

The importance and challenges of equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education

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Advance HE

As a governor, your responsibilities are to provide oversight of the institution's direction and performance and seek assurance that agreed policies are being successfully implemented and the institution complies with the legal and regulatory requirements placed on it. Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is integral to both of these responsibilities.

Defining the terms

Equality: "Equality is a fundamental part of a fair society in which everyone can have the best possible chance to succeed in life." (Discrimination Law Review, 2007)

Diversity: Recognises that everyone is different in a variety of visible and non-visible ways, and that those differences are to be recognised, respected and valued

Inclusion: "The achievement of a work environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute fully to the organization's success." (Society for Human Resource Management)

The importance of EDI in higher education

The best talent is highly mobile, and institutions perceived as not being diverse, or failing to take EDI seriously, are likely to be avoided by individuals and groups who believe they might be disadvantaged. Equally, institutions viewed as accommodating EDI are more likely to attract and retain a broad base of students and staff.

What do governors need to be concerned about?

The best talent is highly mobile, and institutions perceived as not being diverse, or failing to take EDI seriously, are likely to be avoided by individuals and groups who believe they might be disadvantaged. Equally, institutions viewed as accommodating EDI are more likely to attract and retain a broad base of students and staff.

Institutions need to support all learners, whether they have or are from different religious, cultural backgrounds or social settings. Equally, international students need to be appropriately supported by the institution.

The importance of oversight

Many institutional mission and value statements incorporate a commitment to EDI, and focus on linked concepts such as internationalisation or social and civic duties. However, mission and value statements are only effective when translated into action. The governing body's role in providing oversight of the institution's direction and performance should ensure the institution delivers on EDI commitments and objectives.

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Processes and assurance

Has the institution established key performance indicators (KPIs), including reference to clear benchmarks and detailed targets, for EDI?

Has the institution taken effective action to support and integrate international students within its communities?

Does the institution regularly survey different student and staff groups to gain feedback on its EDI policies and practices, and take action where responses suggest the need for change?

EDI in a global market

As institutions continue to compete for, and recruit, staff and students globally, and some launch campuses and partnerships overseas, their student and staff communities are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of race, nationality, religious and cultural backgrounds.

The global market place

Institutions need to embed EDI into their strategies, practices and cultures in order that all staff and students feel included and supported to succeed – as well as providing the best preparation for the future careers of students. Additionally, UK-domiciled students need to work effectively in a global context when they finish their studies.

Increasing student diversity

Widening access to groups of students, under-represented in HE, is a strategic priority across the UK. Retention, attainment and employability of minority groups is also important. Nationally, certain groups achieve lower attainment or are less likely to go into graduate level employment. This has the potential to adversely impact on the HEI's overall success rates.

Institutions set widening access targets within Office for Students (OfS) access agreements in England, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) outcome agreements in Scotland, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) fee and access plans in Wales and the Department for the Economy launched Access to success in Northern Ireland in 2012. Delivering effectively on equality is therefore paramount to meeting these targets.

Improving staff diversity

Certain minority groups are under-represented in HE employment or face barriers to progression in their HE careers. This means that their institution does not always benefit fully from the skills and expertise of all their staff, or potential staff.

Improving staff diversity

Removing barriers, and adjusting institutional policies and improving support can lead to the development of an inclusive environment in which all staff can advance their careers and contribute fully to the success of the organisation.

Contributing to research excellence

For an institution to achieve research excellence, it must enable all its research staff to succeed in their careers. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the process for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. A range of equality and diversity requirements were included as part of REF. These prompted institutions to increase the numbers of women, early careers researchers and those with equality-related circumstances to be submitted to the REF. However, there continue to be disparities in submission rates by different protected groups. Institutions will need to continue to embed equality into research careers in order to nurture the potential of all its research staff, and for these staff to contribute fully to the institution's success in any future REF exercise.

Enabling institutional change

Our Athena SWAN Charter and Race Equality Charter help the higher education sector address the continuing under-representation of women at senior levels of management and of minority ethnic staff in higher education. The charters aim to drive forward the cultural and systemic changes needed if institutions are to remain competitive and attractive to talented staff and potential students in a global market. These outcome-focused programmes are catalysts for change – encouraging higher education institutions, research institutes and others to transform their cultures in order to make a real impact on the lives of staff and students.

EDI challenges in higher education

While some progress has been made in increasing and supporting the diversity of staff and students in UK higher education, significant challenges remain. Governing bodies need to be aware of the challenges and ensure that they have received appropriate assurance that action is being taken.

Differences in recruitment, attainment and employment rates

There are significant differences, even after controlling for a range of variables, in the recruitment, attainment and employment rates for different groups of higher education students and graduates. These differences are difficult to explain, and suggest that further action is required to improve inequalities. Similarly, in relation to staff there are significant inequalities between different groups.

