

Equal opportunities and the curriculum

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Introduction

Curriculum issues are important for the equal opportunities work of NATFHE in a number of ways:

- the curriculum affects our day-to-day working lives
- the curriculum may provide a space to promote equal opportunities, especially among our students
- validate the experiences of students for different groups
- changing the curriculum can contribute to changing the organisational culture
- the curriculum should recognise and validate the experiences of different groups in society, including respect for diversity in relation to age, disability, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

NATFHE as an organisation representing lecturers in further and higher education is both a trade union and a professional body. The equal opportunities work of the union necessarily covers both educational and trade union matters. Many members who are active on equality issues seek to promote equal opportunities both in their work as educators and as trade union representatives. The issue of curriculum change is one area in which equality activists can challenge stereotypes and promote greater understanding. Arguably it has been a relatively neglected part of the equal opportunities agenda of many universities and colleges, compared to access and recruitment of students or staffing policies, but it has a long term importance in respect of the educational experience of students and staff.

In this publication, material on curriculum issues has been prepared in the following four sections:

- 1 Equal opportunities and teaching content**
- 2 Equal opportunities and styles of teaching and learning**
- 3 Equal opportunities and assessment**
- 4 Equal opportunities and placements**

In each case the material raises a number of issues and questions about equal opportunities and the curriculum and then presents some case studies for discussion.

The case studies are not ones which necessarily have any 'right' or 'easy' answers. They have been developed from experiences of teaching in further and higher education and attempting to address some of the challenges of curriculum change. The case studies are designed to capture, in a moderately humorous way, some of the issues involved and to provide a starting point for discussion. When used for group exercises, participants can add material from their own experiences; in some instances the case studies outline a situation, but the reader is left to add further details and use the material in a creative way.

Section 1

Equal opportunities and teaching content

Auditing the curriculum

It can be a useful exercise to carry out an audit of the curriculum to see how much material covers equal opportunities. How much space is given to equality issues? Are equality issues taught in core units or are they only provided as options for those who are already interested in equal rights? An audit may reveal that very little is provided especially if considered as a percentage of overall provision. Auditing the curriculum is not easy because there may be both specialist units dealing with equality issues and sessions within other units.

The student experience

As the student population in adult, further and higher education becomes more diverse, students will increasingly expect and demand to see their experiences reflected in the content of the curriculum. Equal opportunities is not only about access, but about what we teach. This factor may be relevant to student success rates.

Abilism, ethnocentrism and (hetero-)sexism

In some instances oppression within the curriculum takes the form of ignoring whole groups within society; thus their culture, experience and history is ignored, implying that it is unimportant. This is the issue addressed by the question: "Did your education equip you to name six famous black people (who are not musicians or sportsmen/women)?"

Sometimes, however, discrimination in the curriculum occurs through presenting a group in a partial or stereotyped way. Thus if the experience of black people is studied only through the perspective of the sociology of race relations, students may obtain a one-sided picture of black people as victims. Black students on social science courses have rightly complained that they feel that black people are presented always as either immigrants, criminals or as mentally ill and that this selective presentation both misrepresents the black experience and undermines their position as students. Similarly teaching on disability has often presented disabled people as a social problem.

Humanities, social sciences and engineering

Often in the humanities and social sciences variables such as gender and ethnicity occur in the material that is being taught, eg comparisons of male and female orientations to work, rates of unemployment by ethnic origin etc. Thus teaching staff need to address these issues to some degree in order to teach their subject adequately. While the degree of integration is uneven (for example, some social policy experts still discuss poverty without mentioning its gendered nature), the teaching of humanities and social sciences has been influenced by feminism and by anti-racist perspectives and is coming to terms with disabled and lesbian and gay perspectives. But what does all this have to do with engineers? Often discussion about transforming the curriculum is seen as all very well for people who teach English literature and sociology, but not relevant to the 'hard' sciences. Here there is a reluctance to consider that the nature of the subject may be in any way gendered or the product of a particular culture.

Sally Hacker's work on engineering provides a good study of the gender culture surrounding engineering (Hacker 1989). She describes it as 'clean, hard, simple and elegant', unlike the soft and fuzzy social sciences. Engineering provided clear answers divorced from the natural world. Hacker also reports that when she started studying engineering, she found fewer demands were made on her time than when she was just working as a sociology lecturer. The importance of doing calculus or finishing problem sets was accepted immediately as taking priority over other work.

Similarly, Kim Thomas, in a comparative study of the educational experience of English and physics students, explores how academic subjects become gendered and how gender stereotypes and academic cultures operate to maintain a belief in male superiority (Thomas 1990). Thus subjects taught and studied by men are believed to be harder and more important than subjects studied predominantly by women.

The right professional attitude

In some subject areas, such as social work, the process of professional socialisation may require students to engage with issues of equal opportunities. Some professional bodies set high standards of conduct in relation to equality issues and require universities and colleges to devote space in the curriculum to equal opportunities.

