

The Open University in Ireland

Section 75 Northern Ireland Act 1998 – Annual Progress Report for

1 April 2005 - 31 March 2006

NAME OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY

The Open University in Ireland
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Section 1: STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SECTION 75 DUTIES

- All Open University Regional staff and students in Northern Ireland continue to be kept up to date and informed about Section 75 legislation and its implications.
- Regular communication takes place between the OU region in Northern Ireland and the Open University's Equal Opportunities Unit at its headquarters in Walton Hall, Milton Keynes as to how Section 75 compliance is being carried out and how it can continue to inform the University's Race Equality Policy and Strategy Action Plan.
- In 2005-2006 specifically, the bulk of this has been in relation to the practicalities of carrying out Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) and 'Good Relations' responsibilities in a large organisation.
- The drawing up and identification of university policies encompassing all areas of operation has been carried out with assistance from Heads of Units across the University.
- A start has been made on the screening of all the policies identified.

- Agreement was reached on the priority areas to be subject to Racial Equality and Section 75 EQIA's ie. Staff Recruitment and Student Recruitment respectively – on the lines of 'ARE WE OPEN TO YOU?'.
- EQIA skills training has been delivered to appropriate staff.
- The OU's Equality Officer in Northern Ireland is a member of the Open University's Equality and Diversity Management Group (EDMG) and has advised upon Section 75 compliance at meetings of this group.
- The same person has continued to attend meetings of the Northern Ireland Higher Education Equality Consortium (NIHEEC).
- This has facilitated comparisons of policies in the other member institutions of NIHEEC and of implementation of the "Good Relations" duty in each of these institutions and their consultation practice thereon.
- During the year he met with Aubrey McCrory, Manager, Statutory Duty Unit, ECNI to discuss OU compliance with Section 75.
- He continues to attend and contribute to meetings of the UK Equality Challenge Unit's N.I. Group, a theme of which this year has been promoting good campus relations and dealing with hate crimes and intolerance.
- He has continued to liaise with the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC) on the implementation of Section 75 good practice and during the year has reviewed and replied to consultation documents from other NI public bodies, most of which have been in relation to EQIAs.
- He contributed to the NIHEEC's "Good Relations" questionnaire for staff and students in the universities and university colleges in NI. This questionnaire was distributed following approval by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) and the NI Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).
- This questionnaire was circulated to all OU staff and students in Northern Ireland, the results of which are being collated and analysed by the NIHEEC at the time of writing this report.
- On behalf of the Open University he circulated to public bodies in Northern Ireland an OU consultation document entitled "Are we open to you? – Assessing

the impact of OU policy decisions on people from different racial groups". (*Copy attached as 'Doc 1*).

- The purpose of this UK-wide survey was to assess the impact of the OU's policies, services and decisions on different groups of people. To help find out:
 - What people think of the Open University?
 - Is it doing enough to promote equality of opportunity?
 - Is it increasing opportunities for all racial groups?
 - What is the experience of studying or working with the OU really like?
 - What are the barriers to participation or progress?
 - How has the OU's services met individual needs?
- The analysis of this questionnaire is being carried out at the time of writing this report and its findings will be featured in next year's Annual Report.
- The other components of the OU's 2005-2006 Equality Plan in Northern Ireland are as follows:
 - Continued attendance by the Region's Equality Officer at appropriate training and information programmes under the auspices of the ECNI.
 - Refresher sessions for regional staff on the implementation of Section 75 with a particular emphasis on the good relations duty following the dissemination of the results of the NIHEEC questionnaire
 - An EQIA for OU staff in Northern Ireland
 - Consultation on Staff EQIA
 - An EQIA for OU students in Northern Ireland
 - Consultation on Student EQIA.

- In carrying out EQIAs in Northern Ireland the Open University will follow the ECNI guidelines, together with points of good practice in relation to EQIAs commended by the NIHEEC and the OU's Equality and Diversity Management Group.
- Specifically the OU's EDMG's guidelines set out in OU documents "Equal Opportunities Assessment" (OU website extract) and its Equality Impact Assessment Toolkit (*copies attached as 'Doc 2' and 'Doc 3'*).
- With regard to the **direct** resourcing of Section 75 work during 2005-06, the OU's Equality Officer in Northern Ireland is appointed at Assistant Regional Director level. He contributes at least one month's working time of equality related matters spread across the working year. The costs of his attendance at equality related meetings are paid directly from the OU regional budget as are the costs of posting and disseminating information about Section 75 in Northern Ireland.

