon this group of students. However, there are other important points that a teacher must keep in mind.

- Additional support or arrangements may need to be made if ill-health and/or pain accompany the disability.
- Some students may need regular rest periods and help with note-taking and changes of activity. It therefore makes sense to break up a lesson into manageable ‘chunks’ rather than deliver a lecture without breaks.

If a personal helper is present, ensure that all communication is directed to the person with the disability and not through the third party (unless this is the wish of the disabled person).

**Dyslexia**

Dyslexia, a complex neurological condition, affects the ability to acquire and use written language and other organisational skills. People with dyslexia are not a homogeneous group, and the impact of dyslexia will vary as will coping strategies.

Dyslexic students might find it difficult to take notes in lectures and may therefore find it easier to record the lecture. They may also have problems getting their ideas down on paper, so alternative methods of presenting assignments might be appropriate. Dyslexic students may take up to twice as long to read a text, and may wish to use software which reads the text aloud from text files, websites or ebooks. They may also wish to use other devices such as spellcheckers and you may need to account for this. Libraries may offer longer loan times for dyslexic students.

Find out how the student learns best, and adapt your teaching to help. The following may be of assistance:

- giving students a framework in advance of what is to be covered in the course and the lecture;
- giving well-structured and signposted lectures with reasonable pauses;
- supporting the appropriate use of IT including, if helpful, the use of a voice-recording device;
- allowing students to present work in visual/graphical form;
• giving feedback on grammar and style of work presented, even if it is assessed only for content;
• allowing additional time for students to complete written work.

Hidden disabilities

This term can cover a broad range of different disabilities – asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, ME (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis), and many others. As always, ask and find out as much as possible about particular needs. Remember that disclosure is likely to be difficult, noises and other pollution can be problematic, and there may be changes experienced due to medication. Giving very clear information while being appropriately flexible can be helpful.

Students with Autistic Spectrum disorders such as Asperger’s Syndrome could also be classified as having ‘hidden’ disabilities. People with Asperger’s Syndrome have neurological differences which can create difficulties in face-to-face interaction, for example:
• difficulties in interpreting jokes or ‘turns of phrase’;
• deficiencies in social skills (e.g. difficulty making eye contact);
• low empathy and one-sided social interaction;
• obsessive routines or preoccupation with a particular subject of interest;
• poor organisational skills;
• anxiety.

Mental health problems

This ‘label’ can feel stigmatising so it is particularly important to understand the range of disabilities that may be encompassed: mood-related disorders (depression); anxiety-related disorders (phobias, panic, post-traumatic stress, compulsive behaviour); psychosis (schizophrenia); eating disorders (bulimia, anorexia nervosa); and personality disorders.

It is important to remember that, whatever the presenting problem, you do not have to solve it for the student, and if you are unable to suggest an immediate way forward, this is not a failure on your part. It is also worth remembering that the student will have encountered (and possibly managed) similar challenges before, and that neither you nor the student is meeting this alone – other people may have developed strategies that the student can adapt.

If you meet a student for the first time and find them unable to answer ordinary questions or acting inappropriately, you may suspect that there is a mental health problem that is beyond your immediate skill. In these circumstances, it is important to ask detailed questions in the appropriate quarters, to liaise with other services and, if necessary, external agencies, to clarify the situation with the student’s consent. This situation is delicate and needs careful management to avoid further adverse effect on the student’s health.
Gender and diversity

How effective is regulation in producing equitable conditions? Gender-related legislation has been in place for a considerable time in the UK, but even higher education – a sector of society that one might anticipate should be most enlightened – suffers from inequity in status and pay, as Bett (1999) discovered. There are clear examples of gender discrimination at a demographic level and, as an employee in higher education, you may be enjoying (or suffering under) some gaps in the power of legislation to change behaviour: does this impact on your teaching?

Senior academic and managerial positions are more likely to be held by men, and unions report continuing imbalance between the roles that women undertake and the rewards they can anticipate.

Figures produced for the lecturers' union NATFHE show that women academics fall further behind male colleagues the longer they stay in their jobs. While there is only a 3% gap between men and women aged 21–30, this jumps to 8% for staff in their 30s, 13% in their 40s and 14% for 51- to 60-year-olds. Among professors, a similar pattern emerges with a 4% pay gap for those aged 31–40 rising to 7% (£4000) for those in their 40s.

Guardian, 2 October 2001

More recently, the Guardian reported the following.

The government's plans to reform higher education will increase the pay and opportunities gap between men and women in universities, lecturer leaders have warned. Delegates to the Association of University Teachers conference in Scarborough heard last week how a string of proposals in the government's plans would impact on women in academia who are more likely to be on short-term contracts, less likely to be promoted and earn 81p for every £1 their male colleagues earn.