For example, trainee social workers need to develop an understanding of when equal opportunities is about treating everyone the same and when it is about respecting difference. Where a professional body has identified equality awareness as important for professional development and qualification, students will be challenged to consider issues of disability, gender, race and sexuality both in general and in terms of how they impact upon professional practice. In some areas

of professional education, there is thus both a high degree of sensitivity towards these issues on the part of both students and staff, and an understanding of the ever unfolding nature of equal opportunities. Some other professional bodies, however, have far more limited consciousness of equal opportunities.

Academic freedom

Teaching about equal opportunities raises issues of academic freedom for students as well as staff in a number of ways (Lawrence 1993). The debates about 'political correctness' have often been used to stifle curriculum change and to restrict the small advances in changing the curriculum which radical social movements have achieved. Those who wish to transform the curriculum need to reject the charge of political correctness, to argue that it is important that language is inclusive and non-discriminatory and that the curriculum needs to be expanded to include the perspectives of groups who have hitherto been marginalised or excluded. The defence of academic freedom actually includes defending the right of teachers to teach from black and anti-racist, disabled, feminist and lesbian and gay perspectives, and the right of students to encounter these perspectives in the course of their studies.

Increased paperwork for lecturers has also militated against the development of equal opportunities in teaching and course content.

The importance of language

The curriculum is delivered to students largely through the medium of words. The extent to which the words we choose to use influence our students' perception of the world, themselves and their value within the world cannot be over-emphasized. The anti-political correctness bandwagon has succeeded to some extent in undermining the seriousness of this issue, but as educators we should not be embarrassed about exercising professional care and sensitivity about our choice of words. The aim should be to use inclusive language so that no students in the group feel they are undervalued or ignored. An obvious example is the regular use of the masculine pronoun to cover both men and women. The cumulative effect of this is to make women feel their existence is ignored. Care should be taken that the choice of words should not give the impression that the world is made up entirely of white, male, able-bodied heterosexuals. Further examples of inclusive language can be found in NATFHE's *An Equal Opportunities Guide to Language*.

The process of curriculum change

Transforming the curriculum takes decades and involves a number of processes. Within Women's Studies a model of curriculum change has been developed by Gerda Lerner and elaborated by others, including Peggy McIntosh, Marilyn Schuster and Susan van Dyne (Schuster and van Dyne 1985). In the first stage of

this model there is a recognition of the invisibility of women in the curriculum, an acknowledgement that women are missing from the picture. The second stage involves a search for the missing women who are 'hidden from history' At this stage much feminist research involves rescuing women from obscurity, discovering the work of women writers and identifying women's contribution to society. Thus the focus is on compensating for past neglect and affirming the value of women's work and worth in many spheres. Women are thus added in to the existing corpus of knowledge.

In the next stages, however, it is recognised that women (over half of humanity) cannot be added into the picture, without changing it overall. Thus stage three involves a focus on inequality and oppression, seeking to understand their causes. In stage four there is a move towards studying women on their own terms, without always referring to a male norm for purposes of comparison, focusing more on the validity of women's experience. In stage five, women's studies poses a challenge to the male definition of academic disciplines and in stage six a transformed and balanced curriculum has been achieved. It is not suggested that stage six has yet been achieved.

It is interesting to note that women are tending to adopt the male norm of working patterns (see stage 4 above) as they become 'successful'. Far from 'having it all', women continue to have to choose between family and work to the extent that child-bearing and rearing is put off, and perhaps continues to be undervalued as a role in society. Both FE and HE could challenge this as there is perhaps more scope to change working patterns, particularly as courses often have to be fitted around the customer/student. For example, most FE institutions have three learning sessions: morning, afternoon and evening. Greater use of job-sharing, flexitime, working from home with the use of technology etc, could enable both men and women in F/HE institutions to participate in childcare/eldercare and work in a more balanced way. Too many lecturers work 60-70 hours a week and are considered not to be working unless actually on site, which hardly lends itself to a balanced life style of efficiency.

Honouring the social movements

When teaching about equality issues, it is important that the contribution of social movements, such as the civil rights movement and the women's liberation movement, is acknowledged. These movements developed the concepts and theories which provided different perspectives on the lives of black people, disabled people, lesbians and gay men and women. Often in the academic world the contribution of social movements to social theory is not recognised; there may not be an identifiable author of a particular concept and it was not written up in an article in a refereed journal which was entered for the research assessment exercise. Nonetheless the decision by various psychological societies and the World Health Organisation to stop classifying homosexuality as an illness

owes more to the Stonewall riots and the emergence on the streets of the gay liberation movement than it does to debates within medical and psychological circles. The social model of disability has been propagated more by disabled activists demonstrating outside inaccessible public buildings than by academic elaboration of the model, useful as that is. The link with the social movements needs to be maintained as the subjects which grew from them become established within universities and colleges.

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT The presence of women's studies in universities and colleges is just one aspect of how the women's liberation movement has changed society. Feminism as a social movement has a rich history of campaigning to improve the situation of women. It has achieved formal citizenship for women, including voting rights and the right to stand for political office, greater access to education and employment, birth control, many legal rights and numerous changes in social conventions. If we compare the situation of women a hundred years ago with that of women today, we can see that in some parts of the world there is much to celebrate in the achievements of the women's movement. The problem with our partial successes, however, is that many people think the struggle is over, or even that sex equality has 'gone too far' and that men now need affirmative action. This is not the case. In many countries women still face attacks on their citizenship rights, restrictions of taking paid employment and forms of violence, such as female genital mutilation. Even in countries where the law and the government support equality for women, often the operation of the labour market and social customs limit women's freedom.

