

**A review of equality and diversity practice within a
sample group of grade 1 Further Education Colleges**

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Summary

The Research Centre conducted a study reviewing the implementation and maintenance of the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) Single Equality Scheme (SES). The SES was intended to replace individual equality schemes at the institutional scale. The study was charged with finding examples of best practice pertaining to SES implementation, the most effective equality and diversity (E&D) committee structures, how diversity was incorporated within membership, which often reflected community profiles. Interviews were conducted with staff from Ofsted Grade 1 selected colleges. Analysis of data were to result in recommendations for the establishment of a City College Norwich equality and diversity facilitation group.

The study recorded that equality and diversity (E&D) facilitation groups should reflect the ethnic and cultural composition of both the college and its local community. Existing college equality and diversity staff development programmes, that supported individual areas (such as race, gender and disability), should be developed and expanded further and be an ongoing process that involved all college personnel. Where existing good practices were observed, by amalgamating individual E&D practices into one would allow a 'levelling up' in performance across all schemes within a college. This, potentially, raises the awareness and treatment of all equality and diversity issues as important and, thus, in turn, engenders a higher priority for the promotion of equality and diversity across all areas. An important factor in successful practice was the inclusion of local community groups and forums that provided specialist knowledge, experience and support, whilst ensuring credibility to college practices among peers. Tasks performed by outside agencies included undertaking observations of practices/activities and feeding back comments to a main equality and diversity group. Also using peer review/referencing to work alongside partner institutions in the local area potentially permitted the facilitation and exchange of knowledge and expertise.

Institutions reviewed within the study stated that the responsibilities of equality and diversity were undertaken by staff with dedicated roles, not simply incorporated into departmental areas. Furthermore, the direct involvement of the principal raised the awareness/profile and effectiveness of equality and diversity issues within a college. To facilitate information flow, dialogue and opinion, direct lines of communication to the principal were available for all staff involved with equality and diversity. Communications were further enhanced by collaboration between sub-groups, and regular dialogue with learner groups, external community groups and partner colleges, which required time being made available for students and staff to attend meetings and focus groups respectively.

1. Introduction

In the UK, society continues to become increasingly multifaceted and varied, ethnic diversity increases (ONS, 2008) and people live longer, while “new patterns of migration have affected previously homogenous communities” (Improvement and Development Agency, 2008). Recent equality and diversity legislation has opposed much intolerance and prejudice, affording opportunity to challenge discrimination. Race equality schemes, gender equality schemes and disability equality schemes have been established to help ensure that everyone has an equal chance in life, and have assisted organisations in their response to the diverse needs of the communities they serve. The Equality and Diversity Forum (EDF) have stated:

“The philosophy that underpins change should be one that celebrates Britain's diversity and recognises the contributions that different groups within Britain make. Discrimination needs to be tackled and equality promoted so that everyone can fulfil their potential and make full contributions to our society”.

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) view equality and diversity as represented by two discrete themes:

“Equality may also be referred to as ‘equal opportunities’ ... Equal opportunities legislation looks to remove the barriers that prevent(s) ... groups from participating fully in society ... [while] Diversity is about individuals rather than groups. It's about valuing the unique skills, experiences and perspectives of every individual, finding ways to bring the best out of every employee” (LSC, 2006, p.3).

The LSC's Single Equality Scheme (SES) provided guidance for institutions to meet their responsibilities and requirements in producing equality schemes covering race, gender and disability, but also “takes account of employment equality legislation relating to religion or belief, sexual orientation and age...” (LSC, 2007, p35). The SES proposed to incorporate the LSC's Race Equality Scheme (2005–2008), Disability Equality Scheme (effective from 4 December 2006), and Gender Equality Scheme (effective from 30 April 2007) and use the similarities between these three individual components to address consistencies whilst ensuring that the unique conditions for each scheme and associated obligations were met.

“The Scheme describes in a single document how the LSC will fulfil its statutory duties to promote equality of opportunity and avoid discrimination, demonstrating its commitment to placing the promotion of equality and diversity at the centre of every aspect of its work. It is intended to meet the requirements for a race equality, disability equality and gender equality scheme and to implement these in an

inclusive way which takes account of religion and/or belief, sexual orientation and age” (LSC, 2007, p. 7).

