



Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity



CREID BRIEFING 3

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION WORKFORCE

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Recent policy shifts have placed an emphasis on the mainstreaming of equality and human rights issues. Public and private sector organisations now have new duties, in place or planned, to ensure that they do not discriminate against their staff on six grounds: gender, race, disability, age, sexual orientation and religion/belief. Whilst the power to legislate on equal opportunities is reserved to the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament has the power to encourage equal opportunities and to impose duties on public bodies to ensure that they have due regard to equal opportunities in carrying out their function. This briefing summarises the key issues from a study which examined the way that FE colleges manage the implementation of equalities policies and the knowledge and awareness of these policies amongst staff.

Main findings

- The gender balance among teaching staff, especially in senior management, is skewed towards men; however, there has been an increase in women managers since incorporation. There is gender stereotyping in support posts as technical staff are mainly male and clerical and administrative are female.
- Equality policies are well established in Scottish colleges and legislation has provided an impetus for their development.
- It was evident from all the sources that different weight was given to the different strands. Age, religion/belief and sexual orientation were generally less well covered by policy. Sexual orientation was clearly seen as sensitive and part of a person's private rather than public life. Both religion/belief and sexuality tended to be interpreted in individualistic rather than social terms. This suggests that raising staff awareness in these two areas is likely to be of great importance.
- Monitoring of staff characteristics in relation to gender, race, disability and age was fairly routine in most colleges but this was not the case with the other strands. There was only limited action planning and target setting in relation to equal opportunities and staff had little awareness of how the data gathered was used.
- Although efforts were made to inform staff of college equality policies few staff appeared actively engaged in contributing to future policy development. Staff were generally positive about equalities issues and the way their college dealt with them; however, other areas of work were seen as higher priority. Equality issues were also seen by some as more to do with students than staff.
- There was a degree of complacency reflected in staff views. The majority of staff interviewed were white, and in the case of academics and managers, in middle class occupations. They generally felt comfortable that the equalities agenda was being adequately addressed, however, examples given in relation to disability focused on physical disability and access issues. In relation to religion staff mentioned provision for those of a particular religious belief and did not engage with wider issues.
- The data suggested a tension between the task of promoting equalities and managerialism. The colleges were responding to the need to develop policy but there seemed to be limited engagement by staff and possibly reluctance to allow staff to control the equalities agenda. It was therefore not clear the extent that policy actually translated into practice.

Background

The new equalities policies, legislation and regulation stemming from the European Union, the UK Government and the Scottish Executive will require FE colleges to monitor and review their equality activities much more closely than in the past. They will be expected to identify the equality goals they wish to pursue, the progress they are making and the barriers which remain. At the moment, little is known about the extent and comparability of monitoring activities in colleges, and gathering data in relation to sensitive areas such as sexual orientation and religion/belief is moving into relatively uncharted territory (see McLean and O'Connor (2003) and McManus (2003). Furthermore, the extent to which monitoring and target setting has a negative impact, encouraging minimal compliance, is currently under discussion (Mackay and Bilton, 2000).

Little research has been conducted on equality issues in Scottish colleges (see Turner et al, 1996 for empirical research on gender issues in FE management). This study, commissioned by the Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) and funded by the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) investigated how FE colleges currently monitor equality in relation to staff employment and the uses to which these data are being put. It also examined the knowledge and awareness of equal opportunities policies and practices amongst FE staff.

The Aims of the Study

The main aims of the study were to:

- assemble a national picture regarding (a) the collection of equalities data by Scotland's colleges and (b) the use of equalities data by Scotland's colleges; and
- ascertain, from a sample of colleges, staff knowledge and understanding of equalities legislation and their views on the effectiveness of college equalities policies and practices.

Research Methods

The study used four different approaches. The UK academic and policy literature was reviewed focusing on equal opportunities in the workplace with particular reference to that relevant to further education. A questionnaire survey was developed and sent to all colleges, 34 were returned representing a response rate of 75%. The survey examined the systems used to gather and analyse equalities data and what type of equalities data was currently gathered. It also asked for information about policies in relation to equal opportunities. In addition, mini case studies were carried out with staff from five colleges of different sizes and geographic locations. In each college, up to eight interviews/focus groups were conducted. The sample comprised of senior managers, academic and support staff including trade union representatives. There were also a small number of focus group interviews with SFEU communities of practice groups.

Findings

The policy and literature review showed that in Scottish FE colleges men still outnumber women among teaching staff, especially at senior management level. There is evidence for gender stereotyping in support roles as men are more likely to occupy technical roles with more women in clerical and administrative roles. The gender balance at senior management level is changing with an increasing number of women in senior management and this is particularly evident since incorporation. There is a considerable body of literature in relation to the experience of women in FE, especially as managers. Some writers suggest that there is tension between managerialist management values and women's preferred style of managing (Mahoney, 2000) though this was not accepted by all (Hughes, 2000; Prichard & Deem, 1999). It was clear that there was very limited research in FE colleges on equal

opportunities for BME staff and virtually none in relation to disability, age and religion/belief.

The questionnaire survey and the case studies indicated that all the colleges had EO policies and the majority of colleges had written policies covering race, disability and gender; however there was less evidence and/or lack of policies in relation to age, sexual orientation and religion and belief. Policy was normally developed by HR staff and/or the internal EO committee. Staff were generally aware that these policies existed but there was limited evidence for wider staff involvement in the development of policy and there was also a sense that engagement with equal opportunities issues was not top priority for staff in general.

Staff were usually informed about the EO policy as part of the induction process and training events. Most colleges made the policy available on the web and/or staff handbook. Staff who were interviewed commented favourably on the quality of the training but noted that attendance was often poor.

There was some monitoring of staff characteristics in relation to all the strands apart from sexual orientation and religion/belief. This monitoring generally occurred at the stage of recruitment. The equal opportunities data was used by HR managers when writing reports and, to some extent, to inform policy. Less than half of the colleges used the data when they were setting targets.

There was some evidence in some of the colleges that the gender imbalance at senior management level was changing though not in all and there was limited evidence for BME staff in promoted posts. This was considered problematic by many though some suggested that this was no cause for concern. Most felt that religion/belief and disability were effectively catered for but there was a sense that both of these were viewed narrowly. For example, provision of a prayer room was seen as sufficient to demonstrate EO in relation to religion. In relation to disability the emphasis was on access issues for physically disabled staff.

Three quarters of the colleges have an action plan and/or an employee complaints procedure with very few reporting any complaints from staff in relation to EO. These complaints referred only to gender, disability or race and were normally handled informally and internally. Interviewees felt that they knew who to contact in the event of a complaint but there were differing opinions about the fairness of complaints procedures that were in place. There was also some disquiet amongst some about the procedures in place for promotion though the recruitment process was seen as fair. There was a suggestion from staff that the people needed to be made to feel more comfortable about making a complaint.

HR managers indicated that they were unsure about how to communicate with staff about equalities policies, especially in relation to sensitive areas such as sexual orientation and religion/belief. Staff at all levels recognised that there were varying levels of acceptance of equal opportunities issues and that it was not a priority for many. Interviewees also felt that there was a need for further training and awareness raising in relation to EO issues.

Future direction for the equalities agenda

Whilst colleges are clearly making progress in developing the equalities agenda there the data from this study suggests:

- a need for continued development and updating of policies and incorporation of the new equalities strands
- further awareness raising and training in relation to all aspects of equalities to ensure that policies are translated into practice and that all college staff and students are aware of their rights as well as their responsibilities

· more effective monitoring and target setting, especially in relation to ethnic minority staff

References

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