Evidence for Equality

The future of equality in higher education



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Equality Challenge Unit

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Equality Challenge Unit supports the higher education sector in its mission to realise the potential of all staff and students whatever their race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief, or age, to the benefit of those individuals, higher education institutions and society.



Introduction

Equality and diversity present an increasingly challenging agenda for the higher education sector. We now have seven protected equality areas – gender, race, disability, sexuality, religion, age and gender reassignment. These account for some significant and entrenched inequalities and imbalances in the sector. But the relationship between the equality areas and an individual's identity is often complex, and the equality areas do not automatically equate to inequality and disadvantage.

Evidence for Equality, Equality Challenge Unit's conference held in Manchester in November 2008, sought to engage with these issues. The two-day event focused on using a secure evidence-base that recognises these complexities but also informs actions and priorities. As Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, notes, 'Our recent preoccupation with the seven preset buttons of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief, age and gender reassignment may no longer be enough to identify the right focus for action'. Simon Fanshawe, Chair of Council at the University of Sussex, calls for 'a level of sophistication in the interrogation of the issues'. Armineh Soorenian outlines the interplay between different individual identities and categories by discussing the experiences of disabled international students, and Professor Chris Brink, Vice-chancellor of Newcastle University, challenges the concept of merit and value by reference to equality and disadvantage.

A clear message that emerges from the conference is that the equalities agenda will go nowhere unless it is championed at the highest level. A leadership committed to equality is the key to embedding equality and diversity throughout an institution and throughout the sector. Professor David Eastwood, Chief Executive of HEFCE, calls on the sector to present a model to society. Not to do so, he believes, would mean 'selling the vision of higher education short and … diminishing our civil and social value'.

In this booklet, we have brought together these outstanding keynote speeches to present a thoughtful and informed picture of equality and diversity in higher education – the progress, the challenges and the case for equality.

Detaching origins from destiny: higher education and the equality agenda

Trevor Phillips OBE, Chair of Equality and Human Rights Commission



Trevor Phillips was appointed Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in October 2007. Prior to this he was Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality. Trevor attended secondary school in Georgetown, Guyana, and studied chemistry at Imperial College London. Between 1978 and 1980, he was president of the National Union of Students. He then went into broadcasting, becoming head of current affairs at LWT in 1992. Trevor received awards from the Royal Television Society in 1988, 1993 and 1998. He was elected as a member of the Greater London Authority in May 2000, and became Chair of the Assembly later that month.

Good afternoon. This is an important gathering and thank you very much for inviting me, Nicola [Dandridge, Chief Executive of ECU]. I think it is especially important because of the theme you have chosen: the issue of evidence which, on the face of it, should be neutral and uncontentious. Although as you know – or I imagine you shall discover in your discussion – it is probably the most contentious question in the entire arena of equality and, as I will go on to say, in the arena of politics and public life today.

Your conference today comes just a short time after our first anniversary last month. Like any one-year-old the Commission has given its parents, my colleagues and I on the board, some sleepless nights. But we were lucky enough to be born with silver spoons in our mouths. We have the inheritance of social change led by our forerunners – the Commission for Racial Equality, the Disability Rights Commission and the Equal Opportunities Commission. Over the past 30 years, they have made some kinds of prejudice utterly unacceptable in our society.

It is genuinely unthinkable that now someone would say to a woman working for their organisation: I am not going to pay you the same as a man who sits next to you at a job because he is a breadwinner and you are only doing this for pin money. It is utterly unthinkable that anyone would openly say to anyone from an ethnic minority: I am not going to let you into this restaurant or pub, not because I dislike you, but because the other punters wouldn't like it.

These are things that have happened in my lifetime and we do not need to think of the gross examples of bigotry and intolerance to recognise that over the last 30 years, the series of changes which have been inspired, frankly, by changes in the legal framework, have changed people's everyday experience of life in this country.

As great as the changes in individual attitudes have been, and even as discrimination-based inequality has retreated, it has become clear that many symptoms of inequality have persisted, leaving us with a stubborn gap, for example, in pay between men and women, chronic underachievement of some ethnic groups, including some white children; and continuing discrimination and harassment against gay, lesbian and bisexual people. As the tide of individual bigotry has been walled off, we've revealed a shore dotted with the rocks of structural, systemic and cultural bias, all of which demand a rather different approach than the casework and the legally led campaigns of the past. That work isn't completed by any means. So let me be clear. In some areas – disability or sexual orientation for example – there are strong arguments to suggest that we are where we were 40 years ago on race and gender. Indeed, actually there are some people who would argue that in relation to some aspects of racism and sexism too. I don't agree but with the monumental events taking place across the Atlantic [the election of Barack Obama] I don't think that today is a good day to be suggesting that nothing's changed in our world.

The truth is that though progress in the fundamental task of reducing discrimination-based inequality has been uneven, there has been progress. That is principally why Parliament decided that the moment was right to create a new body to help us to tackle some of the cultural, systemic and structural inequalities that have resisted even the liberalised attitudes of the new century.

Our aim is a simple one. It is to detach origins from destiny. To put it simply, to make your destiny in terms of employment, where you live and what station you reach in life as detached as possible from your origins. Or perhaps to put it in a more precise way at an academic gathering, to randomise the relationship between life chances and intrinsic factors such as race, gender, disability and so on. Or, to put it yet another way, to create a society in which where you work, how much you earn and your highest level of education are all pretty unpredictable based on the occupations of your parents; the postcode in which you grow up; your gender, your ethnicity and any disability you might have.

For example:

= We know that educational outcomes are best predicted from the highest level of education reached by your mother.

= We know that if you are black and male you are more likely to be going to jail than to a traditional university.

= If you are female your brother, over a lifetime, is almost certain to earn the price of

two London homes more over the course of his career than you are even if you follow exactly the same career path – and by the way the same goes if you are a Pakistani man compared to your white male neighbour.

That is why our Commission has new duties that go beyond tackling pure individual discrimination. Equality has cultural and economic components. Take, for example, what we think of as a series of racial disadvantages that affect three groups taking success at GCSE as an indicator: African Caribbean boys – fewer than 30% likely to get five good GCSEs including Maths and English; Pakistani boys and girls – fewer than 40%; boys from some white families – fewer than 20%. Is it their race? If so, why are Africans doing better than African Caribbeans; if so, why are East African Asians doing much better than the average white child – about 65% to 45%; and what is it about these white families? Answer – we need to look in other dimensions. And in these three groups we see one significant factor.

In most British families the increase in household wealth during the past 20 years has come about through probably the single greatest social change in my lifetime – that women are now free to work, that they are in the labour market, and that most families now have at least one and a half salaries.

Forty years ago women with children were 69% less likely than male comparators to enter the labour market; today that gap is still large but it is down to 40%. The only groups for whom that has largely not been true are these three groups I've mentioned. Why?

= African Caribbean families – more than half of these children grow up in homes with just one adult – a mother, with two part-time jobs maybe, but the equivalent of one earner.

= Pakistani families – where fewer than one quarter of the women are likely to work – through tradition or because they don't speak English.

= White families – where there may be two parents, but they are young, and they are workless, and no-one may have worked steadily for a generation.

The issue here is not race; it is poverty – poverty of income and assets, but also poverty of aspiration and poverty of the experience of the world of work. So for us, in this new world the issues that we face are much bigger and wider than simply the questions of individual bigotry.

The dimensions of our inequality are more complicated than our current law has scope for; the barriers to our equality are more subtle than we often allow. The upshot of all this is that while our Commission carries the mandates and most of the power of the legacy commissions, we also have some new responsibilities, including the promotion of human rights and we have to find a new way to look at equality.

On the other side of the scale, we have new powers. And we are one of three publicly funded bodies in UK law with a statutory guarantee of independence from government – the others being the Electoral Commission and the BBC. That guarantee is vital. It ensures that we are able to carry out our mandate to promote equality, human rights and good relations without fear or favour.

These days, I think that our position as an independent and empowered voice for equality and human rights is increasingly important. In recent months, we have witnessed the effects that an economic downturn can have on the consciousness of a nation. After over ten years of uninterrupted economic growth we have seen the rapid unravelling of systems we thought we could rely on. Shared certainties have evaporated and have left insecurity in their wake.



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For us in the equality business, the crisis has an added significance. The modest gains we have made in the last ten years have been fuelled, in large part, by uninterrupted economic growth. But we know that things can change. And we all know the historic rule – when belts tighten it is disproportionately minorities and the worst-off who feel the pinch first.

In the higher education sector, the economic downturn could mean that more young adults from low-income backgrounds choose paid employment over higher education because they simply cannot afford the luxury of learning or start their working lives mired in debt; it could mean that Bangladeshi and Pakistani girls, for example, decide that now isn't the time to be a pioneer and be the first women in their families to go to university; and it could mean a continuation of the trend that sees students choose vocational courses such as accountancy over less employable, but challenging, subjects like Ancient Norse.

As you know, the emergence of what has come to be known as the widening participation agenda reflects a recognition by government that higher education opportunities should be extended to as many people from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible.

The significant increase in student numbers has propelled universities over the past 50 years from being bastions of privilege, open only to the well connected few, to being open and more accessible to people from a wide variety of backgrounds. We may argue over the relative merits of institutions and programmes of study, but the bottom line is more people in higher education and a wider variety of opportunities opening up. Whereas in my day, there were only around half a million university students in the UK in total, now, the same number of students join universities and other higher education institutions each year, bringing the total number to around 1.7 million.

This is increasingly important as the structure of our labour market changes, with a greater bias towards service sector jobs that need higher education qualifications and higher-level skills. The reality is a twin-track economy of skilled and unskilled work with less possibility of a cross-over between the two. Nine out of ten adults with a degree are in work, but only five out of ten adults with no qualifications are in work – and the gap between the two is growing wider not narrower.

We don't need a sociologist to tell us the effects of competition for the low-skilled jobs that remain; we can see it in the communities around the UK that have struggled with the absence of traditional industries – social networks break down, crime and disorder increase and life chances deteriorate.

While social mobility may not be the core mission of Britain's universities we can't deny that it is one of its greatest achievements. For most people who were the first in their family to go to university, the chance to have higher education and the chance to lift themselves up go hand in hand.

But is access to higher education – and attainment once you are there – genuinely shared fairly? Here, robust evidence is critical; and that evidence, if it is to be useful, needs to answer difficult questions such as:

- Why do some groups of ethnic minority students generally underperform, compared with their white counterparts – and why do some overachieve?
- Why do women generally achieve fewer first class degrees than men?
- And what can this tell us about other factors, such as the effect of class?

Last year, Aston University produced some research that was particularly instructive in this area. They recognised that ethnic minority students were underperforming and identified a disparity between the degree classes awarded to ethnic minority students and their white counterparts. Even after controlling for A-level results, UCAS tariff points and gender, it was still significant. Some of the underachievement was conflated with other factors; most notably, final year accommodation, prior achievement and whether the student opted to take a placement year. Most interestingly, the report recommends that students should be encouraged to live in university-maintained property in their final year, as that accounted for some of the most significant variances in attainment. Those who stayed in the parental home were more likely to underperform. This finding shows how factors that could potentially be cultural – staying in the parental home and not moving out while at university – could have a significant effect on ultimate achievement.