City College Norwich (CCN) was seeking to establish a Single Equality Scheme (SES) to ensure the college remained inclusive and accessible to all. Part of the process was to facilitate the supporting of “all LSC funded learning providers in embedding good practice in equality and diversity” (LSC, 2008a, p.2). In order to ensure that CCN were implementing the most effective equality and diversity committee structure and appropriate levels of diversity to reflect community profile, the Research Centre was commissioned to review existing practices employed within other Further Education Colleges (FECs). To ensure equality and diversity was reflected accurately necessitates openness on the part of the declaration by individuals. However, the declaration of disabilities and conditions has been shown previously to be difficult (Paradise, 2007; Smith, 2007). Through the dissemination of this report’s findings, CCN also aimed to help “provide in depth guidance and support to all LSC supported learning providers to enable them to respond to the requirements of the LSC’s Single Equality Scheme” (LSC, 2008a, p.2). The collection and analysis of data were to provide recommendations to CCN staff responsible for the establishment of an equality and diversity facilitation group, which embedded examples of best practice in relation to SES practice whilst meeting the needs and aspirations of the organisation. The report has been structured in to the following themes: methodology, thematic analysis of main trends, and lastly, a discussion section pertaining to examples of best practice recorded in participating institutions.

2. Methodology

The Research Centre was requested to undertake a short term project that collected information on the strategies and practices used by Further Education Colleges (FECs) by which they operated their equality and diversity facilitation groups. Whilst identifying existing practices the Research Centre attempted to evaluate the recorded structures and strategies, highlighting any examples of best practice.

The research was conducted using firstly a desk based study to identify a selection of Ofsted Grade 1 rated (in the categories of Leadership and Management and/or Equality and Diversity) FECs. From these, five were approached to confirm their

willingness to take part in the study and to provide the name/s of those related to the facilitation groups' maintenance within each college.

The project employed qualitative research methods, with semi-structured, telephone interviews conducted with college personnel who were responsible for these groups. Data collected from these interviews supported data collected from a review of literature (college and grey or published literature) in providing details on the structures and strategies used to implement either SES or equality and diversity facilitation groups. The intention was to detail the operational strategies and structures used in the implementation of their SES and/or equality and diversity facilitation group.

South Leicestershire College (Leicestershire), West Thames College (Middlesex), College of West Anglia (Norfolk), North East Worcestershire College (Worcestershire) and Liverpool Community College (Lancashire) agreed to take part in the project (Table 1). Telephone interviews were conducted between May and June 2008. In order to protect the anonymity of the institutions and interviewees, statements, and discussions will be referred to as interviewee 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, using a random order.

Data collected included:

- Institutional SES and/or equality and diversity documentation and related literature from appropriate organisations;
- Ofsted reports pertaining to the participating institutions;
- The LSC's Single Equality Scheme handbook;
- Contextual issues relevant to the project;
- Regional briefing documentation;
- Individual institution equality and diversity schemes (SES if in place, individual schemes if not).
- Semi-structured interviews with institutions' key stakeholders, such as vice-principal responsible for equality and diversity, equality and diversity manager, disability equality manager.

2.1 Interviews

The colleges selected for inclusion in this project either had a SES in place (or near to completion), and/or had been rated grade 1 by Ofsted (either in the category of

Leadership and Management, or Equality and Diversity, if separated). Specific personnel responsible for equality and diversity were contacted during May 2008 and were asked to partake in a telephone interview. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour, and were digitally recorded in full. From these recordings hardcopy transcripts recorded specific and relevant data for analysis and discussion.

