

PRACTICE PAPER

The MMU Single Equality Scheme (SES)

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Introduction

It is difficult to predict the long term effects of the introduction of increased fees into Higher Education (HE), but it is likely, in the short term at least, to result in a drop in student applications across universities in 2012. Fewer applications will lead to much greater competition among universities for students and this has major consequences for all areas - especially equality and diversity. There are many good educational, commercial and pragmatic reasons for ensuring that the benefits of studying at MMU are highlighted to prospective and enrolled students, through a clear demonstration of the academic expertise available, the range of courses on offer, and the range of accessible facilities and equitable services provided. It is even more important that these important messages are conveyed effectively and clearly given the potential for a higher fees environment to adversely impact upon student

equality and diversity. Prospective students, along with their families and friends will be comparing and contrasting the overall offering at MMU with competitor institutions. There is often just one opportunity to make a good first impression through the information that is published by the University. The Single Equality Scheme is one source of information, along with KIS (Key Information Sets), which provide prospective students with the information they need to make an informed choice.

This article sets out the rationale for the MMU Single Equality Scheme (SES) and explains how it was developed. The nine 'Protected Characteristics' under the Equality Act (2010) are identified and the legal duties of MMU as a Higher Education institution are outlined. The SES is implemented by means of an Action Plan which is built around six main themes. This paper focuses on ways in which MMU is working toward meeting the objectives of two themes in particular; the student experience (e.g. admissions and induction, widening participation, student retention, teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment, student support), and the staff experience (e.g. recruitment, training and development, rewards and benefits, staff support).

What is the SES?

Through the Single Equality Scheme (SES) at MMU, the planning and actions required to promote equality of opportunity and to demonstrate the value placed on ethics and diversity are set out. The MMU SES (MMU 2011) describes how the University will fulfil its duties under the Equality Act 2010 to avoid discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and foster good relations. The SES mainstreams all of the work that done at MMU in the area of equality and diversity and replaces the Disability Equality Scheme, the Gender Equality Scheme and the Race Equality Policy and Action Plan.

The MMU SES was developed through an extensive consultation exercise involving focus groups, surveys, diagnostic reports and roadshows; engaging all relevant stakeholders (i.e. students, staff, unions, local businesses and relevant organisations). The SES is continually monitored and reviewed and the outcomes reported to the University Diversity and Equal Opportunities Committee (DEOC). Generally, feedback from students who contributed to the consultation was very positive:

“I like the idea of the equality and diversity scheme. It’s a good way to get all staff and students involved and everyone deserves a chance of fairness in order to succeed and enjoy the university experience”.

“As a disabled student the implementations put in place for me at MMU have worked well. On the whole, the staff and tutors have been very supportive”.

Students feel that they have a good level of support and are treated fairly so it is really important to make sure that these values are sustained, especially as students now have a greater understanding of their rights, and will give increasing attention to the value for money that they receive from studying at MMU. However, a strong message from students through the consultation was the need to promote positive behaviour and build good relations between different groups. Some of the other themes that emerged have been addressed in the SES Action Plan:

- The need for improved access to buildings on some sites – the Equality and Diversity team work closely with architects and access auditors regularly to ensure needs are met as far as is reasonable.
- Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs) – there have been lots of improvements made in the processes attached to preparing and implementing PEEPs.
- The need for better communication around Personal Learning Plans (PLPs).
- Greater clarity about the availability of support for disabled staff.
- Workload allocation for staff who work part-time or have caring responsibilities (addressed through workload allocation model).
- Improved communication with staff in grades 1 and 2 who are non-desk based and so do not have regular access to the Internet and email through methods such as SMS and regular cascade briefings.

Who is protected under the Equality Act?

Under the new Equality Act, nine ‘Protected Characteristics’ are recognised. Although all nine are covered by the Act, it only applies to marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity, in respect of the requirement to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination in employment.