The Aston findings also raise questions about the effect of socio-economic background. Some of the most recent research – particularly following the inception of the top-up fee regime – showed that students were more likely to go to a university near their home town and live with their parents instead of accruing the additional cost of living in university halls. If Aston's research were to be translated across the board, this could mean that those students who choose this option could ultimately be disadvantaged.

Collecting together a robust evidence base in the way that Aston has done is the only way that viable solutions can be achieved. We need evidence-based policy-making to achieve real change, not – as I heard someone comment recently – policy-based evidence-making that doesn't do anyone any good. And while there are pockets of best practice, it still has to spread across the sector.

Some work conducted earlier this year for the Higher Education Academy found a majority of institutions without any specific mention of attainment by ethnicity or

gender in their equality schemes. Fewer still had any objectives or policies to tackle the attainment gap between white students and ethnic minorities or between men and women. More universities need to be following Aston's example and collecting evidence from their students to inform the work they pursue to close these gaps.

As public authorities, higher education institutions have a statutory duty to promote equality on certain grounds – currently gender, race and disability. When it becomes law, the new Equality Bill will carry this duty into the 21st century by making it a single duty that applies across all the protected grounds of equality. At the Commission we argue that the focus of this new duty should be on actions and outcomes, based on accurate evidence.

Enlightened universities and colleges will see the merit in providing sophisticated evidence of equality gaps by pure force of argument; less enlightened ones may have to do so by force of regulation. But let me be clear – this is not about amassing data as an end in itself, it is about providing smart evidence that will guide us towards real, effective change.

A crucial point about the way that we all, including the Unit itself, will need to approach these issues is this: returning to my earlier example of the way that we interpret the relative failure of some ethnic groups to flourish, I argued that we may need to correlate causes with factors which are not to do with race – in some cases. It may be that in other cases, as the Aston research showed, that though intrinsic factors such as ethnicity or gender or disability matter, they are actually proxy for what might be described as status factors – parental influence or lack of it, where you live, household wealth or income, a background in care, or I guess, quite possibly the most significant correlate to life chances post-Robbins, parents' highest level of education. So, should we be thinking as hard about these status issues as we do about race and gender as drivers for inequality?

So, for example, I think one of the biggest issues that is going to emerge in relation to inequality, not just in relation to education, is a fundamental shift that has been created by demographic change, and that is this: as the generation we call baby boomers move into their fifties, sixties and seventies we will see a shift in caring for these generations.

There are something like four million women who are between their mid-forties and their later fifties and early sixties, who having got their children out of the door to university, or possibly to jobs, are realising that far from now beginning to lead the lives they promised themselves in their twenties, they are now facing the responsibility of an elderly relative – often bereaved, frequently disabled, very commonly isolated – for whom they will be responsible in exactly the same way they were for their children. The difference is this: there is no 18 year old cut-off for these dependents. They may live for 25 years, they may live for 40 years. I think this is going to be one of the major social changes that is going to confront us in the next generation.

The point I'm trying to make is that, because in the past we decided on the 'preset stations' that drive inequality, there is a tremendous danger that we are going to miss new, and possibly even more powerful, drivers.

This might mean that our recent preoccupation with the seven preset buttons of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief, age and gender reassignment may no longer be enough to identify the right focus for action. This will be difficult to work through, and will leave us without a comforting structure in which we think we can identify the causes of disadvantage in any particular situation without too much evidence. But it may well be time for us to bite the bullet on this one.

Finally, I'd like to say this. At the Commission, we often talk about two great issues facing human beings in the 21st century. One is the toxic bundle of issues around climate change and how we face up to the challenge of tackling pollution and global warming. The other is how we can improve the state of relations between people of different backgrounds and races. In short, how we live with the planet and how we live with each other.

Thankfully, I don't have to worry about the first problem: that's the responsibility of some of the great researchers at your universities. However what I have tried to outline today – cutting across the various areas of your work and the challenges you face – is an attempt to deal with a small part of the second.

However, as your climate change researchers would ask me to turn off the light when I leave the room and do my bit for global warming, we need to be taking people with us in our pursuit of greater equality and asking them to play their part. Achieving greater equality – in universities and across society as a whole – doesn't just benefit minority groups; it benefits all 60 million people in the UK. And with this support, the arguments and the evidence behind us we can continue to work to eradicate inequality and build a society that ensures fairness for all.

At the heart of our approach is the simple proposition that we should start with the evidence: we will look to data and fact to determine where the most significant and intractable inequalities lie; we will determine what the drivers behind those inequalities are; and we will target them.

And we will expect the institutions of higher education to apply the scientific rigour and lucid inquiry for which they are famous to address the equality deficits that may exist across their student body, and amongst their research, teaching and administrative staff.

Embedding equality: a HEFCE perspective

Professor David Eastwood, Chief Executive of Higher Education Funding Council for England



Professor Eastwood is Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), a post he has held since September 2006. Prior to that he was Vice-chancellor of the University of East Anglia and Chief Executive of the Arts and Humanities Research Board. Professor Eastwood held a chair in Modern History at the University of Wales, Swansea, where he was also a Head of Department, Dean and Pro-Vice-chancellor. Whilst at Swansea he co-founded the National Centre for Public Policy. He is an Honorary Fellow of St Peter's College, Oxford, and Keble College, Oxford. Professor Eastwood has been appointed Vice-chancellor of the University of Birmingham with effect from 1 April 2009.

Frederick Engels, in *The Condition of The English Working Class,* records a conversation that he had with a Manchester mill owner in 1884. Engels came to Manchester to study at first-hand social conditions in the leading manufacturing centre of the world. He was aware of the conditions, the long hours, child labour, radically unfair remuneration for women, degrading social conditions, degrading housing conditions, and he recalls discussing this with a very liberal manufacturer walking down the street. They got to the corner and the manufacturer turned to him and said, 'And yet, sir, there is a great deal of money made in this city. Good day'.

That, in some ways, takes us to the heart of the matter. We cannot say something is okay because we get certain kinds of outcomes. We cannot say it is okay because it is profitable, or because we achieve proficiency. Without profitability, without efficiency, we do not make progress, but we cannot say that that is a sufficient answer.

That is precisely the complex agenda that Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) is addressing and shaping in the higher education sector. If we take equality seriously, if we embed the equality agenda in the sector, we do not forfeit our efficiency, we do not forfeit our effectiveness. We gain something above that in terms of the effectiveness of our institutions, in terms of the experience of our staff and students.

I don't speak as an expert in equality, but I do want to say that in the sector and institutions, we do have a story which is worth telling. In the ECU we have a way of addressing the equalities challenge which is highly appropriate for higher education and which is profound and successful.

The 2004 Higher Education Paper made a strong statement about education as a force for opportunity, education as a promoter of social justice and, of course, the white paper envisaged the opportunities agenda and the equalities agenda as something for staff and for students. To actually understand the equalities agenda we need to address it as communities, as integrated institutions, not with staff and students inhabiting two separate worlds.

What was the world that we were in when this particular chapter of the equalities agenda in higher education began? Back at the turn of the century, we were looking forward. We were looking forward to a changed legislative environment, we were looking forward to changed obligations on the sector, and the way in which we sought to facilitate the sector's response was by the establishment of ECU.

In the case of HEFCE, we sought not just to fund those agendas but to model them and we take some pride in HEFCE as an organisation that we do not just preach a gospel but actually we seek, as far as we can, to model best practice. For example our own single equality scheme was an early scheme and I think it has been of some utility in modelling a single equalities approach.

So if you look back to the turn of the century, in one sense these were quite new agendas in the way we were seeking to tackle them. Since then we have seen increasing commitment in the sector and real evidence of substantial progress.

Widening participation is something that the sector and its funding council have taken seriously. This agenda is one we have prosecuted with success over the past few years. If you look at ethnic minority participation in higher education, it is moving in the right direction.

We in higher education have gone through a major process of job and role evaluation, which was designed to deal with issues of equity, issues of inappropriate differentials in remunerations, and we have made substantial progress through that.

On disability we have made a step forward. Just compare the way in which buildings are now modelled, the way in which student residences are constructed, with what we were doing in the mid-1990s – and in the mid-1990s we thought we were pretty savvy about disability. Look at the way in which the needs of people who are disabled are accommodated within our campuses. It is that move from seeing appropriate disabled access as something that you need to do, almost a kind of indulgence, to something which is not only desirable, but part of a higher education institution's commitment to its wider misson and responsibilities. When you look at new residences, when you look at new teaching accommodation, it is a statement about that kind of inclusivity.

If we look at the number of black and minority ethnic academic staff at all levels over the last 12 years, the underlying trend is upwards. We can have a discussion as to whether the rate of that increase is as it should be, but nevertheless that is movement in an appropriate direction. The same is true if we look at the growth of female academic staff at all grades. That is not to say that we have wholly dealt with the challenges around academic promotion, but the suggestion there is that new approaches to promotion have at least met some of the challenges we knew were there.

Again, if you look at the growth of academic staff who declared themselves as having a disability, the numbers have risen quite sharply. What is interesting about those numbers is that it is self-declaration. We seem to be moving into a period where people feel more comfortable about making statements about themselves and about particular needs that they have in the workplace.

So there is a story to tell from the evidence – a story of commitment, and progress in the right direction. But none of that should lead anybody to complacent conclusions. None of that should lead people to presume that there is complacency in leadership in higher education around gender and equalities challenges. The issues remain real and they remain significant.

There are real issues around differentials in degree attainment. And while there is a move through of women into more senior positions, if you look at the body of vice-chancellors, of heads of institutions, it is still overwhelmingly male. We have 19 women vice-chancellors at the moment. I think that is a record number, but it hardly reflects the kind of balance that we would expect in a profession like ours.

When we look at other issues around sexual orientation, there is almost a desert of relevant data and this is an area where there is a danger that policy is driven by hypothesis rather than evidence.

The issue of white working class boys' participation in higher education has been fascinating. When I started doing this job, I did say that there was a problem here and I was ruled out of court on a number of occasions – it was at that point, back in 2006, quite a lonely argument to mount. My argument was simply that there is evidence here that we have another group which is underperforming expectations. We have evidence that there is a group which is slipping back in terms of participation and performance, and we ought to add that to the challenges that we face.

There has been an assumption in this debate (and perhaps in the wider equalities debate as a whole) that if you identify a new challenge, this would somehow displace another group about whom you were concerned. We have to see the equalities agenda as a dynamic process, not in any sense as exclusive. We do not damage our commitment by making it a more capacious agenda. In fact I would argue the more capacious it is, the more powerful it becomes.

