

# 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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### **EQUALITY OFFICER NAME AND CONTACT DETAILS:**

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## **Section 1: PREPARATION OF EQUALITY SCHEME**

- The Open University's Equality Scheme was approved by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland in March 2003.
- This followed upon a draft scheme having been sent out for public consultation, the address list of over 200 consultees having been approved by the NI Higher Education Equality Consortium, of which the OU is a member, and the Equality Commission.
- The scheme was also approved, prior to submission to the Commission, by the Open University's Equal Opportunities Unit and Equal Opportunities Committee, ie the OU's central unit and governing body responsible for assuring equality of opportunity throughout the organisation.
- Prior to approval of the scheme, the following actions took place and are highlighted accordingly:
  - The OU Regional Director in Northern Ireland established a 'Section 75' Sub-Committee 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.
- Training for all OU Regional staff was organised to familiarise them with Section 75 legislation and its implications.
- Consultation took place within the OU as to how Section 75 compliance might inform the University’s Race Equality Policy and Strategy Action Plan.
- Consideration was given to the formulation of university policies.

## **Section 2: STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION OF SECTION 75 DUTIES**

- The agreement of Open University’s Equal Opportunities Committee to assist the OU in Northern Ireland to identify and advise which OU policies should be screened was achieved in year one.
- 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 sheer scale of the OU organisation has delayed identification of OU policies in some areas of operations.

### **Section 3: SCREENING AND EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EQIA)**

- A Screening Report has been adapted but not yet submitted to the Commission.
- This is because final agreement on which policies to subject to an EQIA has to be agreed by the OU's Equal Opportunities Committee taking into consideration which policies are also being prioritised to be screened in relation to racial equality obligations in England.
- It is expected that the identification and subsequent screening of policies for EQIA will be completed by the end of October 2004, the results of which will be reported to the Commission accordingly.
- All OU staff in NI are notified by e-mail about the decisions of the OU's Equal Opportunities Committee in relation to Section 75.
- All regional progress in NI in relation to Section 75 is reported to '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 Committee and Unit at Milton Keynes.
- 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'.

## **Section 6: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

- All heads of units throughout the Open University were asked to approve the policies identified in their areas and to identify further which of these did not appear to afford equality of opportunity.
- Because of the scale of this exercise a complete list of policies has not yet been finalised.
- However, the work that has been done has helped to create a new set of internal organisational data which will also inform the OU's Race Equality Policy and Strategy Action Plan.

## **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 year one since its Equality Scheme was approved has been 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.

## **Section 12: IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES**

- OU regional staff in Northern Ireland are more aware of their obligations and duties under Section 75.
- OU Policy and Strategy Staff in Milton Keynes are more 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 being regarded within the OU as a 'specialist' OU region for the purposes of equal opportunity processes and approach.
- This is the first time this has happened to the OU in Northern Ireland.

*GS/TN  
September '04*