Guardian, 13 May 2003

With universities modelling such inequality in pay and in expectations, what might this mean for student ambitions? Will our young graduates see caring roles as women's work, because women 'naturally' make better personal tutors? Will young women feel marginalised in seminars because young men have louder voices and more strident opinions? Or are these old stereotypes, based on experiences of studying some time ago? In fact, recent reports from school and university results suggest that girls are tending to succeed and that boys are falling behind.

In Extract 4.1, you will find that Ann Bridgewood (1992) asks important questions about the development of a woman-friendly curriculum. It seems that, despite the best efforts of professional bodies, certain curriculum/professional areas continue to be highly gender-oriented: for example, there are still fewer women than men in physical sciences and engineering, and men are very much in the minority in nursing studies.
Overseas students

Many universities welcome overseas students, particularly at postgraduate level. You may find that there are related

- practical issues, to do with living far away from home;
- language difficulties, if overseas students are not well supported or selected;
- cultural differences, some of which will have been dealt with elsewhere in this chapter.

In Pack 5, the online section dealing with supervision suggests a range of ways to better support the supervision of overseas students.

Age and maturity

Mature students are another group who may feel as though they come from another culture. In the recent past, when ‘traditional’ students always came to university straight from school, mature students would report that other students saw them as being out of place. Although it is accepted that mature students may no longer feel like such a minority, it is worth remembering that their ‘other lives’ are likely to present particular pressures. Those of your students who have young, dependent children, for example, may have complicated childcare arrangements which cannot be quickly re-negotiated to accommodate ad hoc changes to class times or having to participate in group work outside hours regularly covered by their childcare.

If mature students come through a non-conventional route, they may not have the common core of knowledge sometimes assumed by teachers used to working with students fresh from A-levels. Situations may then arise when they feel belittled or treated contemptuously by teachers or fellow-students for these apparent shortcomings. Ensuring the orientation and integration of students who have reached higher education through a range of routes, and valuing the diversity of experience that they bring to a learning group, can enhance the learning experience for everyone.

Sexual orientation

Diane Woodward makes the point that sexual orientation and homophobia are, potentially, invisible prejudices.

Lesbian and gay students and staff are often unidentifiable and invisible, making it difficult to identify and respond to their specific concerns. And these concerns can be life-threatening; research [suggests] that one in five young gay men and lesbians [has] attempted suicide and lesbians’ incidence of alcohol abuse is several times higher than the national average for women.

Woodward, 1999

The problem with the hidden curriculum is not just that it excludes some people, but that it contains messages about what is ‘normal’, ‘right’ or ‘proper’. Students receive messages about themselves in the curriculum. What messages are included in the curriculum you teach? Many issues about what constitutes ‘normal’ – for example, normal families, normal male behaviour, normal bodies – are very sensitive for people who feel in some way categorised as ‘not normal’. These are issues that demand very
sensitive handling from you as the teacher. Marigold Rogers' recommendations to schoolteachers suggest ways in which gay and lesbian students can be helped to feel acknowledged and that they have a right to a 'self-defined identity':

- open discussion of homosexuality in class, where it is not treated as a problem; open discussion of the oppression of lesbians and gays;
- incorporation of lesbian and gay theories, examples and perspectives into the curriculum [my addition];
- the identification of role models (both local/actual and in course materials);
- talks by former students (or external speakers);
- critical discussion of plays, books and other materials;
- ensuring staff acceptance of their responsibility to defend students and to challenge homophobic comments and behaviour, rather than seeking to be even-handed or abdicating this responsibility;
- establishing lesbian and gay students' right to be taken seriously;
- ensuring that all tutors and providers of support services have been educated/trained to be sensitive to issues associated with students' sexual orientation, and identifying and if necessary appointing lesbian/gay members of the support staff;
- publicising internal and external sources of support and advice for lesbian and gay students including, if necessary, supporting the establishment of student societies.

Rogers, 1994, p. 46

Some of the issues that we have identified do not appear at first sight to constitute part of the formal curriculum, but they do merit consideration if we conceptualise the student experience as a whole, where the 'hidden curriculum' conveys its own powerful messages, both intended and unintended, which may support or undermine formal institutional objectives. And unless we address issues in the wider environment that marginalise and alienate lesbian and gay students, they will never get to the point of engaging with the curriculum.

4.3 Research to help you to consider your own practice

Where should you start in your own work? You need some measure of your own situation. What indicators might you use to gauge if discrimination is occurring in your own teaching and assessment practices, or within your department? Quantitative evaluations have to be based on particular evaluation data, such as those used in Ruth Van Dyke's paper (1999), provided in edited form as Extract 4.1. This work was based on an understanding that there is a relationship between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, although they are not the same. If we accept individual differences in academic aptitude and performance, and if we reward on merit, then we should expect differences in achievement. If we believe that we have provided equality of opportunity for all our students, then the differences that we see should be due only to ability and effort. It helps to start by considering your student body as a cohort or even over a period of years.

- Who are they?
• What kinds of people do they represent?
• How well do the different constituencies in your student body perform at the end of their courses?
• What do they feel about their teaching and support?