In the case of feminism, many younger women students today may not see the necessity for an organised women's movement and may not identify themselves as feminists. This is partly because of the successes of the women's movement in the last two decades in changing the world for women. A number of formal barriers in respect of education and employment have been removed, together with some changes in social attitudes. Thus younger women have grown up to expect equal treatment in a way that older generations did not. This may lead them not to recognise the substantial inequalities that still exist between women and men in terms of earnings, employment and power. Such inequalities fall particularly on women without educational qualifications and on those in temporary and part-time employment. Moreover younger women may underestimate the barriers they will encounter as they try to live their lives on an equal basis with men. In this context, it is more necessary than ever to educate younger women about the history of the women's movement and to explain the necessity for organised feminism.

BLACK PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT(S) The North American civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s developed and popularised the concept of affirmative action, which has been used world wide to redress historical inequalities. The concept of affirmative action goes beyond creating formal equality at the point of selection

for education and employment. It recognises the need for compensatory action to remedy the effects of both historical and structural inequalities and disadvantage. All movements of oppressed and socially excluded groups owe a debt to the civil rights movement. Without it, we would not have equal opportunities policies in our schools, colleges, universities and workplaces.

The amount of space given in the curriculum to black people's history and social movements is very limited. Access to black studies, as a subject, does not often feature within formal educational settings. Thus what is taught about black people is often a one-sided focus on black people as victims of racism. The struggles by black people against racism are not featured prominently. Within Britain today many black and anti-racist organisations work to challenge racism and inequality. Their activities receive low press coverage except in publications aimed at ethnic minority audiences. Unless a conscious effort is made to incorporate knowledge of black people's movements in the curriculum, the vast majority of students and teachers are likely to remain unaware of what black people are doing to combat racism.

LESBIAN & GAY MOVEMENT Lesbian and gay studies are now taught in some universities. Thirty years ago the very words could not be spoken in public. Such a change in attitude has been brought about by a mass movement for lesbian and gay equality. The first step towards legal reform was the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 (which left much gay male sexuality criminal) but this was an establishment response to the blackmailing of homosexuals in high places. The Stonewall riots in New York in 1969 gave rise to the modern lesbian and gay movement which began in Britain with the Gay Liberation Front in 1970. GLF was a short-lived organisation but its basic premise that homosexuality was of equal validity to heterosexuality and that progress would be secured by campaigning for it. This is maintained today by Stonewall, the national civil rights group working for legal equality and social justice for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals.

Some gains have been secured, reflected in equal opportunities policies in many educational institutions which state that discrimination on grounds of sexuality will not be tolerated. However, widespread discrimination still remains and this is deeply rooted in popular prejudices. Reforms such as an equal age of consent and the repeal of Section 28 (which prevents local authorities from 'promoting homosexuality') are expected from the new Labour Government but many other legal inequalities remain. Winning general anti-discrimination legislation may depend on the incorporation of the European Convention of Human Rights and on the outcome of cases now before the European Court of Justice; this is the priority of the lesbian and gay movement today.

Meanwhile, although there is now a much greater acceptance of lesbians and gay men, the prejudice that homosexuality really is a second class status is preserved in the resistance to the notion that the acceptability of lesbian and gay sexuality

should be taught to children. So while convincing the education system that it should adopt such a philosophy is vital to breaking down prejudice, as well as being crucial for lesbian or gay youngsters coming to terms with their sexuality, it remains the hardest place to win it.

DISABILITY MOVEMENT Disabled people in Britain have been fighting for full civil rights for nearly 30 years. This struggle is based on the 'social model of disability' which was developed during the 1970s and 1980s by a group of disabled activists to explain disabled people's oppression. They argued against the traditional 'medical model of disability' which assumed the effect of impairments was so great that disabled people were unable to maintain a reasonable quality of life by their own efforts. The 'medical model' saw the disabled person as the problem, believing they should try and adapt to fit into the world as it is. The 'social model' moves the focus away from the individual with impairments and looks at the barriers in society which exclude disabled people from full participation.

From the early 1970s various organisations of disabled people were established with the aim of achieving equal rights. In 1981 the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People (BCODP) was set up with the same aim. The BCDOP comprises over 80 organisations controlled and led by disabled people. The Voluntary Organisations for Anti-Discrimination Legislation (VOADL) was established in 1985 and this joined organisations of disabled people with the more traditional organisations for disabled people (such as RADAR) for the first time in the fight for comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation. A number of attempts were made under the previous Conservative Government to get anti-discrimination legislation in the shape of the Civil Rights (Disabled Persons) Bill through Parliament. Although these were unsuccessful, growing public support put pressure on the then Government to introduce the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. This legislation is much weaker than the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 or the Race Relations Act 1976 (for example, the DDA excludes education and has no equivalent body such as the Equal Opportunities Commission or Commission for Racial Equality to enforce its provisions), but it does place disabled people on the equal opportunities agenda for the first time. Since 1994 VOADL have become known as the Rights Now campaigning group, who continue to lobby for full civil rights for disabled people.