Table 1: Background information relating to the Further Education institutions participating within this project

College	Ofsted Grade (L & M or E & D)	Example of Ofsted Comment	Single Equality Scheme in place	College Equality and Diversity Aims
South Leicestershire College	1	<i>'The promotion of equal opportunities is outstanding and is given a very high priority in the day-to-day life of the college. Learners participate fully in activities to promote diversity'</i> (Ofsted, 2007, p.12)	In progress	Equality of opportunity is at the centre of all aspects of college life, within a supportive atmosphere for disclosure and consequent support.
West Thames College	1	<i>'The college's promotion of equality of opportunity is outstanding and its values and commitment are demonstrated extremely well through the actions of staff'</i> (Ofsted, 2007, p.11)	No	West Thames College is committed to providing equal access to its education and training services and will make every reasonable effort to provide an environment in which everyone, regardless of their background, can study and work to the best of their ability.
College of West Anglia	1	<i>'Equality of opportunity is good ... promotion of equal opportunities and diversity is good'</i> (Ofsted, 2007, p.11)	Yes	The College of West Anglia is committed to an inclusive approach for all students, staff and members of the community ... our core mission of excellence and particular values of student focus and maximising the achievement of all.
North East Worcestershire College	1	<i>'There is good promotion of equal opportunities. Learners in all groups achieve at least as well, and in many cases better, than the overall college achievement'</i> (Ofsted, 2006, p.11)	Yes	North East Worcestershire College will encourage and support students and staff to challenge prejudice, stereotyping and intolerance, and will manage its policies, procedures and environment in ways that will seek to maintain every individual's dignity and rights.
Liverpool Community College	Outstanding	<i>'The college promotes equal opportunities and access to education for students from under-represented groups actively'</i> (Ofsted, 2005, p.7)	Yes	Promoting equality of opportunity between diverse groups of people. Eliminating unlawful discrimination. Promoting positive attitudes towards people. Encouraging participation by people from all areas of public life.

2.2 Research ethics

The Research Centre conformed to the latest ethical guidelines of City College Norwich. All data was held in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998) and any data included in the project report was anonymised and/or aggregated before presentation. Interviewees were asked for their informed consent before interviews took place, and only interviewed if consent had been given. The participants had the right to withdraw at any time without prejudice. References made regarding sensitive information, such as the content of particular schemes, have been made anonymously to ensure confidentiality for all participants.

3. Results

The following presents the main themes that were raised from the interviews conducted, and reports on key observations relating to the SES and/or equality and diversity facilitation group operating at each institution.

3.1 The aims, objectives and goals of SES or equivalent group

The interviewees were asked about the details relating to the original aims of their institution's SES, if implemented, and/or their equality and diversity, or similar, facilitation group/s. Four of the participating colleges had recently, or were close to, implemented a SES. The reasons given for their decision to implement a SES included:

"A single equality scheme should ensure that staff development across all areas is equal. ... I suspect that that is the way legislation is going to go anyway" (interviewee 2).

"It should enable best practice from the previous schemes to be drawn together" (interviewee 3).

"Levelling up rather than down and to fulfil legal requirements ... requirements for disability are more rigorous than for gender or race" (interviewee 4).

"We intended to bring all equalities and inclusion duties and policy into one scheme; this would be done with full involvement of staff and learners" (interviewee 5).

However, one interviewee argued that existing individual schemes were already comprehensive and thorough, negating the need for a SES at that moment in time:

"I'm sure we will get round to doing one at some point but we have quite detailed equality schemes ... Time is better spent making the existing"

schemes as good as possible rather than putting the three documents into one” (interviewee 1).

Some institution’s aims encompassed an intention to send a clear message to all regarding the significance they were placing on equality and diversity issues. For instance, the promotion of advisory groups and the disability and race managers as important and influential through regular communication with senior management:

“We show that we mean business and they [the disability and race managers] can report directly to the principal on the successes and frustrations they are having with their job” (interviewee 1).

Other sub-groups had been charged with advising on race, ethnicity and faith, with a focus on shaping policies and practice. Similar aims for promoting channels of communication were echoed in other comments with the anticipation that, as part of a SES, equality and diversity meetings would include all stakeholders rather than, for example, just those concerned with disability. Therefore, improving collaboration between all groups involved, such as:

“The facilitation groups have been set up for staff and student liaison. All areas of curriculum and support are represented” (interviewee 5).

The goal of saving time was a theme highlighted by three interviewees. It was expected that, under SES, a single action plan rather than individual ones would be time effective and facilitate a holistic approach. Furthermore, it was noted that individual action plans could be repetitive with much overlap in many areas, particularly in respect of data gathering and report writing. Therefore, in pursuit of simplification, a SES was deemed favourable.