So the challenges that remain are very substantial and we at the funding council are under no illusions that this will pose more challenges for us in the way that we try and facilitate and steer the sector.

As we move forward, thinking about single equalities and the likely outcome of that, as a sector, we are trying to operate ahead of this curve rather than behind it. We are trying to anticipate and position ourselves for change, rather than respond reluctantly to change. I also think with ECU we have got a remarkably effective partner organisation advising us as the funding council, but also advising the sector as we move forward into the single equalities environment.

In that spirit of building on the success of the last few years, promoting the work of ECU and, indeed, showcasing what is happening in many of our institutions, HEFCE will continue to support and to underwrite this work, and we will continue to recognise that the equalities agenda is becoming more wide-ranging. We will try and reflect that in the way we work with partner bodies, and we will try and reflect that in the funding that we are able to put into the equalities process.

With that in mind, it is now important that this becomes a whole institutions agenda, not simply an agenda about staff, about remuneration, around opportunities, around workplace issues, but a whole universities agenda where what we model for our staff is what we model for our students and vice versa.

That is not to say we have not been thinking about diversity issues within the student bodies – we have been thinking profoundly about those. As we move forward, it will repay institutions thinking about what they do on the learning and teaching side of the house as well as what they do on the HR side of the house.

'There has been an assumption in this debate (and perhaps in the wider equalities debate as a whole) that if you identify a new challenge, this would somehow displace another group about whom you were concerned. We have to see the equalities agenda as a dynamic process, not in any sense as exclusive. We do not damage our commitment by making it a more capacious agenda. In fact I would argue the more capacious it is, the more powerful it becomes.'

In addition to the work that we fund through ECU and the work that both the Leadership Foundation and the Higher Education Academy take forward in this and in related fields, we also work directly with institutions through our leadership, governance and management (LGM) fund. The LGM fund aims to support projects which are worthwhile in themselves, but projects that are also exemplary and can provide a new force and challenge to the sector. We will continue to work in this way with particular institutions to complement the work of ECU. I think if you were to look across the range of LGM-funded projects with institutions, you would get a sense of the breadth of the agenda as far as institutions are concerned, but it would also give you a fix on the institutional commitment.

So, finally, what do I think are the future challenges for higher education in the areas of equalities?

I think we now need to continue to move from equalities being an area still regarded in some institutions as a challenge or a problem, to the point where the equality agenda is fully embedded in what we do.

I don't think we are yet there. I think we've made substantial progress, but it is the embedding of equalities thinking and the understanding of the equalities issues right across institutions which will enable us to take the next big step in the equalities agenda.

I always find the question of multiple identities infinitely interesting. In a former life, as a historian, I was very interested in Britishness and I think I published the first book which had 'multiple identities' in the title. So I have a particular sensitivity around issues of multiple identities. I think here it has a different kind of meaning and I think particularly in universities we need to, and should, understand the complexity of people, the complexity of our students and the way in which students construct their identities. We have to capture that richness, we have to capture the fact that these are students with multiple identities. It is the way they think about themselves and it has got to be reflected in our approach. Though there are good policy reasons for disaggregating various kinds of characteristics and elements, when talking about real people, real students, real colleagues, we have to understand and to reflect the complexity of their make up and the multiple identities that they embody.

I am not going to stress the need for improvement in the equal opportunities data and the evidence base, because that is precisely why you are here [at this conference] and you have made this very strong statement that this is an evidence-based and evidence-informed agenda. What I would say is that we stand ready to play our part in the development and the enrichment of the relevant data, whether they be datasets collected at the time, or data gathered through rigorous social science.

There are a number of issues that we know are on the horizon, issues around working flexibility, of retirement, issues about interfaith relations on campuses, etc. All of these issues need to take their place in an integrated approach to the equalities challenge.

I would like to make three final and important points.

The first is that I think we do need to make single equalities schemes strategic. That is something we are working through as an organisation ourselves, but if we can do that, then the process of embedding, which I was referring to earlier, will be taken forward very powerfully. The more we can think about a single equalities scheme, the more we can think about our approach as something which is structural, woven into the DNA of proceedings.

Secondly, higher education has two responsibilities. It has the responsibility to harness its research power – we as a sector ought to be very comfortable operating from an evidence-based agenda. We might not find the answers that emerge always comfortable and we certainly might not find the challenges that emerge easy, but nevertheless, we ought to be ideologically committed to harnessing the rigour of research to this process.

The second responsibility that we in higher education have is to model to wider society best and liberal practice, best and liberal values. Universities must, and should, be places where diversity is not simply accommodated but is celebrated. Our campuses should be places where people find themselves, find their identities in ways which are empowering and ways which enrich not only their own lives but the lives of those around them. And if our campuses are not those kinds of places, then I think we are selling ourselves short. We are selling the vision of higher education short and we are diminishing our civic and social value.

Finally, there is a cautionary note when we start to think about the impact that the current recession might have on these agendas, and others. We have, in higher education, had ten years with very substantial real-term increases in development. I think that as we look back, we will see it as a golden period for higher education in terms of investments and results. Whatever the impact of the recession, the next few years will be years of greater challenge. The next few years will be years where the competition for public investment is much more fierce and resource might be less extensive than it has been. If we are moving from a period of investment in higher education to a plateau, it is axiomatic that we do not sacrifice the progress we have made and that we do not set aside the challenges that are in front of us. It is fundamental that equalities must not simply be an agenda for the good times, but an agenda for all times.

‘Extreme isolation’: experiences of disabled international students in UK universities

Armineh Soorenian, Centre for Disability Studies, University of Leeds



Armineh Soorenian is a disabled, postgraduate, international mature student, studying for a PhD at the University of Leeds. Her research investigates disabled international students’ experiences, examining and identifying ways of removing the barriers they face in their university life. Through her research, Armineh is determined to improve this group’s experiences and increase their sense of inclusion in academic life.

Armineh’s research examines the relevance of inclusive educational practices within UK universities with reference to disabled international students’ experiences. It is based on first-hand experiences. The data have been collected and preliminarily analysed through 30 student interviews and one focus group. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

As previous studies have shown, disabled domestic students who enter higher education often face various discriminatory and non-inclusive economic or environmental practices which hamper their educational progress.

Higher education, for instance, is more inclined to adapt the individualistic medical definition of disability in the Disability Discrimination Act, evidenced, for example, in the way that disability is categorised in the UCAS form, causing concerns for students about disclosing their impairments.

Gloria, in my research, explains this anxiety:

‘I didn’t specify what, I just told them [name of impairment]. Yeah, I wasn’t straightforward and to the point, because I didn’t know what they needed the information for and I thought that could have been used against me in a way or other, so I didn’t.’

Non-disabled international students similarly face many barriers to their education. These include a range of issues, such as:

= practical challenges including time management and accommodation concerns
= emotional and affective issues which might include stress and home sickness
= cultural adaptation and integration, such as developing adequate cross-cultural skills
= pedagogic difficulties, such as unfamiliarity with the UK system
= course delivery and design

Sova confirms this last point:

‘Writing assignments was enough for me because in the UK they ought to be more comprehensive than in my country. It has to do with English academic writing tradition. To write well in English you have to think in it, which is sometimes quite difficult for a foreigner. My essays were not perfect in terms of style and grammar and they lacked the knowledge of the British argumentation system, I suppose.’

All of the physical and educational barriers mentioned previously for disabled domestic students may be particularly heightened for disabled international students who may also contend with possible additional cultural and linguistic difficulties experienced by a number of their non-disabled international counterparts.

Most international students experience a degree of cultural shock. How people live and work in other countries may challenge their own experiences. For disabled international students, however, this is often exaggerated by additional factors such as the level and types of academic and disability support required and provided, physical and informational accessibility and different cultures of disability which can significantly affect a successful study period.

Sova, for example, compares non-disabled peoples’ attitudes towards disabled people in the UK with her experiences back home:

‘Yes, indeed, people in the UK are more disability friendly and helpful. They don’t think of you as an alien. Say some 15 to 20 years ago, disabled people of any Soviet Republic were segregated in special boarding schools, factories, resting homes and hostels. They had to do their shopping in special shops and would have rarely participated in mainstream life. Recently the situation has been improved, though most people in the street would still try to pass you as quickly as they can. Generally my compatriots perceive disability as a handicap.’

Joseph, on the other hand, comments on difficulties that he had observed relating to the support systems available:

‘The feeling that in England everything is more based on finances, all the help is available as long as you have the right funding. In my country not all the help is available, but the help you do get has a more socially inclusive character.’

Moreover, the identification of international students’ impairments and related support needs may be difficult due to language and cultural barriers and complications. Gloria states:

'No, I didn't receive adequate support. The process of needs assessment is too complicated. Furthermore, in diagnosing dyslexia, tests to assess non-native English speakers, for example, are not always available.'

Gloria's response indicates the general inaccessibility of the assessment procedure for students whose native language is not English:

'I didn't want to bother to explain problems to the disability services staff in English. It was quite tiring to speak in English when I first arrived.'

Generally, there are no specific grants available for disabled and international students who are only allowed to remain in the UK on the condition that they make no recourse to public funds, including such welfare benefits as the disabled students allowance. Therefore, for students who require high levels of support in their home country, additional financial and personal burdens associated with this support on top of their high international tuition fees may make it difficult.

These students may initially feel they must cope on their own without assistance. However, as Ed explains, even when he explained his impairments in full detail, the appropriate help was not offered. In his opinion this was related to issues surrounding lack of funding.

'The disability services assessed my needs but they did not provide support due to funding. I think it is about my disability and my status as international student as well.'

Having the opportunity to socialise is fundamental for students who leave their home environment for the first time to study elsewhere, yet university experience may be a lonely one to begin with. A few students mentioned having reservations about being in a new environment, and taking part in social events when they first arrived at university, but for some the outcome was fulfilling. Alice, for instance, a student with a visual impairment from an English-speaking country and therefore with a similar cultural heritage to Britain states:

'It was hard at first to have a social life, but by the end of the year, I had a lot of friends and felt at home in my university.'

However, in my research, the reasons provided pertaining to why the majority of students found it difficult to socialise or participate in student activities included:

- inaccessible information
- physical access issues
- lack of confidence
- attitude of others
- transport
- health reasons
- study pressures
- funding issues
- reliance on friends and personal assistants

Tanjy, for example, expresses her concerns over not having friends to socialise with:

'Social life and participating in sport activities is not possible due to isolation and no one to take me. I have zero involvement with social life. I'm in extreme isolation.'

Despite these concerns, it appears that very little is being written about disabled international students' unique experiences, although figures provided by the Higher Education Statistical Agency indicates that between 2001/02 and 2004/05, the percentage increase in disabled international students entering British higher education is 38.24 percent (this figure exceeded both disabled domestic students' increase in percentage [37.02%] and that of non-disabled international students [31.38%]).

Yet, there is no designated organisation responsible for this group's affairs. This means that there are no official services for representation and advice. As a result of the limited service offered, disabled international students may consider themselves to be invisible.