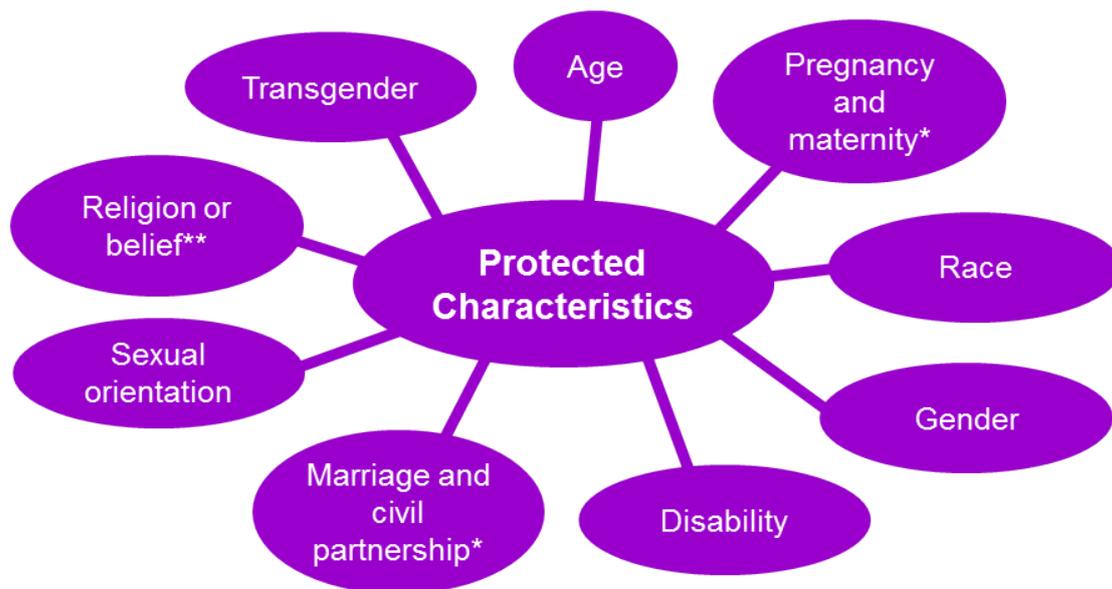


Figure 1: The nine ‘Protected Characteristics’ covered by the Equality Act 2010 (*currently included in Public Sector Duties only in relation to eliminating discrimination in employment; **including lack of belief)

The SES Action Plan

The Action Plan that accompanies the SES sets out the range of actions MMU will / has put in place to meet statutory requirements, and to contribute to improving the experience of all students, staff and other stakeholders. The Action Plan is structured around six main themes:

1. Effective communication, both internal and external
2. Strategic planning, management and reporting
3. The student experience
4. The staff experience
5. Facilities, services and procurement
6. The environment and physical access

Every member of MMU staff has a contribution to make to help achieve the objectives of the Scheme. Senior colleagues also have lead responsibility for relevant sections of the Action Plan and with support from the Equality and Diversity Team and DEOC, will share these responsibilities, ensuring

commitment and accountability. The rest of this paper focusses on the SES actions around theme three, the student experience, and theme four, the staff experience.

The student experience

This theme covers the main aspects of the MMU student experience, from admissions through to curriculum and assessment.

Admissions and induction

As part of the SES Action Plan, admissions processes have been assessed using the MMU Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) process to ensure fairness. EIA (also referred to as *Equality Analysis*) is a simple process of screening policies for any adverse impacts on people with Protected Characteristics. Admissions processes are also monitored and the *Uniview* database is used to analyse exactly which students are and are not coming to MMU. This information can be used to inform marketing and recruitment planning. Various different methods of accepting students, including interview, have been considered and it has been recommended that applicant assessment styles are varied (i.e. as opposed to focussing solely on the application itself). This ensures that students of all backgrounds have an equal opportunity to convince us that they would be capable MMU students. The practice paper by Alan Holmes elsewhere in this issue explains how interview processes have been modified in one Faculty.

Widening participation

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) will safeguard fair access to Higher Education for under-represented groups (such as those from low household incomes) thus ensuring that the student body is kept diverse. MMU also now has a scheme of bursaries in place to assist those students on low incomes.

Student retention, teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment

There are a variety of measures in place to ensure that all aspects of teaching practice promote equality of opportunity and celebrate diversity. For example, checks are made through Programme Review and Continuous Monitoring and Improvement processes, the Peer Support for Teaching scheme highlights good practice in this area, and the EQAL project (Strand Three, for example) aims to raise student satisfaction, engagement and success by providing a

more seamless and personalised online experience of university activity. There is a useful checklist for inclusive practice on the CeLT (Centre for Learning and Teaching) website, developed by CeLT and CASQE (Centre for Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement). There are further opportunities to promote equality and diversity through the staff development and training programme which help to support staff and embed best practice. Another action in the SES involves the Centre for Student Employability and Success who successfully applied for the Matrix Quality Standard. This will allow them to audit themselves against the standard and take appropriate actions to ensure that the needs of the service users are at the forefront of service delivery. The show and tell contribution by Matthew Gawne and Dawn Nicholson later in this issue also provides details of a new University-wide Task and Finish Group that is developing an MMU Framework for Inclusive Practice.