Although all interviewees clearly articulated the reasoning behind the equality and diversity aims and objectives, one participant questioned the necessity for an individual focus on equality and diversity goals, stating that:

“If a college is a really, really good college at teaching, learning and support, and truly differentiates and truly personalises everything it does, then you will address equal opportunities through that” (interviewee 4).

3.2 Implementation and participation

All of the contributing institutions appeared to have had some type of equality and diversity group in existence for a number of years, although not necessarily in the form that functioned at the current time. The interviewees were questioned as to the implementation methods of both the SES and any equality and diversity groups, and

relevant recent changes. The primary driving force in the implementation process at one college was the need for knowledge and information to disseminate into curriculum programmes. Therefore, college representatives approached appropriate external groups and local events had been utilised as a means of engaging cooperation and participation. For example, the race equality council had been invited to collaborate with an advisory body and the Gurdwara had been contacted during the implementation of a community group. The interviewee explained:

“Once you arrive at a critical mass it builds up by itself and gathers momentum. People get to hear of the group and want to take part because of their interests” (interviewee 1).

It was acknowledged that this was rather an ad hoc method of implementing equality and diversity groups, but recognised that these informal processes had resulted in the local community becoming involved in college issues. Further examples relating to the implementation process embraced the inclusion of the disability steering group, advanced lecturers, union representatives for disability and other interested staff and learners in setting up single equality schemes and/or equality and diversity facilitation groups. Although little involvement from the local community had been sought in some cases, one interviewee explained that the implementation of the SES was viewed as a “journey, it’s not finished, we have started the process and ongoing consultation” (interviewee 2).

It was noted that all of the colleges involved in this research worked in partnership with a variety of personnel on equality and diversity issues. In some cases, external collaboration was sought, while other institutions confined their associations in-house, to internal staff and learner involvement. All of the interviewees explained that their institutions had some form of group to oversee equality and diversity issues. One such group, the “standard equality group”, was chaired by the vice-principal and attended by managers with particular roles in equality and individuals who considered themselves as having made specific contributions toward equality and diversity issues (interviewee 1). Its ‘executive group’ was “empowered to make fairly strong recommendations” and was timetabled into a college programme of meetings (interviewee 1). Structurally, above the executive group was a ‘strategic equality group’, which was chaired by the principal and comprised of the vice principal, disability support manager and manager responsible for race. This arrangement had been deliberately adopted to promote the involvement of senior management, particularly the principal:

“Our principal takes an exceptionally keen interest in equality. She is able to speak directly to the lead people rather than having to go through other managers” (interviewee 1).

At another institution, it was explained that equality and diversity issues were under the overall control of the ‘equality management group’ (interviewee 2). This group fed directly into the college academic board and was deemed as the primary management group for equality within the college. Chaired by the vice-principal, the group was described as a “driving force” behind equality and diversity decision-making (interviewee 2). It consisted of heads of faculty and senior managers, and was empowered to make recommendations in respect of equality and diversity. Although it enlisted little external participation, there were plans to address this in the future (interviewee 2). Currently, franchised partners, such as Mencap and the Institute for the Blind, delivered courses on behalf of the college, which covered aspects of equality and diversity.

Another institution rested overall equality and diversity control under the auspices of an ‘equality and diversity committee’, which had a high profile across the college and meetings once a term (interviewee 3). It was stated that:

“There is mandatory attendance from every department at the equality and diversity committee ... if they can’t come it’s mandatory that they have to send someone else from the department” (interviewee 3).

The nominated representatives were charged with disseminating items from the equality and diversity committee within their own department’s team meetings and reporting back on equality and diversity issues. In addition to the main equality and diversity committee, there were specific, smaller stakeholder groups and the college promoted focus groups for specific issues, such as ethnicity, race and disability (interviewee 3).

A further example of a primary equality and diversity group was an ‘equal opportunities committee’. Replacing three, smaller sub-groups (race, ethnicity and gender), the committee comprised of 20 volunteer staff and student representatives, aimed at representing diversity from across the college as best as possible. It met once every half term to discuss equality and diversity issues.