Drawing on data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) website (http://www.hesa.ac.uk/holisdocs/pubinfo/stud.htm), you may be able to look at answers to such questions over a period of, say, seven years to observe whether there is a pattern of change. Using your knowledge of your institution or the changing context of higher education, you might be able to explain changes in terms of recruitment or other strategic decisions that your institution has made.

Extract 4.1 describes the student monitoring that Van Dyke undertook in two London universities. She examined student progression, withdrawal and deferral; and student achievement, in terms of assessment outcomes. She discusses how this monitoring uncovered areas of possible discriminatory practice.
EXTRACT 4.1
THE USE OF MONITORING DATA ON STUDENT PROGRESS AND
ACHIEVEMENT AS A MEANS OF IDENTIFYING EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES ISSUES
IN COURSE PROVISION AND DEVELOPING APPROPRIATE REMEDIAL ACTION

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Van Dyke begins by describing some kinds of monitoring that you can use to check for discrimination: student demographic data, self-completion questionnaires, interviews and ‘focus groups’ (group interviews). These data are then used to uncover trends in student performance, and hopefully lead to some explanations and remedies for these trends.

In the student progress data that Van Dyke examines, black students, mature students and students with other than A-level entry qualifications were more likely to fail or withdraw. The three key factors that she feels help to explain this are an unfriendly curriculum, ‘bottleneck’ units, and the experience of isolation or harassment.

The term ‘unfriendly curriculum’ describes courses that in their content unnecessarily reflect the experience and interests of particular groups in the population. This might be very obvious in the chosen content – for example, literature courses composed only of the work of dead white male European writers may be clichés, but they encapsulate what such an ‘exclusive’ curriculum might represent. On a more subtle level, the metaphors and analogies that a teacher uses to explicate difficult theory or to model systems behaviour may be exclusive.

For example, a Computing lecturer once had difficulty understanding why I did not find it easy to make a data table using the example of car makes and models. At the time I did not drive and had little interest in cars. He found it hard to believe that I could not differentiate between a model name and a maker’s name, and yet thought that he was demonstrating database design using everyday material that would be familiar to all his students.

Van Dyke’s second factor is ‘bottleneck’ units. Most modular courses have some units that are more difficult to be successful in than others. The important thing to monitor is whether particular groups of students are finding it more difficult. Van Dyke suggests that diagnostic testing, remedial work and redesign of the teaching may help.

Van Dyke’s final factor is isolation or harassment; these contribute to what is known as the ‘chilly climate’ in, for example, the field of women and technology. Mostly this occurs where minority students have not yet formed a ‘critical mass’, that is, a large enough group to support each other and to no longer appear ‘different’ to the rest of the student body. Before this critical mass stage is reached, the teacher has enormous power to create a classroom where harassment is unacceptable, and where students are expected to support and co-operate with one another.

When Van Dyke examines student achievement as measured by assessment, she comes up with four possible factors contributing to unequal opportunities. The first of these is discrimination by the ‘marker’. This is mainly due to the marker bringing knowledge about the student to the assessment that leads him or her to assess the work differently. Here the marker is grading ‘who’ rather than ‘what’. This can be a disadvantage to students when some groups are consistently marked down because of race or gender, but it can also be an unfair advantage to a student due to some kind of favouritism. For example, two students on a course were very publicly a ‘couple’. They produced essays that had obviously been worked on together, and they could realistically be accused of plagiarism. The tutor noted this on both essays, and marked down the young woman’s essay because of her reliance on the work of her boyfriend. Both students went to see the tutor – she angry and he sheepish – to admit that he had copied her work, in a subject that she understood better than he had.
The fact that we all operate some kind of unconscious discrimination in assessing the value of work can be demonstrated by a kind of party game. Take some little known work (for example, poems) by well known writers, but incorrectly assign the authors to the works. Then ask your friends to rate the writing according to its quality. In most cases you will find that who is credited with authoring the piece has a significant impact on how it is rated. Anonymous scripts and double marking are attempts to overcome this kind of discrimination within courses.

The type of assessment used in a course, together with the criteria for assessment (Van Dyke's second and third factors), can also lead to discrimination against certain groups of students. For example, there is a long-standing debate about the effects of having essay-type exams, rather than multiple choice, on the grades of male and female schoolchildren. On higher education courses which are taken by many overseas students, the role that written English plays in assessment should be made clear, so that markers do not give lower grades because written English is not of some unexpressed quality. All assessment criteria should be explicit and all students should be helped to meet the criteria.

Finally, Van Dyke returns to the impact of the curriculum, reprising some of the arguments discussed above. She is keen to stress at the end of the extract that she is not advocating abolishing parts of the curriculum or activities which some students find difficult, but that teachers (departments and institutions) should be monitoring the outcomes of their teaching and questioning whether discrimination might be the cause of differential performance.
References


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