Gloria, for example, mentioned the reason she did not get involved in any social activity was because she did not feel included. Disabled international students may feel discriminated against and rejected from such groups, such as students with disabilities within the NUS, and also from non-disabled international students groups such as the UKCISA.

Tony's statement reflects this isolation:

'Social life is quite bad actually because if you are a disabled student it is always hard anyway, but then if they see that you are an international disabled student, they even shy away a lot more, thinking probably you are different.'

Moreover, the need for further research and practical insights is highlighted by one informant's comments for my research. When asked how their university experience could be improved, Tanjy responded:

'By creating a good support system, a circle so that international disabled students know where to go for advice and understand what rights they have. At the moment advice and help is too fragmented.'

I have provided an overview of only a small number of key issues pertinent to disabled international students in UK universities resulting from them belonging to two minority groups. However my research hopes to outline key areas for future policy working to improve disabled students' academic experiences within UK universities.

‘Standards will drop’: dispelling fears about the equality agenda in higher education

Professor Chris Brink, Vice-chancellor of Newcastle University



Professor Brink became Vice-chancellor of Newcastle University in 2007. Before this, he was Rector and Vice-chancellor of Stellenbosch University in South Africa, where he led an internationally renowned transformation agenda. Prior to this, Professor Brink also served as Pro-Vice-chancellor (Research) at the University of Wollongong in Australia. He is a logician with a Cambridge PhD, an interdisciplinary DPhil, with Master’s degrees in philosophy and mathematics, and a Bachelor’s degree in computer science. Professor Brink sits on ECU’s Board of Directors.

Professor Brink’s speech is based on personal experiences of higher education in the UK, South Africa and Australia.

Summary

I discuss, on the basis of experience in South Africa, the UK and Australia, some common fears and negative opinions about the equality agenda in higher education.

These include:

- ‘Standards will drop’
- ‘Our reputation will suffer’
- ‘It’s not our problem’
- ‘It’s social engineering’
- ‘It’s unfair’
- ‘It’s a waste of time’

Introduction and context

As a relative newcomer to higher education in the UK, I have found it interesting to observe the local manifestations of some universal themes. Discussions about the Research Assessment Exercise, student fees, the skills gap, and efforts at widening participation all sound familiar in outline, if not in detail. The debate about equality in higher education, in particular, has caught my attention, since this is a matter with which, in a different country and a different context, I have had some experience.

Much has been said and written about the case for equality. I thought it might be of value to offer a few observations about the fears, doubts and anxieties that permeate the other side of the debate, even when these are not explicitly articulated as a case against equality, but manifest themselves rather as a lack of support. Moreover, it might be of value to do so in a comparative sense, juxtaposing what I experienced elsewhere with what I encounter here.

I acknowledge – indeed, I must stress – that my new context and circumstances are quite different from my immediate past. None the less, the fundamental fears I encounter in the UK seem to me very similar to what I have heard elsewhere. I should add that, inevitably, such a juxtaposition of different experiences will have a somewhat anecdotal nature.

The equality agenda

What is the equality agenda? It seems to me that the heart of the matter is a desire for equality of opportunity. The aim is that nobody who has the ability to go to university should lack the opportunity to do so, no matter what his or her circumstances are.

The equality agenda is not, to my mind, a belief that nature has endowed us all with equal gifts. It accepts that not all individuals have equal intellectual ability, just as we do not all have equal physical or artistic or musical ability.

Nor is the equality agenda an argument for engineering social uniformity. On the contrary, it starts from a premise of the value of social diversity, on somewhat the same grounds as we argue the case for biodiversity.

Moreover, the equality agenda accepts that people find themselves in different circumstances – rich or poor, urban or rural, employed or unemployed. Of particular relevance are those circumstances beyond the choice or control of the individual: being born into an ethnic minority, being disabled, or being mathematically gifted, for example.

What the equality agenda does not accept is that the membership of an individual in any particular societal group is a determinant of the ability of that individual. The equality agenda holds that individuals of different abilities can be found in different societal groups and under different circumstances, and that the ability of the individual should not be impeded by any such factors.

Quite simply, then, the equality agenda is that ability should be able to access opportunity regardless of circumstance.

Pursuing this agenda

Why should we pursue an equality agenda? There are three broad categories of argument in favour of doing so.

The first category contains arguments couched in terms of natural rights and social justice. These are founded on the idea that everybody has a right to education, that as a matter of social justice nobody should be disadvantaged in exercising that right, and that under-representation in education of any societal group may be a sign of a systemic denial of such rights, in which case society has a moral obligation to intervene in order to rectify the matter. This kind of argument often arises in considering the participation of low-income groups against the background of fees. In the UK in the early 2000s, as was the case in Australia in the early 1990s, charging fees at university was a new phenomenon, which gave rise to much debate about the possibility of higher education being unfairly denied to those without the ability to pay.

A second set of arguments for widening participation are founded on the notion of redress. In South Africa after 1994 a strong driving force for increasing both the numbers and the ratio of participation of black students and staff has been to rectify the inequalities of the past, when apartheid policies restricted educational opportunities for black people. That is why, in South Africa, the equality agenda is often referred to as 'corrective action'. Moreover, the societal groups at which the corrective action is aimed are not in the first instance defined by race, or gender, or locality, but in terms of history, and are collectively called 'previously disadvantaged groups'.

A third set of reasons for equality refer not to rights but to utility, and not to the past but to the future. These are the arguments which say that if we only draw participants in higher education from certain sectors of society then we are missing an opportunity to optimise potential across the broad base of the population, and hence our exploitation of the human capital available to society would be sub-optimal. These arguments, too, have a strong appeal in South Africa, where about 80% of the population are African blacks. Where the target groups for widening participation form only a small part of the population, such as Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia (about 2%), the optimisation argument has correspondingly less force.

Special interests

I will confess at the outset to two special interests – hobby horses, if you like. The first is widening participation, which is that special case of the equality agenda which is concerned with getting more students from certain under-represented groups into university.

To be clear, we should distinguish at the outset between widening participation and increasing participation. The idea of increasing participation is about numbers: the question is how many people, or what percentage of the entire population, experience higher education. In the UK, the government has set a target that 50% of young people aged 18–30 should have had some experience of higher education.

The idea with widening participation, however, is not primarily about changing numbers, but about changing ratios. It is about increasing the ratio of participation of certain identifiable societal groups who are considered to be under-represented in higher education. 'Under-representation' is typically taken to mean that the percentage of participants in higher education from that societal group is less than the average rate of participation of the entire population, although it may sometimes be defined more specifically as being too low in comparison to certain other societal groups.

What exactly these societal groups are, and in what terms they are identified, would vary from place to place. In Australia, emphasis is placed on the under-representation of indigenous people, meaning people from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. In South Africa after 1994, the emphasis has been on under-representation of black people compared to white people. In the UK, even though widening participation would officially include groups such as ethnic minorities, later learners, and children in care, the debate around widening representation is firmly anchored in a discourse of class, with unblinking use of terminology such as 'the lower socio-economic classes'.

My second hobby horse is the interplay between the language and the substance of the debate. The reasons given for the equality agenda often relate to the particularities of the groups of which we would like to raise the participation ratio, which in turn relate to societal circumstances, which means that the debate about widening participation is largely socially conditioned.

Part of that social conditioning consists of the terminology and language we use in conducting our debates. Our language of discourse on equality will differ from place to place according to circumstances, culture and history. The legacy issues on race so central to the debate in South Africa, for example, only have a distant resemblance to talk of 'ethnic minorities' in the UK, and the class discourse of the UK would be foreign in egalitarian Australia.

Moreover, the language of discourse may change over time. In South Africa there was a shift in the terms of discourse about widening participation from the pre-1994 era to the post-1994 era. Pre-1994, the mainstay of the argument for widening participation was in terms of human rights. After 1994, once these rights became enshrined in the new constitution, the focus shifted from rights to redress, and over time I believe will shift again from redress to optimisation.

Why do I consider this important? Because our thinking can be conditioned by our language of discourse, just as much as being expressed in it. Our habitual terminology, which is socially conditioned, will influence the reasons we give for engaging in widening participation, and consequently the actions we take.

For example, an assumption of deprivation, coupled with a language of discourse based on terms such as 'lower socio-economic classes', will emphasise justification of

widening participation in terms of the first category of reasons indicated above: those phrased in terms of rights, obligations and social justice. If you emphasize deprivation, you will be led to a discourse of victimhood, entitlement and obligation, rather than to the more neutral topic of optimising talent and tapping potential.

Likewise, our use of language is important in the discourse (sometimes sotto voce) about why we should not pursue the equality agenda – or at least why it might not quite get the kind of support its advocates think it should be getting. This discourse mostly has to do with fears that by engaging in the equality agenda something valuable will be lost, such as educational standards, institutional prestige, strategic focus, or a slice of the budget.

That brings me to the topic of this paper. In discussing some of these fears, I will concentrate on issues relating to widening participation.

'Standards will drop'

This is the most common and stereotypical fear concerning widening participation. Its basis is the observation that, almost by definition, the under-representation in higher education of some particular societal group correlates with the fact that people from that group do not meet university entry requirements to the same extent as the rest of the population.

Consequently, admitting students from such groups into university – usually under some kind of special admission programme – has the effect that the average school-leaving results of the new cohort are lower than they would have been without such a programme.

If 'standards will drop' means nothing more than that – that relaxing entry criteria results in the average entry qualification going down – then the point may be readily conceded. But the fear factor is more than that. 'Standards will drop' is usually code for a bigger claim, namely that the quality of education on offer will suffer as a consequence of widening participation.

The first point to note in response is that if talk is of standards, then it is necessary to distinguish entry standards from exit standards. By conflating these two, the fear that 'standards will drop' extrapolates from an observed change in entry standards to a postulated change in exit standards, and from there to a conclusion that the quality of education will decline. But that does not follow – it depends on whether or not value-add measures are instituted for those who enter under a special admissions programme, and how effective these are.

In the mid-1990s, at the University of Cape Town, I served for a while as Coordinator of Strategic Planning under Dr Mamphela Ramphele, the first black woman vice-chancellor in South Africa, and in that capacity came up, as part of our strategic plan, with the slogan 'Flexible on access, firm on success'. We had a flexible admissions programme, aimed largely at black students disadvantaged by apartheid education, backed up by an Alternative Admissions Research Project.

This flexible access was coupled with active support. We had a special unit called the Academic Support Programme, through which we offered options such as extra tutorials, walk-in consulting rooms, better staff-student ratios, and extended degree programmes. My experience was that students admitted under the alternative admissions scheme, who successfully completed their degrees with the aid of such support schemes, were of equal exit standard on graduation to students who had completed the standard programme. Moreover, far from the standard of education declining, I believe we actually learnt a great deal more about quality education by offering such programmes than we would have done in their absence. I realised at that time that the reward of teaching is not just in turning straight-A school-leavers into straight-A graduates, but also in turning weak starters into strong finishers.