As well as these main groups, all of the institutions had various proactive sub-groups. One of the interviewees described their highly influential ‘community advisory group’,

which had been created by the principal. It consisted of representatives from outside the college and focused, primarily, on race, religion and ethnicity. Members included the chief executive from the local race equality council, a lead local authority inspector on race equality, the equality advisor from the primary health care trust, a representative from Gurdwara, a black fire fighter, the vice principal, the principal, a member of the student union and a member of staff working on race issues. In general, the individuals involved had expertise in issues of race and ethnicity. This group had become a formal sub-committee of the corporation, meeting once or twice a term with membership on the governing body (interviewee 1). The power and potential of the group was enthusiastically recounted, and it was stated that:

“Discussion is very animated and strong views expressed ... it is a free forum where people say what they want to say” (interviewee 1).

Further illustrations of groups recorded representing equality and diversity included a black staff group, a disability steering group, a diversity steering group and a disability forum, headed by a disability support manager. The latter example was essentially a student body meeting eight or nine times a year that provided valuable assistance and a range of opinions for the disability support manager. Operating autonomously, the black staff group had been set up and was facilitated by a principal and vice-principal with the aim of communicating ideas and views to the senior management level.

Regarding sub-groupings, it was detailed by an interviewee that although the college did have some staff and learner groups, they would like to encourage the formation of more. However, it was clarified that “we are not trying to coerce people to form groups, we are trying to facilitate the process” (interviewee 2).

3.3 Training

The theme of training, in respect to equality and diversity issues, was a topic addressed by all the interviewees from each college. In most cases, training was compulsory for all staff, such as during induction programmes, or was being planned to be compulsory:

“Further staff development is planned and will be mandatory.” (interviewee 5).

In one instance, it was explained that a mandatory, three hour training session operated for all staff in conjunction with a two day, equality training programme for

management. Training on managing disability was also given in curriculum areas, whilst a programme had been designed to raise cultural awareness among staff generally across the college. It was also stated that the “key agents are the managers ... we then try to drill it down to all members of staff” (interviewee 1). Moreover, the principal and vice-principal were both involved and trained as mentors under Black Leadership Initiative run by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (2004) and, thus, were very aware of the issues.

Other references to training tended to be on the theme of disability. One interviewee detailed how their equality management group, in collaboration with union involvement, organised training programmes for all staff. Reference was also made to the use of outside agencies in training provision. For example, Mencap recently provided training around mental health issues. Similarly, other planned events included specific programmes on race awareness and understanding disabilities, such as dyslexia and autism, which were intended for all the college’s personnel.

3.4 Communication

Within all the institutions, the interviewees considered that the process of communication was vital in the dissemination of information, canvassing of opinion and implementation of procedure. One interviewee clarified quite clearly how this operated with respect to equality and diversity issues. It was expected that the college executive equality group would report directly to the principal, thus allowing direct contact with the key people. The interviewee expanded on the importance of this when stating:

“We make sure that they ... [equality and diversity managers] ... have a really solid line of communication to the principal, that what they want to say doesn’t get watered down in the minutes of committees, they explain how things are going well and also areas of the college where their work has been frustrated ... this gives a regular chance to talk. The principal might advise on how to overcome problems or say ‘this is something I need to deal with’” (interviewee 1).

Likewise, a further interviewee described how the process of communication between the main equality and diversity group and faculty areas was facilitated by the Head of Department attending important meetings. This resulted in liaisons and exchanges of ideas occurring directly between the key individuals and, therefore, information was distributed immediately to team members.

In order to ensure contact and communication between sub-groups, another interviewee detailed how “existing groups have representation on the diversity group” (interviewee 2). Both the disability and diversity steering groups had common members, flexible agendas and a positive two-way channel of communication. In this institution, “ongoing dialogue” between key partners and local community groups was promoted, and the college was aware that they had to “adapt, change and react” to foster progression (interviewee 2). The interviewee related a good level of discourse between franchised partners and also proactive communication with associate colleges through the peer review system; “we work with partner groups to take best practice from each area” (interviewee 2).