Case studies

The sociology of the family

At a recent staff-student committee meeting a course on the sociology of the family has come under considerable fire from students. Students from various ethnic minority groups have argued that all the material related to white European families, some lesbian and gay students claimed that the course was designed on the assumption that everyone was heterosexual, while others objected to the session on 'pretended family relationships' and disabled students complained that the course said nothing about disability. As Head of Sociology you agree to raise these issues with the member of staff concerned, who was not present at the staff-student committee because she was off sick. She agrees with you that the course needs some updating, but says that she does not have the time with all the documentation being demanded for the forthcoming teaching quality assessment exercise and that anyway the research has not been done which would provide teaching material in the areas raised by the students. What would you say to the teacher and to the students?

Too much equal opportunities?

You are having a bad week as Head of Sociology. Two days after the students on the Social Work programme complained about lack of attention to equality issues on the sociology of the family course, you attend a meeting with a group of engineering students, who take a unit on work and employment taught by a new member of the Sociology section. They want to know why they have to do all this stuff about gender segregation in employment, coming out in the workplace and racial inequality etc. How is this relevant to them as engineers? Previously this unit was taught by a white male member of staff, who has now taken early retirement. The students ask whether they are having to do all this 'equal opps' because the course is now being taught by a black woman. What would you say to the students and to the teacher?

Who gets listened to?

You are teaching English literature to a group which is made up in fairly equal proportions of sixteen and seventeen year olds, and of mature students. Early on in the course, the mature students complain that the texts seem to be focused very much on issues of growing up, and of teenage angst. As the course progresses, they get involved with the texts, and contribute to lively and stimulating debates in class, while the 16-17 year olds remain largely silent. One sixteen year old comes to you to complain that she feels overawed by the experience of the mature students, and completely sidelined in class. How would you deal with this situation?

Christmas

It is the last week of term before Christmas. You have a tutorial group which includes several Muslim students. They come to you and complain that in all their classes, including maths, English, sociology and biology, the examples used and the work given has been given a 'Christmas' slant and that they feel oppressed and excluded by this. The final straw has been seeing the principal walk around college dressed as Santa Claus. What would you say to the students, the lecturers, and the principal?

Feminist research

You are a member of the Research Degrees Committee and have been asked to review a PhD proposal. The title of the proposal *Feminist Perspectives on the Novels of Barbara Cartland* has already been greeted with hilarity by some of the men on the committee. You read the proposal, and consider it basically sound, although you are not very familiar with some of the feminist methodology being used. The other reviewer, however, is recommending that the proposal should be rejected on the grounds that the subject does not give sufficient scope for academic analysis and that the proposed methodology is fundamentally faulty. What would you do in this situation?

Sensitive issues

Your college has recently told staff that they must check the immigration status of students. NATFHE members, in line with union policy, are refusing to do this but checks are being made by administrative staff. You have a student from Bosnia in your history class. One day the topic of the war in Bosnia comes up and leads to a heated debate. The student bursts into tears and tells the whole class that she and her family are seeking refugee status, and having great difficulty getting anywhere. It is obvious that she has slipped through the net, and the college authorities do not know about this. What, if anything, would you say to her, the other students and the college authorities?

Section 2

Equal opportunities and styles of teaching and learning

The presentation of self in everyday lectures

Do men and women tend to teach in different ways? Do students respond to teachers in terms of their age, gender and race as much as their subject competence? Do male and female students learn differently? Once one starts asking all these questions about how teaching material is delivered and received, a whole range of equal opportunities issues becomes identifiable.

There are questions too about how much about oneself should one reveal when teaching. For instance how far when teaching industrial relations should one talk about one's own experiences of being a union activist? For disabled teachers with non-visible disabilities there may be decisions to take about whether to inform students of the disability or not. For lesbian and gay teachers there is the issue of coming out in the classroom.

The tyranny of dress codes

The world view which validates the values of certain powerful groups as 'the norm' permeates attitudes to/policies on dress. On the whole, the students we teach are unlikely to dress very formally, although certain courses (for example, catering or motorcycle mechanics) may necessitate particular forms of dress. Unless there is a practical reason for a dress code, a teacher who makes it clear that they approve and validate more those that dress in particular ways, eg a suit (male or female), runs the risk of undermining the confidence of poorer students or of those who for a variety of ethnic or personal reasons may not wish to conform in this way. There is also the issue of how teachers themselves should dress. The commonsense view is that you should dress in the way that seems appropriate and sensible to you. For many teachers, this involves some degree of informality. However, many teachers in the new business-orientated colleges and universities will be coming under pressure from management to adopt the dress code of the dominant suit, ie. the suit. This even became a political issue in the 1997 General Election when both major political parties made comments about 'scruffy' teachers setting a bad example. For students, the situation is confused. Those who do not subscribe to the dominant culture are likely to feel more relaxed and better able to relate to a teacher who dresses not unlike themselves, but so strong is the establishment culture of power-dressing that they may feel dubious about the status and authority of an informally dressed teacher. Individuals will have to make their own judgements about whether they choose

to conform or not, but an institution which enforces one mode of dressing is infringing individual liberty, and a culture which can only cope with one very restricted style of dressing excludes many, and is rigid and inflexible in what it values in individuals. This may, in some institutions, require collective action.