There is by now solid evidence for the claim that sufficient value-add measures can result in students with lesser entry standards attaining perfectly acceptable exit standards. This is true even in very demanding environments such as the undergraduate medical degree.

At Newcastle University, some students, including medical students, have been admitted since 2000 on an alternative access route called the Partners Programme, which will accept students from disadvantaged backgrounds with lower school-leaving results than the norm (after successfully attending a summer school). Of these, 92% of the 2002 to 2004 entry cohorts of Partners alumni graduated with a degree classification of lower second or better, which compares well with the overall average of 95% for the same three years.

Similar results have been observed elsewhere. A recent article in the *British Medical Journal*[1] reports on an Extended Medical Degree Programme at King's College London. Students coming from certain specified 'educationally deprived' boroughs in inner London are admitted with a school-leaving result of three C-grades, rather than the usual two As and a B, and put through an extra year of study. Despite their lower entry grades, and slower start, in the later clinical years pass rates are comparable to those of conventional students.

'Our reputation will suffer'

This is a variation on the theme of 'standards will drop'. Essentially, it says: 'Other people will think our standards will drop, so our reputation will suffer, which means we will not be able to attract the best students and staff, which means our standards will drop'. In a higher education environment where reputation is sometimes seen as

hinging on newspaper league tables, this argument cannot be dismissed lightly.

The Times Good University Guide, for example, uses entry scores as one of the parameters in calculating a ranking of UK universities. In the 2007 Guide, the entry score for Medicine at Newcastle is quoted as 476 points, and our ranking on this parameter as seventeenth. Removing the Partners Programme students from the equation would have taken our entry score to 510, and moved our ranking from seventeenth to seventh on that particular parameter, thus improving also our overall score. The Partners Programme, to which we are firmly committed, therefore comes at a cost in terms of league table positions.

Sometimes it is best to meet this argument of reputational risk head on. Before coming to Newcastle, I was Vice-chancellor at Stellenbosch University in South Africa from 2002 to 2007. Stellenbosch, the university and the town, are known for a number of things: spectacular natural beauty and a wonderful climate, the heart of the wine route of the Cape, and for a long time the South African mecca of rugby.

It is all of that. It is also, however, the place where apartheid was born. For many decades, Stellenbosch University had an intimate relationship with the powers of Afrikaner nationalism. D.F. Malan, the first apartheid prime minister, was a Stellenbosch resident. Hendrik Verwoerd, the true architect of apartheid ideology, was a professor of Sociology at Stellenbosch University before entering politics. His successor, John Vorster, was a student leader at Stellenbosch, and eventually Chancellor of the University – as was Vorster's successor, P.W. Botha.

With that background, it is not surprising that, even after 1994, changes towards a more diverse student population were slow. For some time, while other universities painfully reinvented themselves, Stellenbosch remained an enclave of Afrikaner hegemony. Debates – such as there were – were conducted in a language almost alien to the new South Africa.

When I took up the vice-chancellorship in January 2002, I felt that a change in the terms of discourse was a prerequisite for a change of ethos at the university. I therefore did two things. The first, within weeks, was to state in front of a university-wide assembly that 'Stellenbosch needs more diversity'. The second, once the usual arguments of the 'Yes, but …' variety were being trotted out, was to give an educational rationale for why more diversity would be good for the university. The claim I made was that quality needs diversity.[2]

For this point of view I gave a number of reasons, which I will not rehearse here, but the heart of the matter was the following idea:

Diversity has an inherent educational value. That is why we need more of it. The university is an educational institution. Our business is about knowledge. That means that we all have to learn, all the time. Students learn through their lectures, their assignments, their tutorials. Staff learn through their research, through their interaction with the community, and through their teaching. One way or another, we all have to learn, and keep on learning. And we will learn more from those people, those ideas, and those phenomena that we do not know, than from those we know only too well. We need around us people who represent the rich spectrum of South African life, and we need the diversity of ideas that are new to us. We need to pursue this diversity of people and ideas to increase the quality of our core business – which is to learn. Only in this way, I believe, can we really meet our responsibility to our students. We need, and we wish, to prepare our students to become active and confident participants in a multicultural and globalised society. Whatever the advantages may be of a mono-cultural institution, they do not include the opportunity to meet and engage with many different viewpoints, and to learn about many different environments. One reason why our engagement with diversity of colour is so urgent for us in South Africa is that engagement between black and white people is such a powerful training ground for engagement with different ideas.

As might be imagined, the idea that quality needs diversity was not an immediate hit at Stellenbosch. At first, in fact, a lot of opposition arose from a simple confusion of necessary and sufficient conditions. I was criticised for saying that an increase in diversity would result in an increase in quality (which I did not). What I did say, and what eventually became understood, is that I believed Stellenbosch could not attain true educational quality without breaking away from homogeneity.

Of course that did not end the debate. However, and I think importantly, it changed the nature of the debate. In particular, the fears that 'standards will drop' and 'our reputation will suffer' could be addressed by arguing, on educational terms, that diversity is a necessary ingredient of quality.

'It's not our problem'

This is the fear that universities may get sucked into a societal problem that is not of their making and to which they cannot provide a solution. The most common manifestation of this fear is 'Yes, but the problem lies in the schools'. On this view, universities can only fish in a pond stocked by the schools.

In the UK, the common route towards admission to university is via a school-leaving qualification called 'A-level', typically around age 18. But the common route towards A-level is via a qualification called the GCSE, typically around age 16. The most recent figures show that only 46.5% of 16 year olds achieved the kind of GCSE results that would typically lead to A-levels (five or more GCSEs at grade C or better, including Maths and English). That is the kind of figure that may raise concerns about increasing participation in higher education.

But it is the breakdown of that figure into societal groups that raises concerns about widening participation. According to Professor Steve Smith, a member of the government's National Council for Educational Excellence:

The class differences are stark. In the last year (2003) for which full details are available by socio-economic class, 42% of 16 year olds obtained five GCSEs A*–C including Maths and English. Yet for children from the higher socio-economic groups that figure was 57%, for lower groups it was 31%, and for those eligible for free school meals the figure falls to 16%. We know that once a student qualifies with A levels, eligibility for free school meals makes no difference to their going to university. Therefore, the critically important determinant is that they do not progress in education after 16, mainly because their GCSE grades are not good enough to get onto the right courses. If we want to widen participation the task is to increase the percentage of those from the lowest four socio-economic groups going on to university and that requires raising their pass rate for five GCSEs, including Maths and English.[3]

Universities may well argue that raising the pass rates for 16 year olds at GCSE level is not part of their core business. And that would be true – but it does not follow that a university may not choose, quite legitimately, to engage with this problem.

At Newcastle University we have embraced the ideal of reinventing the notion of a civic university. There is a rich and honourable tradition of civic universities in the former industrial cities of the UK responding to societal demands for intellectual capital arising from what would now be called the 'lower socio-economic classes'. The tradition of workers' associations aimed at intellectual improvement still resonates in and around many of these cities. A recent play, 'The Pitmen Painters'[4], tells the story, for example, of miners from a colliery in Ashington (near Newcastle) in the 1930s, who not only formed an art appreciation society, but became an active and creative group of painters of some renown. In the context of such a tradition, a modern civic university like Newcastle may choose to construct a portfolio of civic engagement which embraces engagement with schools as part of that portfolio – which we do. And we do not see that engagement as being outside our core business, since much of what we do in this regard has a scholarly educational aspect.

'It's social engineering'

I have heard this fear expressed a number of times since coming to the UK. At first I was puzzled why this particular activity is singled out in this way, because so much of what I have encountered in the UK could equally well be classed as social engineering.

A national curriculum for children under five, for example, with 69 specified 'learning outcomes', seems very much like social engineering to those of us who come from places where children are allowed the luxury of being children for a little longer. When the government semi-nationalises British banks because of an international financial crisis, this must surely count as social engineering. And a national campaign to discourage people from smoking or littering or binge drinking are examples of social engineering which many of us probably support.

When government policy on promoting equality in higher education is criticised as 'social engineering', there are two different aspects worth considering. One is the language of discourse. The term 'social engineering' seems to be reserved for what is considered as harmful social engineering. Any other government-sponsored behaviour-changing initiative on a national scale, which might well fall under the same objective definition of 'social engineering', but which is considered to be benevolent and/or beneficial, will not be called social engineering at all.

The other aspect is the fear that any government agenda of enhancing equality in higher education would be a coercive kind of social engineering. The fear is that universities may be, or are being, pressurised into doing something they may not



'Diversity has an inherent educational value. That is why we need more of it. The university is an educational institution. Our business is about knowledge... one way or another, we all have to learn, and keep on learning. And we will learn more from those people, those ideas, and those phenomena that we do not know, than from those we know only too well.'

wish to do, or at least may not wish to do in the manner or to the extent that the state desires.

This brings into play the notion of academic freedom. My first personal encounter with such matters was at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in the 1980s, when South Africa was still an apartheid state, and the government was still implementing a coercive policy of segregating students into 'black' and 'white' universities. UCT was one of the universities which had opposed such policies from the outset. TB Davie, Vice-chancellor at UCT in the 1950s, encapsulated the resistance of liberal universities against apartheid interference in higher education by defining academic freedom as the right of each university to decide for itself:

- who shall teach,
- who shall be taught,
- what shall be taught, and
- how it shall be taught.

After 1994 the argument shifted. There was broad national consensus that the legacy issues of apartheid had to be addressed. One manifestation of the government's intention of doing so was the national 'mergers and amalgamations' initiative of 2002/03 which consolidated the patchwork of 36 pre-1994 higher education institutions into 22 universities, often bringing formerly 'black' and formerly 'white' institutions together. Stellenbosch University, where I was then the new Vice-chancellor, escaped virtually unscathed.

An intriguing problem then confronted me. As much as I supported the T.B. Davie principles while at UCT, I was conscious of the fact that a strict adherence to those same principles at Stellenbosch, 20 years later, could be used to slow down or negate the corrective action encouraged by the post-apartheid democratic government. Stellenbosch had no lack of good applicants for most of its degree programmes. It just happened that most of them were young white Afrikaners from what were, there as in the UK, called 'good schools'. If the university were to decide that it was happy with this situation, made no effort to recruit outside of that cohort, and only taught in Afrikaans, it would have been well within the T.B. Davie definition of academic freedom.

My view, as mentioned above, was that Stellenbosch needed more diversity, and recruiting more black students and staff was part of that goal. I therefore did not face the risk of being told to do something I did not want to do, nor did I need to make an argument on the grounds of academic freedom to avoid implementing measures of corrective action (as I was often pressed to do).

If anything, I faced a different category of risk, namely of being ordered by the state to do something I did want to do. If that were to happen, which by and large it fortunately did not, it would have put me in an awkward position. It was hard enough to try and convince sceptical Afrikaners that the university was mounting equality initiatives of its own accord, with the full approval and support of its academic Senate, and not because it was being forced to do so by government. It would have been virtually impossible to make the same argument if we had indeed been working under overt government orders.