Section 2: SCREENING AND EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EQIA)

- The OU policies to be assessed in the two EQIA's relate to one of the basic tenets of the Open University in which it claims to be 'Open to People'.
- An attempt will be made to assess if the OU in Northern Ireland is truly 'Open to People', as reflected in the composition of its staff population and its student population in comparison to the profile of the adult population in Northern Ireland.
- The comparisons will be made across the nine categories identified in Section 75.
- Specifically these will be used to assess the recruitment processes for OU staff and students in Northern Ireland and if these processes are supportive to equality of opportunity or are having an adverse effect on this opportunity.
- The policies concerned, as enacted in Northern Ireland, are exactly the same as the policies, set out by the OU, for other parts of the UK.
- These policies have been screened by the University for the purposes of Section 75 and prior to a possible Equality Impact Assessment as part of the University's obligations to the Race Relations Act.

- The OU in Northern Ireland is taking the following actions to ensure compliance with the Commission's guidelines:
 - OU STAFF AND STUDENT EQIAs
 - *collating most relevant, reliable and up-to-date data on adult population of Northern Ireland (as advised by ECNI).*
 - *collating data on profile of OU staff and students in Northern (including Associate Lecturers).*
 - *consultation with ECNI specialist staff on reliability, application and interpretation of this data.*
 - *following their guidance on consultation with representatives of groups from the nine categories potentially under-represented.*

Section 3: TRAINING

- The Region's Equality Officer has attended EQIA training presented on behalf of the NIHEEC and the OU's Equality and Diversity Management Group.
- He has also attended general awareness raising sessions at the Open University in Milton Keynes about the University's obligations under the Race Relations Act.

Section 4: COMMUNICATION

- The Equality Officer has kept OU regional staff informed of Equality developments by e-mail and by announcements on the Region's OU website.
- All OU staff and students in Northern Ireland were contacted personally in connection with the NIHEEC Good Relations Questionnaire, the introduction to which gave an up-dated overview of Section 75 compliance and the need for the Good Relations duty.

Section 5: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

- The most significant equality related research carried out during the year was the dissemination of the NIHEEC's questionnaire to university and university College staff and students across Northern Ireland
- As mentioned in section 1 above the analysis of this large questionnaire is being carried out at the time of writing of this report and will feature in next year's Annual Report.
- To enable the widest possible access to these questionnaires, all OU staff and students in Northern Ireland were contacted by circular letter, e-mail and reminders posted on the Region's web site.
- This involved nearly 5,000 people in Northern Ireland and represents the largest communication on behalf of the region on equality matters.

Section 6: INFORMATION PROVISION, ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND SERVICES

- The 'Good Relations' Questionnaires referred to in the previous chapter were offered in alternative formats to ensure accessibility.
- The Open University documents referred to in this report are all available in alternative formats.

Section 7: COMPLAINTS

- None recorded

Section 8 SCHEME TIMETABLE

- Following guidance from the University's Policy Officer for Equality and Diversity the main actions arising from the Region's Equality Action Plan in 2006 will centre around the intention to carry out two EQIA's.

- The other components in the 2006 Action Plan are as follows:-
 - (i) the circulation to OU staff and students in Northern Ireland of a 'Good Relations' Questionnaire constructed by the NIHEEC and approved by the ECNI and DEL. This was circulated in March/April and the results analysed and disseminated by the NIHEEC and the ECNI later in the year.
 - (ii) continuing attendance by the Region's Section 75 representative at appropriate training and information programmes under the auspices of the ECNI.
 - (iii) refresher sessions for regional staff on the implementation of Section 75 with a particular emphasis on good relations duty following dissemination of results of the NIHEEC questionnaire.
 - (iv) therefore the Region's Action Plan will revolve around four areas of responsibility with the following timetable:-
 1. April/May '06 - Good Relations
Questionnaire to staff and students
 2. July/Aug '06 - Consideration of results of questionnaire
- possibility of focus groups.
Consultation on results.
 3. Sept/Oct '06 - EQIA for OU staff in Northern Ireland
 4. Oct/Nov '06 - Consultation on Staff EQIA
 5. Sept/Oct '06 - EQIA for OU students in Ireland

Section 9: CONSULTATION, PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

- On behalf of the Open University the Equality Officer co-ordinated the circulation to public bodies and representative groups (using the ECNI's template) copies of its Public Consultation document "Are we open to you? Assessing the impact of OU policy decisions on people from different racial groups".
- The public consultation for this exercise closed on 31st July 2006 and the results are being analysed at the time of writing and will be included in next year's report.

Section 10: THE GOOD RELATIONS DUTY

- The OU's participation in the NIHEEC's 'Good Relations' questionnaire will be reported upon in next year's report.
- This exercise represents one of the biggest and far reaching consultations about good relations in Northern Ireland and its outcomes will also be the subject of a special report to the ECNI and DEL.

Section 11: ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- The Open University has embraced and included equality as the first of its 10 Strategic Priorities.
- This priority states that it will promote fair access for all especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds or from under-represented groups.
- It has extended its Mission to state, "The Open University promotes educational opportunity and social justice by providing high quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential".

- In its promulgation of the importance of equal opportunities it has referred repeatedly to the equality guidance produced by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

GS/VO/30/08/06