Interviewees also focussed on lines of communication between student bodies and other equality and diversity groups. In some cases, class representatives nominated members to sit on the college council, so facilitating a “student voice mechanism” (interviewee 3). Other Further Education Colleges were ensured regular attendance by the principal and vice-principal on student groupings. Further illustrations of attempts to improve communication on equality and diversity issues included surveys for staff and students to ascertain awareness, college magazines, posters, diversity days/weeks, college intranet notices and announcements, workshops and training days. For example, it was stated that:

“At present, communication is quite formal and takes the form of minutes and briefings. This will be changed next year. We are looking at a ‘you said – we did board’, video box, moodle, newsletters and so on”
(interviewee 5).

3.5 Impact and successes

As part of the interview process, interviewees were asked for their perceptions regarding the impact and effectiveness of either their college’s SES or equivalent equality and diversity facilitation group. The outcome of equality and diversity being afforded a high profile across the college was a common impact, primarily endorsed by the proactive involvement of the principal (interviewees 1, 2, 4, 5). Running in parallel to this was good disability awareness amongst staff and support for learners, achieved mainly through the appointment of a dedicated disability manager (interviewees 1, 2, 4):

“Support for disabled students used to be part of someone’s job but it is now a job in its own right, which has had huge dividends” (interviewee 1).

The successful endorsement of policies and the provision of confidence in areas that the college was not knowledgeable were identified in other instances. For example, the formulation of a policy on prayer, use of the veil, improving the percentage of staff from black and other minority ethnicities. It was explained how a community advisory group had been instrumental in pushing the college for information, resulting in a:

“Powerful way of helping us to move forward ... they help set the vision and hold us to account ... they come from a different angle and say why can’t you do that and push us outside of our comfort zone” (interviewee 1).

The community and advisory group had been successful in ensuring that the college was able to attain a sound knowledge base on equality and diversity themes from outside of the organisation.

Other examples of impact and apparent success articulated by the interviewees included involvement of black staff in national leadership programmes, enabling staff to voice grievances in a non-threatening environment as “part of a wider group where you can raise collective issues” (interviewee 1), successful collaboration with partner institutions on raising equality and diversity themes and the confidence and capacity of student groups in providing opinion and feedback on issues of equality and diversity. One interviewee explained that class representatives liaised with equality and diversity groups to gather data and opinion and relate instructive information:

“Students agreed that they shouldn’t bully one another and they should respect different racial backgrounds ... the students wrote that in their words themselves and it became integrated into policies ... their words are up in every classroom” (interviewee 3).

While another interviewee described their equality and diversity group as a proactive body organising, for example, a staff development week encompassing lots of equal opportunities themes in the programme, with ideas having come from the equal opportunities committee:

“They do a lot of good stuff and have thrown themselves wholeheartedly into impact assessing policies and procedures and the single equality scheme” (interviewee 4).

3.6 Challenges

There were many positive aspects and experiences recounted by the interviewees, but there were also examples provided of challenges and difficulties. One interviewee noted that even with much focus on disability and the involvement of the principal,

there continued to be complaints from staff that they were not being treated fairly. It was suggested that, on occasions, “expectations do not always match experiences ... staff are sometimes told that there are experiences available but they are not facilitated in attending them or encouraged by their line managers” (interviewee 1).

Some interviewees commented that issues around race tended to dominate the agenda while other areas continued to require attention. However, in one case it was noted that although they did not have every equality and diversity area covered:

“We don’t want it to be a management led thing. Therefore, if there is no demand for it we don’t want to artificially create a group. I suppose we could argue that if it isn’t an issue for the college then it isn’t an issue. We are strong in disability but not as strong in the other areas yet ... I would like to see some more of these groups at the grass roots level” (interviewee 2).

One interviewee explained that they found it hard to get together disability focus groups or any groups on ethnic minority due to the college demographic composition. It was suggested that trying to encourage disclosure was challenging and, although they had encouraged students to contribute, the main equality and diversity committee continued to “look too white and too middle class” (interviewee 4). A common challenge centred on the issue of time, as observed by one interviewee:

“In the future, time will become an issue, time for people to attend as there is no extra time given to people to participate. It has to be voluntary, out of their time. We will try to facilitate but ...” (interviewee 3).