The most common and stereotypical expression of the fear of 'social engineering' in higher education is the idea that government will withhold funding from universities that fail to do its bidding. My sense of it is that in the UK, as in post-apartheid South Africa, a government who tries to exercise power over universities in this manner would lose the political argument – perhaps even within its own party. Universities have their own path to tread, as has recently been pointed out again by the Vice-chancellor of Cambridge University.[5]

There is sufficient agreement on that principle – which is another formulation of the idea of academic freedom – to allow the higher education sector to stare down the state if need be. That is not to say that a government cannot and will not try to exercise influence. It does. But a wise government would not try to turn influence into compulsion, because it might then lose even those universities who had already chosen, of their own accord, to engage with the equality agenda.

'It's unfair'

Again we have to clarify some points of terminology. In the UK, one aspect of widening participation is the idea of 'fair access'. This refers to the fact that, of the cohort of young people who do enter university, disproportionately many of those who enter the so-called 'leading universities' come from private schools (which, confusingly for the rest of the world, are referred to as 'public schools'). That raises the question of whether privately educated students, through the wealth of their parents, have an unfair advantage. 'Fair access', then, is the insistence that prospective students should be judged in terms, not just of the arithmetical fact of their school-leaving results, but in terms of the context within which those results were obtained.

This is a line of thought I propounded myself when at Stellenbosch. The medical school again provides a good case study. During my term of office, we crossed an important threshold when more than 50% of the intake for the medical degree came from previously disadvantaged groups – that is, essentially, non-white students. Crossing that threshold could not have been accomplished by a simple algorithm of judging entry in terms of school-leaving results. It was necessary to design admissions criteria that looked at a variety of contextual data, such as school background, performance relative to context, leadership qualities, and community work, and to supplement such data as far as possible with personal interviews.

Yet our success in what would in the UK be called 'fair access' brought to light quite vividly the other side of the coin, which is the argument that this kind of contextual judgement gives rise to unfair access. If you ignore context, it is easy to argue that school grades reflect merit, and that admitting students with lower grades above students with higher grades – which is what special admissions programmes do – is a measure of discrimination.

Certainly at Stellenbosch the Dean of Medicine and I annually had to deal with some very irate parents who resented the fact that their child, who as they saw it had on the basis of hard work and perseverance achieved excellent school-leaving results, was not selected for medical studies, while others with lesser grades were. These discussions could become quite intense, and sometimes took surprising turns. One affluent parent offered the Faculty of Medicine a donation of one million Rand should his child be admitted. In South African universities one million Rand is a great deal of money, and we knew we could do a lot of good with such a donation. None the less we turned it down. More seriously, we were sometimes threatened with litigation, based on the accusation of unfair discrimination. Our response to this threat was twofold. First, we had a clear policy approved by Senate and Council, and we took great care to ensure that there were no procedural lapses in applying this policy. Secondly, however, we could rely on the fact that the Bill of Rights enshrined in the South African constitution allows the concept of 'fair discrimination', even though it disallows unfair discrimination.

In a wider concept, our efforts at widening participation at Stellenbosch were aided by the fact that we were also operating in a context of increasing participation. The rate of participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds increased rapidly – but the rate of participation of white students did not decline. Between 2001 and 2006 the total number of students at Stellenbosch grew at 3% per year on average. During that time, the rate of growth of black/coloured/Indian students was 11.6% per year on average, while that of white students was about 1% per year on average. However, an increase of 1% p.a. roughly matches the growth rate of the white population over the same period. Thus, in crude terms, widening participation did not come at a cost to the previously advantaged.

'There is a fear that widening participation is a waste of time... [because] it is impossible. This is the view that widening participation and maintaining standards are inherently contradictory concepts – in short that excellence and equality are mutually exclusive. [It] is grounded in the idea that those societal groups for which widening participation efforts are mounted are less capable intellectually, and hence less able to perform well at university.'

'It's a waste of time'

This fear has two manifestations. The lesser one says that widening participation is a waste of time in the sense that the time and effort and money spent on it do not justify the returns. For example, in response to the article cited above in the *British Medical Journal* reporting on the extended medical degree programme at King's College London, an editorial in the same edition points out that the scheme costs £190,000 to run, and concludes by asking the question 'Is it worth our while to widen participation, particularly if this risks reducing standards? Political ideology says yes, but the evidence is pending and costs are rising fast.'[6]

It is worth noting the language of discourse here: widening participation is presented as driven by 'political ideology', while questioning the King's College programme is presented as a cost-benefit analysis – even when riding on the coat-tails of the fear factor that 'standards will drop'. None the less, the cost-benefit question cannot be shrugged off. Widening participation coupled with extra support does cost money, and – motives apart – it is legitimate to ask 'how much does it cost?' and 'who will pay?' In a democracy, a properly elected government has the mandate and the legitimacy to answer these questions – and a higher education sector which maintains its academic freedom has the right, collectively and individually, to decide whether or not to follow government policy.

There is also a more fundamental version of the fear that widening participation is a waste of time, which is that it is impossible. This is the view that widening participation and maintaining standards are inherently contradictory concepts – in short, that excellence and equality are mutually exclusive. We might call this the strong waste-of-time argument, to distinguish it from the weaker version which only says that the costs outweigh the benefits. Implicitly or explicitly, the strong waste-of-time view is grounded in the idea that those societal groups for which widening participation efforts are mounted are less capable intellectually, and hence less able to perform well at university, than those currently making up the norm. A short version of such an argument can be seen in the BMJ editorial mentioned above, the opening sentence of which reads: 'UK medical students tend to come from higher socio-economic classes, perhaps not surprisingly, as social class correlates with intellectual ability.'

At somewhat greater length, the strong waste-of-time argument can be unpacked into three parts. The first part is an empirical observation, namely that standard

IQ tests would show a correlation between test outcomes and social class: people from higher socio-economic groups have higher IQ scores, and conversely for lower socio-economic groups. The second part of the argument consists of equating a quantitative measure, namely IQ scores, with a qualitative judgement, namely intellectual ability. The third part of the argument extrapolates from the qualitative judgement to a value judgement, namely that higher intellectual ability makes an individual more meritorious than lower intellectual ability.

I do not propose to discuss here the first part of the argument, correlating IQ with social class. I simply put it up as an observation that has been made, and as an integral part of the strong waste-of-time argument. I would, however, like to discuss and take issue with the other two parts of the argument.

About the second part of the argument, I would observe that any translation between quantitative data and qualitative judgements involves imprecision. If you try to quantify qualitative judgements, you are doing what mathematicians call linearisation. More precisely, you are turning a partial order into a linear order[7], which by definition involves loss of information. In the other direction, if you take a linear order – such as would be given by testing scores – and you put a qualitative interpretation to it, you create meaning from numbers. Different interpretations are then possible, because you put words to numbers, meanings to words, and social parameters to meanings.

To illustrate the point, consider the academic career of Nelson Mandela. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela recounts how he started his legal studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1943.

> The English-speaking universities of South Africa were great incubators of liberal values. It was a tribute to those institutions that they allowed black students. For the Afrikaans universities, such a thing was unthinkable. Despite the university's liberal values, I never felt entirely comfortable there. Always to be the only African, except for menial workers, to be regarded at best as a curiosity and at worst as an interloper, is not a congenial experience…
>
> Our law professor … held a curious view of the law when it came to women and Africans: neither group, he said, was meant to be lawyers. His view was that law was a social science and that women and Africans were not disciplined enough to master its intricacies … Although I disagreed with his views, I did little to disprove them. My performance as a law student was dismal.[8]

There can be little doubt about the intellectual ability of Nelson Mandela, and even less doubt about his merit. However, there can also be little doubt that if IQ tests were carried out in the rural Transkei, where Mandela came from, on African youths in the early 1940s, they would have scored no better than children from 'lower socio-economic classes' score today. And, as Mandela attests, if admitted to university at all, but finding themselves in an uncongenial environment, they might well struggle. The question is to what extent we should equate such a struggle with intellectual ability, and then with merit.

It is the identification of a qualitative judgement about ability with a value judgement concerning merit – that is, the third part of the strong waste-of-time argument – that really sets the warning lights flashing. Recently, for example, the Nobel Prize winning scientist James Watson told *The Sunday Times* that he was 'inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa', because 'all our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours – whereas all the testing says not really'.[9]

These comments drew widespread condemnation. Yet it seems that exactly the same kind of comment can be made with impunity about 'lower socio-economic classes'. While the discourse of racism has become unacceptable, the discourse of classism has not. It is not uncommon to encounter a line of argument that says admitting students to university solely on the grounds of school-leaving results is nothing more than the implementation of a meritocracy, with the corollary that if the 'lower social classes' are proportionately less successful, the only proper conclusion to draw is that they are less meritorious.

Consider again the pronouncement in the BMJ editorial intimating that there is nothing surprising in the fact that UK medical students tend to come from higher socio-economic groups, 'as social class correlates with intellectual ability'. It is uncontroversial to say that in an admissions system relying mostly or entirely on school-leaving results, children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds will not be successful to the same extent as children from a socially advantaged background.

The difficulty arises when such a context-free, numbers-based admissions system is called a 'merit-based' selection, and the successful and unsuccessful candidates, respectively, thereby included or excluded from a presumed meritocracy. That could only be true if the playing field was level – which, by the very concept of 'lower socio-economic classes', it is not. To say that school-leavers whose parents could buy their way into 'good schools' are of higher merit than school-leavers who struggled in adverse circumstances, on the sole evidence of their respective school-leaving results, seems a peculiarly narrow definition of the word 'merit'.

At Stellenbosch we also struggled with the propensity to equate the fruit of advantage with innate merit. As one way of addressing this phenomenon I instituted a university-wide prize called 'The Vice-chancellor's Award for Succeeding Against the Odds'. This was a large cash award (about double a full-cost bursary) to carefully selected students – usually three or four per year across the university – who had succeeded in rising above difficult circumstances. Not only was the value of the award much higher than existing awards, so was the amount of public attention we paid to it. At the annual official academic opening, in front of an audience of thousands in

the great sports hall, we inducted the new award holders with the same pomp and ceremony as the award of honorary doctorates. At the first such ceremony I explained the rationale for the award as follows:

In line with our vision statement, Stellenbosch University strives to be an academic institution of excellence, with a national profile and an international reputation. Quality must be our benchmark. If so, we have to ask a simple but profound question: how do you judge quality relative to context? Some of us take for granted an environment, which for others is only a dream. If so, is it not the case that our performance, no matter how well merited on the basis of our own efforts, also owes something to the environment within which we live and work?