Authority and diversity

For teachers who are female or belong to minority groups, establishing one's authority in the teaching situation may be complicated by student responses based upon factors other than one's teaching competence. Teachers with a background in radical social movements may wish to teach in a way which encourages student to participate as active learners and to question received wisdom, but this can undermine their own standing as professionals. Students may value more democratic styles of teaching, which place less emphasis on the teacher as an authority figure, but teachers whose style is friendly and informal are respected less as authorities on their subject than those who adopt more distant lecturing styles. Sometimes too students are very conscious of the staff hierarchy and of whom it is safe to complain about. Thus a disproportionate number of claims about teaching competence may be directed against part-time and temporary staff, those who are female or members of minorities, and those whose situation in the department or institution is marginal. Might the use of disciplinary procedures by management constitute harassment? There may be a hidden agenda here, eg to emasculate a strong branch of the union, introduction of agency staff etc.

Ageism also plays a part in student responses to teachers. A young teacher straight from training may be seen as lacking in authority and not to be taken seriously, regardless of how good they are at their subject. In these years of mass early retirement, those few teachers still working in their fifties may be regarded as anachronisms, fuddy-duddy, out of date and thus not worthy of respect, not matter what valuable experience and knowledge they have to offer. Both these attitudes (but particularly the latter) may be subtly reinforced by the management of the institution.

How can teachers be protected against unjustified complaints about their teaching which are really disguised forms of harassment?

Should equal opportunities monitoring check whether a disproportionate level of complaints are made against particular groups of staff?

Teaching radical material

Teaching about equal opportunities and equality issues raises further questions about staff-student interaction. Subjects such as black studies and women's studies raise high expectations among students and can make emotional demands on course participants in a way that some other subjects, which appear to be more cut and dried, do not. Since issues of identity are centrally involved in these subjects, both staff and students may feel they are at times under the microscope.

(If a lecturer teaches units about equal opportunities, does this make her/him a particular target for criticism when the college or university fails to deliver on its equal opportunities policies?). In teaching these subjects there can be a tension between validating personal experience and helping the student to place personal experience in a wider social context. The status of these subjects, such as women's studies, can be marginal in universities and colleges, and often colleagues can view involvement in these areas as a bad career move.

Provision for disabled students

Where this issue is being addressed seriously by a university or college there will be a recognition that far more is involved than access to buildings. Access to buildings should as far as possible be on the same terms and through the same entrance as for everyone else and the question of how easy it is to get around the premises should be reviewed. In addition the availability and accessibility of enabling technology should be checked. Provision should also address examining methods of the delivery of teaching, providing training for staff and for all students in disability awareness. The development of specialist units to provide advice and guidance on good practice can be helpful.

There are a number of ways in which the design and provision of learning materials can take account of the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In some cases it is a matter of producing materials in a larger typeface, which is appropriate for students with some types of visual impairment, reassessing the use of visual aids, OHPs, videos, ensuring the right equipment (eg adapted keyboards) is available at the right time and so on. What is important in all cases is that the disabled student is able to discuss their needs with both specialist advisers and teaching staff in good time, well before the course starts. Effective assessment of students' requirements is a major issue in the quality and effectiveness of students' learning and an induction programme should be established during which a student's learning style, learning goals and learning environment are identified. Lessons can thus be planned to meet a range of individual students' requirements, progress should be monitored and students provided with regular positive feedback. Teachers should be given adequate time and resources to produce necessary adaptations to learning materials and methods of teaching delivery, including working with notetakers, support assistants, BSL interpreters etc. They should not, however, be put under pressure to adopt inappropriate methods of delivery or to lower academic standards.

All staff should be required to accept responsibility for the learning and support of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, as for any other student.

Better provision for disabled students (and disabled lecturers) requires increased funding for post-16 education, as well as the demand that every institution's budget must take on board the need of disabled students.

Computer based learning

In many universities and colleges, staff are rapidly trying to come to terms with the introduction of technologies for computer based learning. There are many issues of pedagogy, students' needs and lecturers' conditions of service which need to be addressed. Equal opportunities considerations should also be incorporated in the design and introduction of forms of computer based learning, not identified as a problem after the event. For instance, some visually impaired students will be disadvantaged or even excluded if computer based learning packages rely entirely on visual images for communication. Whenever a new learning technology is introduced, it should be checked out by disabled people to see whether it aids or restricts communication. There are also major financial issues of equality of access if some courses can only be taken by those students who can afford a home computer.

