

Implication of London Metropolitan University's Equality and Diversity Policy on Courses Offered in Information Management

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Introduction

London Metropolitan University's Equality and Diversity Policy (2004)² has particular relevance on information courses. It is not purposed here to look at the whole Policy but only at Section 5.11 which requires teaching staff to:

- promote equality and diversity through their teaching programmes
- ensure that the curriculum covers the knowledge, skills and values which students need to tackle discrimination
- ensure that materials used to deliver the curriculum are free from sexist, racist and other discriminatory assumptions, images and languages

Equality requirements are often seen as involving employment and service aspects; less well understood, and acted upon, are the above requirements. They are often taken for granted or ignored in practice. No monitoring process exists to ensure compliance. At the same time, the above section is not easy to monitor and ensure compliance. It is therefore important that all staff understand and implement these requirements as they are backed by equality legislation listed in Section 5.1 of the Policy.

The need to do so has been given greater urgency by two recent reports. The first one was from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). This stated that "over 60% of London Metropolitan's students belong to ethnic minorities" (Curtis, 2006). As Sutherlans (2006) says, there are "more black Caribbean students in ...London Metropolitan University than there are in the entire Russell Group".

The significance of this fact can be seen in the context of the learning process itself. Fry, Kettridge and Marshall (2003) point out that leaning should not be seen "in terms only of adding more knowledge", explaining that "lecturers should be considering also how to bring about change or transformation to the pre-existing knowledge of their learners". For such transformation to take place among students from ethnic minority

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² Referred to in the rest of this paper as "the Policy".

communities, lecturers need to pay greater attention to their “pre-existing knowledge” when designing curricula and developing learning and teaching policies and practices. The world outlook and experiences of ethnic minority students are likely to be different from those of the ethnic majority students. Thus the learning needs of each group should be addressed in different ways. There is often an assumption that learning needs of all students, irrespective of ethnic or class backgrounds are the same. This assumption needs to be challenged if the Policy requirements are to be met.

The second report mentioned earlier deals with the teaching of history. Although it relates to the school sector, its implications are equally valid for Universities. The report says:

...in many schools, ‘too little attention is given to the black and multi-ethnic aspects of British history’. Too often, the teaching of black history is confined to topics about slavery and post-war immigration or to Black History Month.

The effect is to undervalue the overall contribution of black and minority ethnic people to Britain’s past and to ignore their cultural, scientific and many other achievements. (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2005).

When seen in the context of the Policy requirements, the above report adds urgency to the need to re-examine University learning and teaching practices. “Incorrect” practices at Universities then get reinforced at the school and public sector levels.

Relevance for University teaching

The question then arises whether the Policy requirements and the two reports have any relevance for Universities. Bhattacharyya (2006) looks at the role of Universities in creating an environment free from negative perceptions of people from the “South”:

Universities do have a responsibility to create a representative public space for thinking about the world and how we want to live in it. At the moment, they are failing in that task.

But if Universities have this social responsibility, then the departments which teach information have an even greater responsibility of ensuring that students are given an appropriate understanding of the multi-cultural and globalised world. It is not only history that needs to be seen from a global and a non Eurocentric perspective. It is equally important that developments in all aspects of social, natural and physical sciences are seen from a different perspective than one that is currently promoted by some mass media, and, indeed, some University courses. The Policy requires us to ensure we do not reinforce Euro-centric thinking. Yet no mechanism for doing so exists.

These are not mere academic concerns in the information sector. There are areas where we need to re-examine the theories and practices that are daily reinforced by being shown as “universal” and as the only possible ones. An example is the Eurocentric information classification systems that undervalue the contribution to knowledge by people from the South, and give undue importance to experiences and achievements of European people in Europe, USA, Canada and Australia.

The teaching and learning perspective

The Policy makes it clear that course content and teaching practices need to reflect a world in which all countries and peoples are equal. The same case has been made from a learning and teaching point of view. According to the Department of Education and Skills (DfES), “Universities and colleges play a vital role in ...promoting social justice”. Social justice cannot be provided if the equality aspect is lost sight of. Yet in a world sharply divided by different ideologies, world outlooks, classes and religions, it is not easy to decide the perspectives from which social justice can be approached in order to ensure a real equality. Martin (2003) explains this succinctly:

...arts, humanities and social sciences are disciplinary fields which are heavily value-leaden...these academic subjects are cored through and through with ethical issues, social concerns, judgements.

This raises particular questions in the field of information. For example, it would not be appropriate to claim that “the Gutenberg Bible [was] the first book printed with movable type ...in 1454-1455” (Henry Ransom Centre, 2006) and ignore the facts highlighted in “History of Printing” (2006):

The movable type printer was invented by Pi Shen in 1040. The movable type metal printing press was invented in Korea between 1234 and 1241. By the 12th and 13th century many Arabic and Chinese libraries contained tens of thousands of printed books.