Consider two hypothetical cases. One is a student whose parents are well-educated professional people, reasonably affluent, and who comes to us from one of the so-called 'good schools', where she enjoyed every possible facility for sharpening the mind. The other is a student whose parents have had little formal education and who live in poverty, who comes to us from a historically disadvantaged school in a gang-infested area. If the former student comes to Stellenbosch with a school-leaving mark of 90%, and the latter comes with a school-leaving mark of 70%, is it possible for us to say that the former is a better student than the latter? And if we do, would that be right?

In short, the claim I made was that performance is relative to context. In a different country and under different circumstances, I am reminded of these words whenever I hear school-leaving results being equated with merit. The students who won the Vice-chancellor's Award for Succeeding Against the Odds all had life stories to tell which made it impossible to regard them as anything other than meritorious. Most of them barely scraped into university, yet all of them performed well – some outstandingly well – towards the end of their studies, and in later life. All that the award really did was to give them a chance, by removing financial worries and showing appreciation for the route they have travelled. And a chance was all they needed.

We should think carefully before equating merit with IQ test scores – or with school-leaving results. The very word 'meritocracy' is an example of how language constrains debate, and social conditions influence language. At present, 'meritocracy' carries the connotation of a self-evident societal virtue.

It is worth recalling, however, that the word is of relatively recent coinage, and that it was introduced in a satirical, even pejorative, sense. It comes from a book titled *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, published in 1958 by Michael Young, a sociologist and social activist, and written as a satire of what Britain might become if those with high IQ become the new aristocracy. The satire, however, became the reality, contrary to Young's intentions. In the Introduction to a new edition of 1994[10], Young says 'I wanted to show how overweening a meritocracy could be', and 'if the book is not seen to be

counterargument as well as argument, the point of it (or at least a good half point) will be lost'. But the counterargument never received the same attention as the argument. Indeed, Young lamented in a newspaper article[11] in 2001 that he was 'sadly disappointed' that his point had been missed. The summary, in that article, of what 'meritocracy' has come to mean, from the man who introduced the concept, is worth quoting:

= It is good sense to appoint individual people to jobs on merit. It is the opposite when those who are judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new social class without room in it for the others.

= Ability of a conventional kind, which used to be distributed between the classes more or less at random, has become more highly concentrated by the engine of education.

= A social revolution has been accomplished by harnessing schools and universities to the task of sieving people according to education's narrow band of values.

= With an amazing battery of certificates and degrees at its disposal, education has put its seal of approval on a minority, and its seal of disapproval on the many who fail to shine from the time they are relegated to the bottom streams at the age of seven or before.

= The new class has the means at hand, and largely under its control, by which it reproduces itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion: I offer the considerations above about fears concerning the equality agenda in general and widening participation in particular not because I believe some theory or plan of action can or should be extracted from them, but simply because I believe the comparison of different manifestations of underlying fears tells us something about what is fundamental and what is accidental.

Circumstances are accidental, and differ from place to place. Fears, on the other hand, seem to be much the same, no matter where. Perhaps, therefore, there are some underlying themes. Perhaps one such underlying theme is the fear of the haves for the intrusion of the have-nots.

This is not an uncommon phenomenon, and if we are honest about it perhaps we can deal with it. But doing so can be confused by accidental factors. In particular, it seems to me that an overlay of class discourse often confuses the issue. And when 'lower classes' further acquires the connotation of lesser classes, then the extent of conceptual confusion should become cause for societal concern.

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[1] Pamela B Garlick & Gavin Brown, 'Widening participation in medicine', *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 336 No. 7653, 17 May 2008, pp. 1111–1113. See http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/extract/336/7653/1111

[2] I first used this phrase as the title of a speech at Stellenbosch to an international gathering of former Rhodes scholars in January 2003 as part of the centenary celebrations of the Rhodes Trust.

[3] Professor Steve Smith, 'Focus on real access issues', Guest leader in the *Times Higher Education*, 24 April 2008. This was written in the run-up to the NCEE presenting a set of recommendations to government, dated October 2008, in which Prof Smith authored the section on higher education engaging with schools and colleges. See http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/ncee/docs/7898-DCSF-NatCouncilEd.pdf

[4] For a review, see for example http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2007/10/01/btdominic101.xml

[5] Professor Alison Richard, in a speech to open the Universities UK Conference in Cambridge, 10 September 2008: 'Responsive to and helping shape the national policy context, we need the independence and autonomy to chart our individual institutional courses, and to experiment.' See http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/v-c/speeches/20080910.html

[6] Hugh Ip and I.C. McManus, 'Increasing diversity among clinicians', *British Medical Journal* Vol. 336 No. 7653, 17 May 2008, pp. 1082–1083. See http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/extract/336/7653/1082. In a short response, the authors of the original paper point out that the places reserved for widening participation are additional to the normal number of entrants to the medical school, and the extra cost is funded not by the university but by the Higher Education Funding Council of England. See http://www.bmj.com/cgi/eletters/336/7653/1082#195526

[7] The terms 'partial order' and 'linear order' have precise mathematical definitions, but the difference may be explained for present purposes as follows. In a linear order, if we know that nothing is bigger than X, we may infer that X is bigger than (or equal to) everything else. In a partial order, no such inference can be made. It is perfectly possible that each of X, Y and Z have the property that nothing is bigger than it, without any one of them being bigger than the others. By way of illustration: if you rank sports stars in terms of annual income, you get a linear order. If you rank them in terms of quality, you get a partial order, because there is no natural single measure by in which a football player is better or worse at sport than a golfer.

[8] Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Abacus, London, 1994, pp. 103–104. Mandela eventually gave up his LL.B studies at Wits, after failing his exams several times, and took the (separate) qualification exam for an attorney in 1952. (*Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 171)

[9] See http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article2677098.ece

[10] Transaction Publishers, 1994, ISBN 1560007044

[11] *The Guardian*, Friday June 29, 2001. See http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2001/jun/29/comment



'Circumstances are accidental, and differ from place to place. Fears, on the other hand, seem to be much the same, no matter where. Perhaps, therefore, there are some underlying themes. Perhaps one such underlying theme is the fear of the haves for the intrusion of the have-nots.'

Sophisticated narratives: equality and the role of governing bodies

Simon Fanshawe, journalist and Chair of Council, University of Sussex



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I was one of the co-founders of Stonewall in 1987. So that is a kind of polite way of telling people who don't know you are gay! You say, 'When I was co-founder of Stonewall...' and throw in a little body language, a few visual hints, they finally get the point. I have spent a long time working in the equality business really, and a long-term colleague of Trevor Phillips too, from NUS days, so this conversation feels like it has been going on for a long time.

I went to the University of Sussex as a student and I am a poacher turned gamekeeper. I am now the Chair of the Council and I write letters to students telling them to face up to the real world, which is great, and a real piece of revenge.

Legislatively speaking, it is the responsibility of the governing body to pursue the issues of equality within institutions. It is our leadership, together with the academic leadership, that is crucial to this.

I want to talk about three things this morning.

Group and individual identities

We are in changing territory, the election in the United States gives us a clue about that, but I think in the UK we are also in changing territory. Group identity and group discrimination are now illuminated, I think, through a very real and warm progress, and we are in a different place than we were 10 or 15 years ago. We should acknowledge that and start to ask different questions.

Notwithstanding, of course, discrimination exists. But whilst discrimination may be an everyday event, it is no longer an all-day event. So we live our lives differently, our identities sit differently in different places, depending on where we are. It does not tell you very much about a person to say somebody is Muslim, to say somebody is black, to say somebody is gay, it does not tell you much about them. To know that someone is gay does not even tell you very much about their sexuality, let alone anything else about them. To be told that you are black does not tell you much about your identity. It tells you some things, but it does not tell us much about your experiences. It does tell you something about your experience when the fist of prejudice hits your face, when you are called an abusive word: at that point you are very clear about what you share with other people in that category. But you also have to remember that prejudice is stupid and we are the clever ones.

For example, of all the men in the 'gay area' of West Hollywood who have suffered homophobic violence, the majority of them are not gay. It is enough to be in the area. It is enough to be a boy who did not like sports or a girl who did.

It is very difficult, on the other hand, to be mischaracterised as black. A friend of mine has a kid; his father is white, his mother is black, he looks more black than mixed race, if I can put it that way. He was given an award at school for being the highest-achieving black child and he said he did not want to accept the award. At his school they have a couple of football teams, one for black kids and one for white kids, except the ones on the black team aren't black and the ones on the white team aren't white. It is organised around a whole series of cultural things, it is about the music you listen to, the clothes you wear, and, interestingly, kids move between the two teams, so they have an interesting fluidity. So if you talk to Joe and ask, 'Are you black?' he'll say, 'Sometimes'.

I know that is anecdotal, but in order to ask questions about someone's experience, you have to ask questions that relate to their individual experience now. These are different questions from the ones we used to ask. There are different assumptions.

It was good to go to the lesbian and gay workshop [during the conference], because you always pick up things you did not think of. Is there anything that gay and lesbian people experience as a group in higher education that they do not experience anywhere else? Somebody at the workshop pointed out that one of the interesting things about higher education is that in a sense they are locked in. At work or wherever, you can go home, but in higher education you might be in student residences, you have paid your fees, you will be there for three years. That is actually quite a closed environment in which to experience hostility.

I think those questions are always worth asking intelligently. We have the sophistication and intelligence to drill down into individual experience and then see what that might tell us about group experiences, but be clear about the difference. We have to challenge prejudice and bullying where it happens, but don't confuse the

challenging of bullying and prejudice with the creation of potential and the opening up of potential for individuals, whoever they might be.

I have a friend who is Muslim. Her family is Iraqi, her family came through the United Arab Emirates, she has been in Britain all her life. Britain is absolutely the country she lives in and loves. I interviewed her once for the radio and I said to her, 'If I said you were wearing the hijab, no one would know what you looked like,' because she was wearing a pink hijab with a white jacket, a matching pink skirt and ruby slippers. She replied, 'Me and my friends call ourselves Hijabi Barbies.' She started to articulate why she wore the hijab, that she wanted to be taken as a woman, but not physically. She wanted to have a sort of modesty about her physicality, and she said, 'The problem is sometimes when I wake up in the morning and I'm a bit groggy and I'm trying to match the colour of my hijab to my knickers, I feel as if I am arguing against myself'.

She is an interesting person, she sees herself in a very explicitly modern British way. We spend too much time at the moment saying 'Muslim students'. It actually tells you very little and the worst mistake is to equate it with extreme religious views.

I am making a plea here for a level of sophistication in the interrogation of issues.

We need to recognise that identity politics was a transition – it was right at a historical moment and it is still right in some moments and contexts. In this country I think it is more of a transition. We are seeing, as I said, the rise of mixed race kids and so on and so forth. But what it illuminates when you start to get beyond the notion of identity politics is the real power of inequality of wealth and class. Despite the fact there are more students in higher education than there were in the 1960s, the proportion of opportunities for kids who come from certain socio-economic classes has not changed. That is a extraordinary indictment in a lot of ways. There are more kids from those backgrounds coming into university, yes, but the proportion of society that is putting kids into universities has not changed. So I think we have to think hard about wealth and class.