Some of the research on gender and technology indicates that female students may be disadvantaged by the introduction of computer based learning unless conscious measures are taken to prevent this happening. Women tend to prefer learning from human beings rather than computers, since they place more value on communication and interpersonal relationships. Thus some of women's particular skills and qualities are excluded or devalued in the design of computer based communication systems, which favour expository report talk over explanatory rapport talk. The reality of women's lives, even more than men's, fosters awareness that the answers to all questions cannot be found by pointing and clicking at an icon on a computer screen.

Women have less access to computers, within both schools and at home, and so have less confidence in using computers. There is still a widespread cultural prejudice that women are incompetent at using technology, whereas in reality some women are made incompetent because men monopolise access and thus deny women the opportunity to learn. Decisions about which computers to purchase for home use are more likely to be made by men than women. Similarly designers of software packages tend to design for a young male audience. Moreover distance learning, studying at home, may be easier for men than women, since men are under less social pressure to perform housework and childcare and so are freer to study.

Case studies

Sharing teaching

You are a lecturer sharing a new course with a lecturer of the other sex. One of you tends to teach in a fairly didactic style, with a clear lesson plan, while the other one has a more student-centred, participatory teaching style. The students enjoy the more student centred teaching methods, but they have more respect for the expertise of the lecturer who teaches in a more formal manner. The two of you have found a rare opportunity to sit down and discuss how the course is going. What would you say to each other?

Dress codes

What would you wear to work for the following occasions:

- a) teaching a group of business studies students on a full cost course;
- b) a revision session with social work students
- c) first meeting with a panel of teaching quality assessors
- d) a social connected with a women's studies course
- e) a trade union studies course
- f) a teaching session in which you know you will be the only member of your category of humanity present.

Are there any items of clothing in your wardrobe which you would definitely not wear for some of these occasions?

The new woman teacher

You are a newly appointed female science lecturer teaching a predominantly male student group. The students appear uneasy about how to respond to a woman teacher. You suspect they interrupt you and question things you tell them more often than they do with your male colleagues. You want students to participate in classes, but you also need to get through the syllabus. At a recent meeting of your subject group, you realise that the students you are teaching are three weeks behind compared to other groups of students. How would you handle this situation?

Checking on teacher

You are a white member of the teaching staff. A black colleague is responsible for the organisation of students' project work. She has recently given the students a talk and a detailed written guide about how to do their projects. Two days after her talk some of your students come to see you to ask about their project work. As the discussion with the students progresses you become more and more uneasy, because they seem to be checking up on your colleague and you wonder whether their lack of confidence in her may be related to her race or gender. What would you say to the students and would you raise the issue of racism?

Section 3

Equal opportunities and assessment

Anonymous marking

One method of avoiding discrimination against students (and unfair accusations of discrimination against teachers) is to use anonymous marking systems, where numbers and not names are entered on examination scripts and coursework. An article in *The Guardian* (15 June 1993) reported that women's degree classifications improved when anonymous marking was used. In some institutions anonymous marking is near universal, while in others the practice is very uneven.

There are some situations where anonymous marking cannot be used; for instance in evaluating presentations, individual pieces of project work, and performance on placement. Here there is a need to address other ways of ensuring that equal opportunities are observed. In marking the work of students who you teach regularly, you inevitably become familiar with and can identify individuals' handwriting. If you wish to mark, for example, GCSE and A Level coursework anonymously, the only way would be to ask that for those pieces of work every attempt was made to get it word-processed.

The use of anonymous marking does raise some problems about how, if appropriate, allowance is made for students for whom English is not their first language, especially those who are prelingually deaf and for those who are dyslexic. Clearly if the marker does not know the identity of the student then it may not be possible to make any allowance for any disability or unfamiliarity with English, although some would argue such allowances should be made by examination boards and not by individual markers.

The use of 'standard' English is highly valued by essay-markers but there are some common variations to normal grammatical structures prevalent among those from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. It is possible to use non-standard English and yet be perfectly clear and comprehensible. If anonymous marking is used, knowledge of a student's linguistic background cannot be taken into account.

Access to word processing facilities

Some institutions and examining bodies may require coursework to be produced in a typed or word-processed form. This raises issues of social class and access to information technology. Students differ greatly in the material resources available to them when it comes to producing essays and other coursework on a word processor. Formal examinations temporarily level out some social class

inequalities: everyone has to prove what they can do on their own, using pen and paper. There are advantages in the use of word processors; students learn the skill of writing on a word processor and lecturers can mark more quickly and accurately because they do not have to devote part of their attention to deciphering handwriting. Nonetheless it is important that assessment is based on the actual quality of the work and not the elegance of the word processing package available to the student. Wherever possible, institutions should make high quality word processing equipment available to students and provide training in its usage.

Different perspectives

Another equal opportunities issue that arises particularly in some subject areas is how to assess work that is written from a black, disabled, feminist, lesbian or gay perspective and so may challenge the dominant perspectives. Feminist research and scholarship has achieved some academic legitimacy, but even feminist perspectives may be marked down outside women's studies courses. The development of courses in black studies, disability studies, lesbian and gay studies and women's studies is essential if the voice of oppressed groups is to be heard within universities and colleges.