Similarly, it would not be correct to leave out the development of libraries and publishing in forests and urban working class areas by the Mau Mau liberation forces in Kenya during the late 1950s and early 1960s in a course on the development of public libraries. Nor would it be acceptable to focus entirely on British libraries in a course on the history of public libraries without explaining this in the context of development of libraries in, say India or USA. The requirements of the Policy will not be met if a multi-dimensional approach is not taken,

Joseph (2000) looks at the role of information in social development:

How we see ourselves and others is shaped by the history we absorb not only in the classroom, but from newspapers, films, television programmes, novels ... an important aspect of this Euro-centric approach to history is the manner in which the history and potentialities of non-European societies are represented, particularly with respect to their creation and development of science and technology.

The information profession has a vital social role in ensuring that they use an equality approach in acquiring, storing and disseminating information. Lecturers in information have a key role in ensuring that the profession fulfils this role while meeting the Policy requirements.

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Sutherlans, John (2006): The ivory tower; Black underrepresentation at university should be front page news. *The Guardian*. January 11. Available from: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/racism/comment/0,10795,1683973,00.html>
Accessed: 17 January, 2006.

Guide to resource

There is a growing body of information on equality in the information sector. This includes legislation, requirements from Government bodies as well as research reports and recommendations from organisations. Some of these are listed below:

Black, A. (2000): Skeleton in the cupboard: social class and the public library in Britain through 150 years. *Library History*, 16(1) 3-12.

Castells, M. (1998), *The information age: economy, society and culture*, Volume II, *The power of identity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, M. (1996), *The network society (The information age, economy, society and culture Vol 1)*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Commission on Social Justice (1994), *Social justice: strategies for national renewal (Borrie Commission Report)*. London: Vintage.

Department of Culture, Media and Sport (1999): *Libraries for all: social inclusion in public libraries; policy guidance for local authorities in England*. London: DCMS.

Department of Culture, Media and Sport (2003): *Framework for the future: libraries, learning and information in the next decade*. London: DCMS. Web version available at: http://www.culture.gov.uk/libraries_and_communities/framework_for_the_future.htm

Durrani, Shiraz (2000): Returning a stare: people's struggles for political and social inclusion. "Open to all? the public library and social exclusion. Vol. 3 pp. 87-110. (Working Paper no. 6). London: Resource [MLA].

Durrani, S. and Smallwood, E. (2003): Mainstreaming equality, meeting needs; the Merton Library approach. *Library Management*. 24 (6) 348-359.

Employers Organisation for Local Authority (2004): *Equality standard for local government*. London: Employers Organisation for Local Authorities. Information about the Standard available at: <http://www.lg-employers.gov.uk/diversity/equality/index.html>

Feather, J. (2000): *The information society: a study of continuity and change*". 3rd edition. London: Library Association, 2000

Great Britain: *Fairness for all: A new Commission for Equality and Human Rights presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs by Command of Her Majesty*. May 2004.

Web version available at: <http://www.dti.gov.uk/consultations/files/publication-1193.pdf>

Leicester City Libraries (2000): *Achieving inclusion*. [Libraries Review 2000]. Leicester: Leicester City Council.

Muddiman, D. (2000a): *Public libraries and social exclusion: the historical legacy*. "Open to all? the public library and social exclusion". Vol. 3 pp.16-25. (Working Paper no. 2). London: Resource [MLA].

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National Working Party on Social Inclusion (INSINC) (1997), *the net result: social inclusion in the information society*. London: IBM.

Resources (2000): *Open To All? The Public Library And Social Exclusion*. London: Resource. Library & Information Commission Research Report no. 85. 3 volumes:
Vol.1: Overview and conclusions. Web version available at:
<http://www.mla.gov.uk/webdav/harmonise?Page/@id=73&Document/@id=23155&Se>
Vol.2: Survey, case studies and methods.
Vol.3: Working papers. Available from:
<http://www.seapn.org.uk/publication.html>

Roach, P. and Morrison, M (1998b): *Public libraries, ethnic diversity; a baseline for good practice*. Warwick: University of Warwick.

Smallwood, E. (2002): *Communities Developing Communities*. Diversity. No. 3, pp. 22-32, 75. Web version available at:
http://www.seapn.org.uk/docs/diversity_march01.pdf

Walker, A. (1997), "Introduction: the strategy of inequality" in A. Walker and C. Walker, (eds.), *Britain divided: the growth of social exclusion in the 1980s and 1990s*. London: Child Poverty Action Group.

Webster, Frank (1995): *Theories of the information society*. New York: Routledge.

Some useful websites

Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals:
<http://www.cilip.org.uk/default.cilip>

Community Development Foundation: <http://www.cdf.org.uk/default.asp>

Disability Rights Commission. <http://www.drc-gb.org/>

Diversity Group (CILIP): <http://www.cilip.org.uk/groups/dg/newsletter.html>

Equal Opportunities Commission. <http://www.eoc.org.uk/>

Institute of Race Relations. <http://www.irr.org.uk/contact/index.html>

International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA): <http://www.ifla.org/>

The Network, tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries.
<http://www.seapn.org.uk/index.html>

UNESCO Libraries portal: http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=6513&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html