Support for Students

At MMU, lots of support for students is already provided (Box 1). The services available have all undergone EIA and are regularly reviewed to ensure equity and transparency. When thinking about support, it is important to be clear that it is not just about considering disability, but all of the relevant protected characteristics. One of the biggest challenges faced is in trying to engage with students and finding out about their experiences at MMU. Ensuring that their expectations are met (and managed) is testing for us all but as long as their experience is fair and of a high quality, then students will get value for money.

- Accommodation Services
- Student Services and the Student Information Points
- Faculty Student Support Officers
- Learner Development Services
- Information Technology and Library Services
- Counselling
- Health Advice
- Quiet Spaces / Prayer Rooms / Chaplaincy
- International Office
- Sport and Leisure facilities
- Students' Union
- Careers and Employability

Box 1: Some of the support services made available to MMU students

The staff experience

Under this theme there are actions in the SES Action Plan covering a range of aspects of staff experience, from recruitment and induction, through to training, reward, and staff support. Just a few of these are touched upon here.

Recruitment, selection and induction

To ensure equality in recruitment processes, all staff-related policies have undergone EIA to identify and drive forward necessary changes and improvements. On an annual basis, all data pertaining to staff are analysed and reviewed. In particular, there is a focus on disclosure rates for all of the protected characteristics. Attempts are being made to raise awareness of the support available for equality and diversity in order to increase disclosure rates. MMU actually has one of the highest disability disclosure rates in the HE sector, but there is still a lot of work to be done to improve rates among academics in particular. Staff vs. student data have also been interrogated across Faculties to try to better understand and improve diversity across the University.

Training and development

Equality and diversity training provisions are regularly reviewed and developed to ensure that they are genuinely helpful. This has become especially important as the implications of Public Sector Duties have become clearer. There are four MMU Staff Equality Fora¹ (which are open to anybody to join) and these play an important role in deliberations. There is a desire to see membership of these fora increased to be sure staff concerns are known and understood and acted upon. Further details of the Staff Fora can be found at <http://www.mmu.ac.uk/humanresources/equalities/equality-staff-forums.php>.

Reward and benefits

There are several actions around reward and benefits. For example, an Equal Pay Audit has been undertaken.

Having initially attained full corporate Investors in People (IiP) recognition against the IiP Standard in May 2009, re-assessment 'beyond the standard' has been undertaken, and in May 2012, MMU was recognised as meeting the criteria to be awarded 'Gold' level recognition. In achieving 'Gold' level

¹ Black and Minority Ethnic; Disabled; Gender; and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Fora.

recognition MMU is the largest of only five Universities in the UK to attain it and benchmarks MMU in the top 1.5% of organisations in the country.

Support for staff

MMU holds a Bronze Award for the EFD (Employer's Forum on Disability) Disability Standard (only 2% away from silver!). On behalf of the institution, the Equality and Diversity team are in the process of re-applying next year and continuously strive for improvements to the staff experience.

An application has been made for an institutional bronze award under the Athena Swan programme which recognises and celebrates good employment practice for women working in science, engineering and technology (SET) in higher education and research. This is aspirational and demonstrates a commitment to the advancement of the careers of women in SET in higher education and research.

Conclusions

The importance of equality, diversity and fairness in HE has been widely recognised, a fact reflected in the content of the third (of six) principles in the recent Browne report (2010):

“Everyone who has the potential should be able to benefit from higher education. No-one should be put off from studying in Higher Education because they cannot afford the cost of living while they are studying. HEIs will be evaluated on how well they are doing in providing fair access to all.”

This is also reflected in the MMU core values (MMU 2012):

- to respect the rights of individuals.
- to promote responsible, ethical and professional behaviour.
- to promote diversity.
- to achieve institutional goals through teamwork and flexible working
- to invest in staff development.
- to promote and reward outstanding performance.
- to encourage creativity and enterprise.
- to develop and disseminate new knowledge.

- to promote global citizenship among staff and students.

The MMU vision to create '*World-Class Professionals*' can only be realised if barriers are removed, knowledge is increased disadvantage is addressed, and the aspirations of both present and potential learners are raised. The SES is one way of demonstrating how these goals will be achieved and challenges at this difficult financial time for HEIs will be overcome.

MMU staff are in a unique position in society; embedding equality and diversity has the potential to produce significant benefits to society as a whole. An HEI can influence and guide people in a formative stage of their life, so that these embedded progressive attitudes in students and staff carry over into wider society.

Working together...

The Equality and Diversity Team are keen to be involved in MMU and public engagement projects pertaining to equality and diversity and are happy to support such initiatives. Further information about the work of the Equality and Diversity team and contact details can be found at <http://www.mmu.ac.uk/humanresources/equalities/>.

References

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