The 'voice' extends to the use of language. The dominance of standard English in academic circles has tended to mean that only material written in this style is taken seriously. This may disadvantage working-class students, whose speech patterns are likely to be further away from 'standard' English than those raised in a middle-class home, and who therefore have a greater leap to make to translate their thoughts into sentences which are regarded as well-expressed. This is also true of, for example, Afro-Caribbean students, where the rhythms and grammatical structures of speech used at home may be very different from the 'standard'. As rap poetry has shown, it is possible to communicate effectively, vividly and memorably without adhering to accepted formal expression. As long as the use of language is not a barrier to communication and understanding, it should be possible to validate and reward the work of students who write in a variety of different registers and styles.

At the same time we need to increase the forms of language and study skills support which can ensure that students, who may have been subject to low expectations in their earlier education, are fully equipped to express their ideas in a way which does not lead to discrimination against them.

Provision for disabled students

Many institutions now have detailed guidelines about methods of assessment for disabled students. These cover matters such as the timetable for notifying the institution of the disability, the scope for varying the method of assessment and special examination arrangements. Nonetheless practice is uneven and vigilance is necessary.

The underlying principle should be that all students should receive a form of assessment which is suitable for them. (This is not the same thing as a form of assessment which it is guaranteed they can pass). Universities and colleges must recognise that the provision of extra time in examinations, the use of separate examination rooms, and production of examination material in alternative formats, all place demands on resources, including staff time. These resource needs should be identified and met well in advance of the examination period.

The Tomlinson Report identifies the following principles for assessing students' achievements:

'Assessment should be based on self-advocacy, with students involved in deciding what they wish to achieve and in evaluating their progress towards these achievements; assessment regimes should be fair, impartial and objective; the purpose of criteria for and outcomes of assessment should be understood by students, parents and employers; assessment should be conducted in a way that enables the individual to participate fully'.

Case studies

Extenuating circumstances

Discuss in the following cases:

- (a) how you would advise the student
- (b) what recommendation you would make to an examination board, in the case of an internal college or university examination
- (c) what you would consider to be fair treatment of a student in the circumstances described.

A is a final year student. She has a medical note and has been to see the year tutor recently. Six months ago she suffered a miscarriage of pregnancy. She claims this has left her feeling depressed and unwell and she has been unable to concentrate on her studies. She has therefore not completed all the required coursework and feels her depression may have affected her performance in the examinations.

B is a second year student, whose work was of a high academic standard in year one. During year two this student appears to have lost motivation and to be performing less well academically on some parts of the course. When seeing the student about some coursework, as year tutor, you enquired how the year had gone. At first the student was reluctant to say anything, but on further questioning it emerged that the student was under family pressure to enter into an arranged marriage. While not wishing to disappoint relatives or break with traditional Asian culture, the student did not personally wish to get married yet.

C is a first year student. Some months after arriving at university, he joined the student lesbian and gay society and came out. This has brought him into conflict with his parents who have fundamentalist religious beliefs and are praying fervently for his recovery and urging him to seek medical treatment. Deeply upset about the break with his parents, D needs their financial support to continue his studies but recognises that they are unlikely to accept his sexual orientation. He has submitted a letter claiming that the stress of coming to terms with his sexuality and the conflict with his family has affected his work throughout the year.

D is a mature woman student with four young children. Her marriage broke down shortly before coming to university. She has submitted a letter to the examination board, claiming that she was unable to attend an examination because it was held in half-term week and she was unable to afford childcare. She is also seeking to defer some project work until September on the grounds that she has less time for coursework than other students because of childcare commitments.

E is a young woman from a working class family; her parents are both unemployed. She is asking for extra time to complete coursework. Her work is late because she has been working weekends and three evenings a week in a supermarket to support herself and help pay off debts which various members of her family have incurred.

Pornography or art?

You are a female tutor on a Fine Art course. You have been asked to second mark a series of paintings by a final year student. When you see the work you find it deeply offensive and disturbing. It portrays women in a way which you find objectifying and degrading. You ask the male tutor who supervised the work whether he advised the student about the university's policy on equal opportunities and discussed the images of women contained in the work. He says that he is against censorship and cannot see what you object to in the student's work and that, if you feel you cannot assess this work fairly, perhaps someone else should be second examiner. What would you do in this situation?

Conflicting dates

A student comes to see you as course leader in a state of distress. She is expecting a baby, which was due one week after her final examinations, so she had been hoping everything would work out all right. She has just been to the hospital. Because of problems with the pregnancy they want her to go in for a caesarean section during examination week. She asks you if there is any way she can take the examinations before then. What would you do and how would you advise the student?

Section 4

Equal opportunities and placements

Equal opportunities policies and other organisations

Some students will be placed with other organisations, such as social work agencies, local authorities, voluntary bodies, which may have very good policies and practice on equal opportunities, from which the college or university can learn in a process of partnership. Other students may be placed in organisations where the awareness of equal opportunities is limited or non-existent. For some students discrimination can make it difficult to obtain placements. There is a real issue for colleges and universities about how selective they can be in finding placements for students, but if they are not prepared to stop sending students when clear instances of discrimination occur, then this suggests their equal opportunities policy only goes so far.

Assessing the placement: the student or the place?