Similarly, the democratic process itself was seen as a problem by another interviewee:

“The problem with democracy is it is slow and this can be frustrating even though the involvement of other people is important and welcomed” (interviewee 2).

Alternatively, staffing was a difficulty experienced by another college with the loss of two influential members of staff, both of whom were very proactive in the area of diversity. This had affected a slowdown in progress, especially the organisation of training. Another issue highlighted by several interviewees involved the inclusion of student and/or external representation on equality and diversity groups. As one interviewee remarked:

“Some focus groups go really well while other ones, on different campuses, raise a number of issues to do with attendance from students or students not turning up. We may start to offer vouchers as an incentive” (interviewee 3).

Other general statements for challenges to the implementation of SES were cited by interviewees and included: 1/ the enabling of staff attendance on equality and diversity programmes, events and courses; 2/ ensuring equal focus on all of the individual equality and diversity themes/areas; 3/ facilitating time for staff to attend E&D meetings and the collation of all views from a range of sources; 4/ staff retention in equality and diversity areas; and finally, 5/ promoting student involvement in meetings, forums and focus groups.

3.7 Future Plans and Foci

To ensure that equality and diversity practices were relevant and efficient, many colleges facilitated the revisiting of policy on a regular basis. One interviewee explained that “we take them ... [policies] ... back to the group and let them rethink ... if they advise a different approach then we will take that on board” (interviewee 1). An outcome of this procedure had led one institution to form a group for ethnicity, as feedback had indicated that “ethnic student perceptions were lower than white student perceptions” (interviewee 3).

All interviewees cited several similar examples of future plans that were to be installed within their colleges. These included: 1/ completion of externally arranged interviews with staff to find out their perceptions; 2/ additional focus on issues of sexuality; 3/ facilitation of declared disability from all college sectors; and 4/ a diversity week every year to “celebrate diversity across all areas” (interviewee 2 only).

4. Discussion

The following were the main recommendations and/or examples of best practice that were cited by the interviews during this study. They started with the equality and diversity make-up of the facilitation group, which should reflect the composition of both the college and the community within which it was located to the best of its ability. This would be improved by the inclusion of representation by relevant, local groups on forums and/or facilitation groups to provide an opportunity to improve the knowledge base within the college and, thus, the foundations upon which such equality and diversity schemes were based. The involvement of relevant outside agencies also enables the acquisition and continued knowledge transfer of up-to-

date information, ensuring the full meeting of statutory requirements, and support, whilst also providing 'credibility' to any implemented scheme. Outside agencies could also be incorporated within reviews and utilised/contracted to undertake observations and feedback comments to the main SES group. Using peer review/referencing to work alongside partner institutions located within the area would also facilitate the exchange of knowledge and expertise.

The equality and diversity staff development programmes, which support the individual areas (race, gender, disability), should be developed and expanded in an ongoing process that involved all college personnel to foster positive principles and practice. Also, through the amalgamation of different schemes into one, areas and processes of best practice recorded in any individual scheme, should be used to facilitate a 'levelling up' in performance and practice across the board. This also aims to promote greater awareness for all issues pertaining to equality and diversity, which would be expected to, in turn, engender a higher priority for the promotion of equality and diversity across all areas.

Another factor that was perceived by the majority of interviewees as a major component in the successful implementation of a SES or equivalent facilitation group was the direct involvement of the college's principal and/or senior management. This raised both awareness and the profile of all equality and diversity issues. Similarly, the facilitation and flow of information, dialogue and opinion, was improved by having direct, two-way lines of communication with the college's principal, which should be available for all staff involved with equality and diversity areas. Communication channels could be further enhanced via the collaboration of relevant sub-groups and regular dialogue with learner groups, external community groups and partner colleges. Such actions require time to be made available for those participating, which includes staff and students, to attend any relevant meetings and/or focus groups.

Many of the interviewed individuals within this study were recorded stating that the roles and responsibilities for equality and diversity should be incorporated within dedicated roles, and not more simply assigned into the responsibilities of departmental areas generally. Similarly, the structure of the facilitation group should include faculty heads, the principal and/or senior management. The SES group or facilitation group should be able to respond to communications and flexible enough to adapt to changes in legislation or practice.

5. References

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