Student inequalities

Inequality can affect student populations across a range of demographics. While most institutions collect monitoring data on the protected characteristics of their students there are often gaps in this information for certain groups. A lack of data limits an institution's understanding of equality challenges faced by certain students and the ability to take action. Another concern is that there is a lack of robust national data to enable benchmarking to make comparisons.

Gender attainment gap

For Science, Technology, Engineering, Medicine and Mathematics (STEMM) subjects, male students comprise the majority of students studying engineering and technology (83.9%), computer science (82.9%) and architecture, building and planning (65.0%). Low participation by women in STEMM subjects impacts on their career options and earning potential; perpetuating the under-representation of women in related industries and professions.

A smaller proportion of male graduates receive a first or upper second class degree than female graduates. The gaps were as follows: Wales -7.0%, Scotland -5.5%, England -5.1% and Northern Ireland -4.7%. However, despite women making-up the majority of students and gaining a high class of degree, after graduation they are less likely to secure professional full-time work than male leavers (49.9% compared with 47.5%). Male students also often engage less with support services offered by HEIs.

Black, minority and ethnic (BME) attainment gap

The overall BME degree attainment gap at 15.2 percentage points remains significant. However, the gap is larger for certain ethnic groups, including UK domiciled first degree undergraduate graduates from other than Black background (28.2 percentage points) and with Black African ethnicity (27.0 percentage points).

Many graduate-level jobs and post-graduate courses (and related bursaries) require an upper second degree or above as a minimum entry requirement. This means that minority ethnic graduates are less likely to access graduate opportunities in the labour market or to undertake postgraduate study. This may be one reason why the proportion of research postgraduates who were black was nearly half that of first degree undergraduates last year.

Employment of disabled graduates

Six months after leaving HE, unemployment rates were much higher among leavers with certain impairments than non-disabled leavers.

This suggests disabled students can be disadvantaged in finding employment following completion of their studies, which impacts on their future life prospects.

Assessing specific EDI issues for students

Does the governing body closely examine recruitment data and trends at faculty or subject level?

- What is the gender balance across subject areas? What is the institution doing to encourage more women or men to study subjects where they are under-represented?
- Does the institution collect student data for all protected characteristics? What are the disclosure rates for each characteristic? What actions should, or could the institution take to understand the equality barriers for these students?

Do graduate attainment rates (e.g. as measured by degree classification) vary significantly by gender or ethnic group?

- How does the attainment of our BME students, including by different ethnic groups, compare to that of white students? If there are gaps, what action is the institution taking?
- How does the attainment of male students compare to that of female students?

Is there significant variation in graduate employment rates for graduates with declared disabilities, gender or ethnic groups?

- What is the employment rate for disabled graduates, by impairment type, compared to non-disabled graduates? If there are large differences, what action is being taken?
- What are their respective employment rates for male and female students?

Staff inequalities

As with student data, there are often gaps in monitoring information for certain staff groups. This limits the institution's understanding of the equality challenges for these staff and the ability to take action. As with students, there is no robust national level data on the other protected characteristics to provide appropriate benchmarks.

BME people at senior levels

Proportionally, UK white academics hold far more professorial roles than UK black academics. Additionally, among UK professional and support staff, a smaller proportion of BME staff hold manager, director and senior official positions than white staff.

The under-representation of ethnic minority staff in senior roles suggests that there are barriers to their career progression within HEIs.

Disabled people at senior levels

A lower proportion of professors disclosed a disability (2.7%) than non-professorial academic staff (3.8%). A smaller proportion of disabled academics were employed on senior academic contracts than academics without a disclosed disability.

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People with impairments can face barriers, which may be physical, procedural or social, to employment and career progression in HEIs. Providing support and adjustments can remove these barriers and support the development of an inclusive environment.

Women at senior levels

79.5% of Heads of Institutions and over three quarters of professorships are held by males, resulting in 77.6 % of all professorial (5A level) posts being occupied by male employees . Additionally, the proportion of male staff on a senior contract level was nearly three times higher than for female staff.

The under-representation of women at senior levels within institutions suggests that insufficient action is being taken to support the progression of women within HEIs.

Gender pay gap

Median salaries for HEI staff were higher for men than women; the median gap in earnings was 14.6% across the UK.

The median gender pay gap varied across the different nations, being highest in Scotland (20.2 %) and lowest in England (13.7 %). The gap was higher amongst academic staff than professional and support staff.

Assessing specific EDI issues for staff

Does the governing body regularly review the EDI of its staffing base?

- What proportion of professors, senior academic roles and manager/director/senior official posts are held by BME staff? How does this compare to the local and student demographics?
- What proportion of professors are women? What proportion of senior contracts are held by women? What action is being taken to support the career progression of women?
- What proportion of professors and academics on senior contracts have disclosed a disability? What is the disability disclosure rate among staff? What action has been taken to support disabled staff?
- Is there a gender pay gap? If so, for which employment grades are there the largest gaps? What are the reasons?
- Is data on all protected characteristics collected? What are the disclosure rates for each characteristic? What action is the institution taking, or could take to understand equality barriers for these staff?



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