Assessing placements often presents difficulties of how to assess the student rather than the organization; for instance a teaching placement in a 'nice' middle-class comprehensive compared to an inner city school with multiple social problems presents sharply the issue of how to be sure one is assessing the student and not the school. Where students experience discomfort or discrimination on grounds of their disability, race, sex or sexual orientation, this may adversely affect their performance on placement. Institutions have a responsibility as far as possible to protect students from unfair treatment, but they also have to be aware of when it needs to be considered as a factor in the assessment of work done on placement.

Tribunals and courts

Occasionally cases where students have experienced discrimination on placement have led to legal proceedings against the educational institution. This is worth indicating to those who otherwise fail to take cases of discrimination on placement seriously.

Case studies

The student teacher

You are a lecturer in the Education department and have been sent to visit a student teacher who appears to be having some problems with his second placement. The student's regular tutor is off sick, so you have been asked to cover. You examine the records and find the student survived all right last year in an inner-city school with a rather poor reputation. You drive to the school, which is located in a pretty country village. On arrival you find that the student is African-Caribbean and that the rest of the teaching staff and all the pupils are white. What sort of discussion would you have with the student? Are there any recommendations you would make to the department about appropriate placements?

Management and typing

As the placements tutor for a Business Studies course you go to visit an engineering firm, with a good reputation for equal opportunities, to see how some students are getting along on placement. You meet several students who have interesting and challenging junior managerial assignments, who are clearly having a varied work experience and are learning a lot from their placement. You then find the one Asian female student of the group, who is sitting in an office with a typewriter. What would you do about this situation?

A safe place to work

You are the placements tutor for a Hotel & Catering course. As part of the course students spend a term living and working in a hotel, often in a fairly isolated rural area. On one of your visits to a hotel that your institution has used for several years, a student asks to talk to you privately about some concerns. The locks on some of the bedroom doors are faulty and she has been told by one of the kitchen staff that the proprietor was some years ago acquitted on charges of rape. The student is clearly anxious. What would you do?

A compromise too far?

You are a woman Engineering teacher. Your college has an arrangement with a college in Saudi Arabia that, from time to time, a small group of staff are seconded from your college to theirs to train up new engineering teachers. So far only men have gone. The college in Saudi Arabia seems to have difficulty coping with the idea that a woman will be coming. They send a set of conditions, including that you must be veiled from head to foot (something that will make the teaching of practical elements very difficult), that you must never go out alone etc. Your head of department says that it is up to you whether you go under these conditions or not. What do you decide?

Conclusion

Changing the curriculum is an essential part of the equal opportunities work of an educational institution. The process of curriculum change takes place over a number of years. There are many lecturers who do perceive the need for curriculum change and are doing imaginative and valuable work in this area. Nonetheless there are also many managers and lecturers who do not see the need for changes in the curriculum. This arises partly because equal opportunities as a whole has a low status within organisations. Too often there is either complacency and an attitude 'that we know it all, anyway' or a view that equal opportunities conflicts with the business goals of the corporation and is an expensive luxury.

To convince managers and colleagues who do not see the importance of revising the curriculum in terms of equal opportunities considerations, equality activists need to campaign vigorously. We need to remind colleges and universities of their legal responsibilities in terms of non-discriminatory provision and to point out how many students may be lost through failure to address equal opportunities seriously.

There are many lecturers too who agree in principle with proposed equality changes but claim they do not have the time and resources to modify the curriculum. It is important that equality activists do address conditions of service issues for all staff, teachers, administrators and technicians. If we do not, a conflict may develop between implementing equal opportunities changes and defending conditions of service. Too often managers are ready to give time allowances for work on developing uses of information technology or similar projects, but when it comes to equal opportunities expect that staff will do it anyway, because they have a political or moral commitment to it. This attitude lowers the status of work on equal opportunities and signals a lack of management commitment to the area, thus weakening the position of those staff who are trying to introduce change.

For all teaching staff time should be made available within their agreed (and contractual) annual workload for equal opportunities work. This is a way of affirming that equal opportunities is the responsibility of all staff, not just a few in a specialist unit. This time could be used for activities such as attending training events, rewriting teaching materials, and adapting presentation of teaching materials to suit the needs of disabled students. If time is genuinely made available to free staff from other duties to undertake this work, then more staff are likely to be committed to equality changes and can reasonably be expected to

undertake this work as part of their professional duties. While staff are burdened with unreasonable and excessive workloads, the climate for change is not favourable.

Lastly it is important that staff who are leaders in equal opportunities in their university or college, whether in matters of staffing, student recruitment or curriculum change, are properly supported by both management and by their union. Too often the contribution of such staff is not recognised. They may be dismissed by some with the charge of 'political correctness' and may experience discrimination on account of their disability, race, sex or sexuality. Staff and students must be able to speak out to challenge institutionalised discrimination without fear of reprisals. The way that educational institutions handle challenges to oppression is a test of the extent to which they are genuinely committed to equal opportunities. NATFHE as an education trade union has a role to play in providing a support network for equality activists within colleges and universities and in representing and defending members who experience discrimination.

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