

The Open University in Ireland

Section 75 Northern Ireland Act 1998 – Annual Progress Report for

01 April 2003 - 31 March 2004

NAME OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY

The Open University in Ireland
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Section 1: OPEN UNIVERSITY EQUALITY SCHEME

- The Open University's Equality Scheme was approved by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland in March 2003. It therefore came into implementation during the period of this report.
- Following this approval the OU Regional Director in Northern Ireland established a 'Section 75' Working Group to ensure that necessary actions were progressed in accordance with the OU's Scheme, Section 75 commitments and timetable.
- She also approved that one of her Assistant Directors be delegated with the necessary authority to act as 'Equality Officer' in relation to Section 75.
- In turn, he attended Section 75 related training programmes organised by the Commission and the NI Higher Education Equality Consortium.
- All OU Regional staff have been kept up-to-date with Section 75 legislation and its implications.
- Consultation has taken place within the OU as to how Section 75 compliance can help to inform the University's Race Equality Policy and Strategy Action Plan.
- Specifically in relation to the practicalities of carrying out Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) in a large organisation.

- Consideration has also been given to the “Good Relations” duty and has resulted in a better understanding of how a number of OU student projects in NI contribute to good relations.

Section 2: STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION OF SECTION 75 DUTIES

- The agreement of Open University’s Equal Opportunities Committee centrally in Milton Keynes to assist the OU in Northern Ireland to identify and advise which OU policies should be screened was achieved.
- Recognition by the committee that the OU’s Section 75 Equality Scheme in Northern Ireland would prove useful in the University’s response to the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 which requires the University to assess its policies in England in relation to students and staff from different racial groups was achieved.
- Approval to establish a policy screening process, including development of pro-forma was achieved.
- Meetings were held with the central OU Equal Opportunities Committee to prioritise which policies should be screened first.
- Agreement to the need to draw up and identify university policies across all areas of operation was achieved.
- The drawing up of a timetable for equality impact assessments was achieved.
- The initiating of pilot impact assessments on relevant policies was achieved.
- EQIA skills training was delivered to appropriate staff.
- Enhanced communication with the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC) on the implementation of Section 75 good practice was achieved.
- The consolidation of an ‘internal partnership’ relationship with the OU’s Equal Opportunities Committee and Unit was achieved as a result of Section 75 in NI.
- The introduction of Section 75 as a standard agenda item in quarterly meetings of the OU’s Scotland, Wales, Ireland Strategy Group (“SWISG”) was achieved.
- The nomination of the OU’s Section 75 Equality Officer in NI to become a team member of the OU’s Race Equality Policy and Strategy Action Plan Group was achieved.

- The University agreed that 2 EQIAs should be carried out on the theme of how 'open' is the Open University in Northern Ireland with regard to the recruitment of staff and the registering of students in NI.

Section 3: SCREENING AND EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EQIA)

- A Screening Report has been adapted but not yet submitted to the Commission.
- This is because the "blanket approach" to screen all university policies as reported in 03/4 has proved difficult across such a large organisation involving over 200,000 staff and students.
- To overcome this a more focused regional approach was agreed for the OU in NI, as a result of which it was agreed that 2 major areas, staff and student recruitment should be subject to Impact Assessment in NI.
- All regional progress in NI in relation to Section 75 is reported to the University's Equal Opportunities Committee and 'SWISG' on a quarterly basis.

Section 4: TRAINING

- OU Regional staff in NI are kept up-to-date with important developments relating to Section 75 by e-mail on the regional intranet.
- The region's Equality Officer has received specialist training to carry out screening and to advise on the carrying out of an EQIA.

Section 5: COMMUNICATION

- Internally, the OU in NI has developed closer links with the OU's Equal Opportunities Unit at Milton Keynes.
- These links have been strengthened by the University's senior appointment of an Equality and Diversity Officer who has a monitoring brief over Section 75 compliance in NI.
- Externally, it continues through the NI Higher Education Equality Consortium, to communicate with external organisations and groups in the community regarding Section 75.
- The OU's commitment to Section 75 has been written into partnership projects such as its EU Peace II funded programme 'Business Skills for the Social Economy' and the EU Peace II funded "Cross-Border Openings Programme".

- These programmes have provided learning opportunities to over 400 people from disadvantaged and marginalised communities who could not otherwise have obtained this access. There is a significant “Good relations” dividend arising from these projects.

Section 6: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

- In preparation for the 2 EQIAs to be carried out on staff and students respectively, the University has been asked to provide data for both of these groups in NI based as far as possible on the 9 categories obliged under Section 75.
- It is intended to map and compare the OU data with the 2001 NI census.

Section 7: INFORMATION PROVISION, ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND SERVICES

- With regard to reviewing and developing arrangements for the provision of information in accessible formats, the OU in Northern Ireland follows the approach of its guiding body, the NI Higher Education Equality Consortium, by making available documentation, if requested, in large print, audio and alternative formats, where appropriate, also to meet the needs of those who are not fluent in English. This approach has been approved by the Commission.

Section 8: COMPLAINTS

- None received
- A Section 75 complaints procedure is in place in line with the OU's Equality Scheme.

Section 9: TIMETABLE

- The Section 75 implementation timetable is reviewed by the OU's Regional Section 75 Group and the OU's central Equal Opportunities Committee.
- Progress in the year since its Equality Scheme was approved has been broadly in line with the objectives stated in the scheme.

Section 10: CONSULTATION, PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

- The consultation approach used by the OU in Northern Ireland is the one applied by the NI Higher Education Equality Consortium as stated in its guide to consultation, ie ‘The Universities/Colleges recognise the importance of meaningful consultation and are committed to consulting in an open and conclusive manner. They particularly welcome the views of any organisation, group or individual with a particular interest in their work and/or the likely impact of their policies.’
- Based on this approach the Open University in Northern Ireland has invited advice and guidance, both qualitative and quantitative from interested organisations, groups and individuals on its policies. These will be taken into account by the OU in drawing up its programme for full Equality Impact Assessments and will help to inform the prioritisation of these.
- The list of consultees is the one compiled by the NI Higher Education Equality Consortium and approved by the Commission.

Section 11: THE GOOD RELATIONS DUTY

- Section 75 obligations in NI have necessitated closer working relations with external organisations and the application of a good relations duty in these relationships.
- The OU has adapted the approaches to good relations commended by the NI Higher Education Equality Consortium, ANIC and the Department for Employment and Learning.
- The approach of the OU in NI to its good relations duty has been taken up by the OU’s Equal Opportunities Committee in the implementation of its Race Equality Policy and Strategy Action Plan.
- The University’s Equality and Diversity Officer has drawn attention to ‘good relations’ dimension and impact arising from several OU community projects in NI.

Section 12: IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

- OU regional staff in Northern Ireland continue to be aware of their obligations and duties under Section 75.
- OU Policy and Strategy Staff in Milton Keynes continue to be aware of the University’s Section 75 obligations in Northern Ireland.
- The University’s Race Equality Policy and Strategy Action Plan has been informed by its Section 75 experience in Northern Ireland.

- These impacts and outcomes reflect the progressive mainstreaming of Section 75 duties and awareness into OU policy development at regional and national levels.

Section 13: ADDITIONAL COMMENTS ON MAINSTREAMING

- The impacts and outcomes described in section 12 above have led to the NI region of the OU continuing to be regarded within the OU as a 'specialist' OU region for the purposes of equal opportunity processes and approach.

*GS/fmo
September '05*