What diversity looks like

The second point I want to discuss is just to think about what diversity looks like. If you don't make the easy definitions about group identities, what you have to start doing is asking more intelligent questions about what diversity means in your institutions. Chris Brink made a very particular point with the educational argument for diversity: the idea that quality needs diversity. To extend that just a little bit, the kind of quality and the kind of diversity is necessarily linked to the kind of institution you are in. We all need to find a narrative about equality and diversity. Particularly, we need to find a narrative about diversity which relates to our institutions: their histories, their purposes and who makes them up, what communities they sit in, because it will mean something very different in Bradford than it does in Brighton. It will be very different in north London than in rural Gloucestershire. What does diversity mean in a university that is situated in the context of an agrarian economy? Who are you looking for to run your university, to represent your university, to relate to your university?

At Sussex, my view would be our institution is 50 years old in 2011, it has a history of radicalism. It has a set of very strong links to South Africa, there is a powerful international presence. All those things start to say things to me about what I think the governing council should look like, for instance, and it says things to me about how to recruit our staff, what our staff should look like. If you need a bit of jargon, what you are doing is called mission alignment, but just think about the story of the place and what that tells you.



'We need to find a narrative about diversity which relates to our institutions: their histories, their purposes and who makes them up, what communities they sit in, because it will mean something very different in Bradford than it does in Brighton. It will be very different in north London than in rural Gloucestershire. Who are you looking for to run your university, to represent your university, to relate to your university?'

What do we do about it?

So, what do we do about it? Leadership is absolutely key. The thing about leadership is that in so many ways it makes a difference to an agenda. Research is clear that in schools if the head teacher stands up and does three things, this has a profound effect on bullying.

If the head teacher stands up and says, 'There is bullying in this school', that is number one, acknowledgement. That is difficult, because it is seen as failure, but the acknowledgement that bullying exists is absolutely key.

The second thing is saying, 'I will not tolerate it'. The values of this institution do not tolerate it on any level, whether someone is black, white, gay, straight, for whatever reason they are being bullied, if you are treating somebody in an unpleasant way because of who they are, not what they have done, I do not tolerate it.

The third thing is saying, 'We're going to do something about it'. It is particularly true of homophobic bullying. In schools staff find it incredibly difficult to tackle homophobia. Unless the head says 'I am going to support you to do something about it'. So there are practical things you can do, but leadership is very important.

When we started Stonewall, a lovely lesbian from a drinks company did this great calculation: she worked out exactly what proportion of gin, what proportion of vodka, etc, that they sold to gay pubs, what number of people they employed and the size of the customer base that was gay. She approached the chief executive with these figures, explained that a significant proportion of the company's customers were gay, and asked, 'will you have your photograph taken with me and we will bang it up on the notice board?' The chief executive said yes, and that small gesture for that market acknowledged the presence of those people and that started something quite considerable. It showed the link between diversity and the business, which is very key, but it was also a physical demonstration of the visibility of people.

So leadership does not mean massive great bits of policy. Leadership can come in all sorts of different forms. From the council point of view leadership is absolutely key.

Another thing to comment on particularly are religious objections to homosexuality. We get very anxious about this, as if somehow we have to dignify the prejudice because it is religious. We find it very difficult because we talk about a clash of rights.

What I want to suggest is it is not a clash of rights at all, it is a clash of freedoms – your absolute freedom to say and think what you want. I am a great believer in that. We have to put up with being upset and hurt. I use that as a framework, to think through these things, these counter positions: rights and freedoms, actions and words and harm and offences. This is the consequence of living in a multi-opinionated world.

So when you have a gay couple who live on a corridor and there are people of any religion who do not like it, if they shout and scream, then tell them to stop. It seems to me we have to find some way of working out who is right in this context. How do we deal with that clash of freedoms? One way I like to deal with it is to say it is a clash of freedoms, not a clash of the rights. The right not to be discriminated against on the basis of who you are.

That is a framework which you can use to try and resolve some of those differences. It will not necessarily resolve them practically, but you have to resolve those sides of the arguments – you have to find something they agree on. It might just be that absence from discrimination is an acceptable thought on both sides.

So, I am just testing a framework there, but try not confusing words and actions, try not to confuse freedoms and rights. Of course when you get to that wavy line between them you will have some great arguments, but that is what we pay academics to do!

Governing bodies

When I came into Sussex I said we need to talk about our governing bodies, students and academics and our effectiveness. For example the last four people we appointed to the University of Sussex Council were from a shortlist made up entirely of black people and women. When people said, 'Yes, but I wouldn't want to be on the council just because I was black, or just because I was a woman,' I said, 'At what point during the suggestion did I lower the quality bar?'

We have appointed a very senior QC, someone who runs an NHS trust in Sussex, a guy who sold his company just recently for £36 million and has an employment relationship with the university. In fact the fourth person unfortunately for personal reasons could not take it up but she runs a very big publishing company. So we are talking very senior people. But whenever we have this discussion with somebody and they say they can't find any suitable candidates, I tell them they are not looking hard enough.

It is about where you look. Be careful of head hunters, because they all fish in the same pond. We personally use our alumni network. You have to look harder, but on the other hand make absolutely clear that what you are looking for is skill, you are not looking for gender or sexuality, you are looking for skill. What you then have to do is paint the picture of the institution so that when you see that photograph of your governing body it looks vaguely like the institution it is the governing body of.

There is a post-92 educational establishment in an urban area which I will not name, and it has a substantial number of students there for whom English is either a second language or they speak one language outside and one language at home. If you look at their board of governors it is entirely the great and the good from

the local area, it is white men. The reason, frankly, is the vice-chancellor is not interested, so without that kind of leadership there is no platform to make changes.

I think the second thing is that in academia we appoint ourselves. They recruit people who are going to fit in, who are intellectually part of an institution, and what they don't do is look outside that and say: actually we are going to appoint someone who does not fit in. Again, this is absolutely key when it comes to leadership – having that discussion about appointments is absolutely crucial.

The other thing I think you can do in terms of governance, is to constantly examine salaries and remuneration. Examine the content of that professorial cohort, really get to the bottom of asking some real questions, because it is quite clear that there is a glass ceiling for professorial level. There are lots and lots of women who are senior lecturers, but not at professorial level.

When it come to students, initial research shows that it looks like African Caribbean kids going into university are doing worse at degree level than they did at entry level, so the education is not helping. Now, those questions need to be deeply interrogated and we need to find out why our institutions are doing that to the people who go through them.

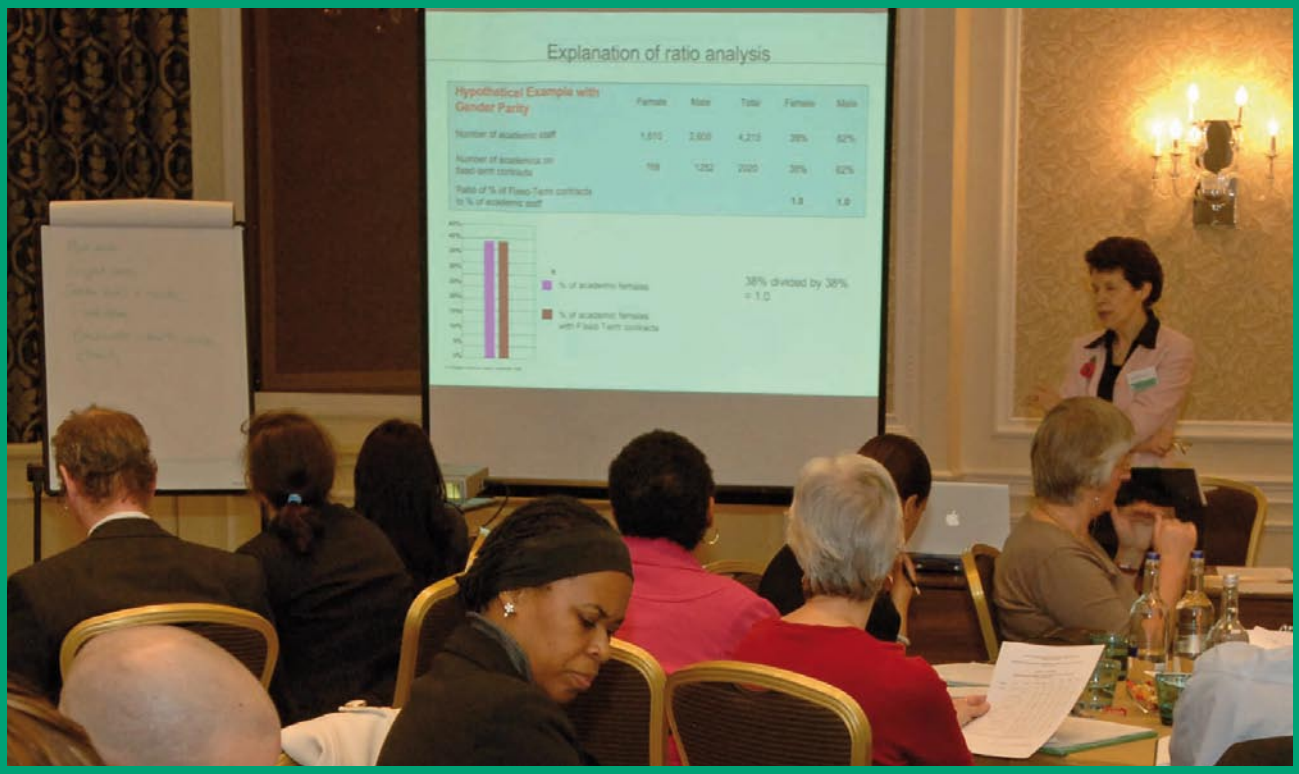
Funnily enough I think policy is the last thing you do. I think policy is the thing that comes out of what you think your institution is about, what you think the real problems are. Ask those more intelligent questions and then design your policy around the specifics of what your institution is telling you are the issues. Do not do the policy the other way round otherwise it will merrily sit on the shelf and collect dust. It has to be about active engagement.

The importance of leadership

My final point is to say that I am not entirely sure we should have equality and diversity managers. The reason I say that this is I am not sure that they situate equality and diversity at the right level within organisations. In the end, of course, there is a job to be done and you are the people to do it, but the questions, the leadership, the culture of the institution cannot be set solely by people who are at a lower level in the organisation. It can really only be set in the first instance by people who are leaders. This responsibility and these questions have got to be situated at a senior level and be central to what people are talking about. Diversity has an educational rationale. We are cleverer when we talk to people we don't know about than we are when we just talk to ourselves.

Equality Challenge Unit's *Evidence for Equality* conference took place in Manchester on 4 and 5 November 2008. The conference explored equality in the higher education sector and how developing an evidence-based approach to equality and diversity can move the agenda forward.

This publication includes extracts of key speeches made during the conference. Full transcripts and audio recordings of the conference are available at www.ecu.ac.uk/events



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