

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN COLLEGES OF FURTHER EDUCATION:
POLICY VERSUS PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN COLLEGES OF FURTHER EDUCATION: POLICY VERSUS PRACTICE

This research questions claims made by Colleges of Further Education that they are committed to equal opportunities. Although policies may exist, it is not a guarantee that they are effective. This research explores the realities behind anecdotal evidence that indicates policies figure more prominently prior to inspections and validations.

A literature review reveals a dearth of evidence to suggest that any consideration is given to policies in practice. Equal Opportunities, in general, are well documented but research in this field in Further Education is almost non-existent according to Cole (2000) and Wallace (2001). This research identifies a move away from an observable commitment to equal opportunities that colleges need to address to justify their claims.

In Phase One colleges provide copies of their policies for analysis that identifies commonalities but also striking differences. In Phase Two a postal questionnaire clarifies how successful colleges have been in addressing equal opportunities and whether this can be attributed to live, working documents.

Phases One and Two provide the framework for the debate and in Phase Three the survey results are complemented by in-depth interviews. Detailed questioning compares the commitments expressed with procedures and practices. The research used both qualitative and quantitative approaches with the different sources of evidence presented so as to provide a rich, layered understanding of the dynamic of policies in colleges.

The conclusion to this research is that whilst colleges have policies, that are generally devised following accepted guidelines, the real problem lies in ownership and the monitoring process. As a result provision is affected, as the needs of individuals are not always recognised, thereby denying them equal access to the educational opportunities that colleges aim to provide.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effect of Equal Opportunities policies in practice in Colleges of Further Education with the focus on women and disability and to see how equal opportunities were perceived within those organisations. As Colleges publicly declared their commitment to equal opportunities, for instance in advertising material, prospectuses and job advertisements this research aimed to establish the extent to which colleges supported these claims. The key themes that emerged from this research related to:

- Monitoring of policies
- Ownership of policies
- Communication within the organisation
- Consultation with staff and students.

As it was not mandatory to have an Equal Opportunities Policy when this research began the initial stage was to identify if policies existed and to gauge the diversity or commonality of their content. This would provide an insight into the way colleges interpreted their opinion of equal opportunities and how it should be addressed. Secondly, where policies existed, the research aimed to explore the views of members of those organisations to discover whether they considered claims being made were reflected in provision. The research further investigated whether monitoring mechanisms were in place and the effectiveness of these mechanisms in maintaining equal opportunities provision. The presence of monitoring mechanisms was expected to be an indication that these were live working documents and not just policies that were brought off the shelf and reviewed in time for an OFSTED inspection for instance.

In this chapter I outlined the research question, the reasoning behind this enquiry and how I intended to challenge the status quo. The purpose of the research has been described, with a justification for maintaining a narrow focus on two specific groups that I considered to experience serious discrimination and yet raised quite different issues. I set the research in the context of my own background and experiences, explaining how my curiosity led me to the research question. Changes to legislation and the governance of further education led me to consider whether, in fact, terminology had changed and thereby added a different dimension to this research. There was empirical evidence to indicate new terminology had been introduced but it was not clear whether the intention was to replace existing terminology or broaden the focus.

I then highlighted the lack of evidence in the literature to support or refute the claims I made, other than evidence that could be obtained through government reports and legislation. This led on to an overview of the ever-changing scene within further education coupled with constant changes to legislation that have impacted on that provision.

Finally the purpose of the research has been detailed with reasons for pursuing particular lines of questioning. Views of theorists within the field of equal opportunities have been included to validate and justify the line of questioning. The chapter concluded with a summary of the thesis, chapter by chapter.

Research Question

This research investigated the effect of Equal Opportunities Policies in practice in Further Education, more specifically to question claims made by colleges that they were committed to equal opportunities. The first question to answer was whether policies existed and then, following on from this, to expose how clear and detailed they were in content, as an indication of intent on the part of the organisation. The questions arising from this were whether the written intent was translated into practice, by

which I mean, for instance, was specific provision in place such as disabled access and women's support groups. This was looking mechanically at the policies from a purely operational point of view and in order to gain the humanistic perspective questions were asked of the people these policies were supposed to benefit. To round off the picture questions were asked in order to ascertain whether there were mechanisms in place for the on going monitoring of the policies so that they remained 'live' and up-to-date. My concern was that although colleges may have documentation in place that did not necessarily constitute a guarantee that they were live working documents that held any meaning or relevance for staff or students or provide any benefit. Questions relating to ownership and consultation were linked into the process of establishing whether monitoring mechanisms were in place.

The research was conducted in three phases with Phases One and Two providing the framework. Phase One was a content analysis of existing policies to identify similarities and differences. Phase Two made use of a pilot survey followed by a postal survey using questionnaires to collect primary data on attitudes and opinions relating to equal opportunities in practice. In Phase Three the results of the survey were complemented by in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore and understand the reasons behind the answers.

Personal Experience

The decision to focus on equal opportunities for this research was as a result of personal experiences, both current and in the past, and from observations in the college where I work. I became curious to know whether these approaches and attitudes towards equal opportunities issues were representative of practices in other colleges. Some of the questions that emerged were as a result of contemplating the opportunities that had been open to me from leaving school, where I had an inherent desire not to conform, allowing me to make a complete career change in later life.

I have attended regional workshops on women and equality but these have just been one-offs and not specifically related to further education. They did, however, lead me to reflect on events in my own life from leaving school to becoming a working mother, challenging the view that these should be the norm and thereby questioning my own assumptions, ie that everyone has the same opportunity if they decided to take it.

I was educated at an all-girls grammar school where the curriculum was gender stereotyped. I stubbornly resisted the advice to become a secretary, as was the norm in those days. Men dominated the career I embarked upon as a Medical Laboratory Technician and pay was determined by gender despite work of an equal value (before the Equal Pay Act 1970). I decided to return to college after my marriage and when our children were still very young but this was only made possible through my husband's earning.

When the question of extending my studies arose there were a number of issues that had to be considered that would not have been a problem for a man: sufficient income to afford the course fees, fitting in the course hours around the family, childcare provision in the school holidays. I began to appreciate the difficulty for a woman wanting to change careers and be independent but this led me to consider other women who possibly had greater barriers to learning, for example, women with disabilities or women from ethnic minorities. These experiences shaped the questions that I wanted to ask in relation to policy statements and provision that was actually in place in colleges.

I started work as a part-time lecturer in the Business Studies Department of a Further Education College in Lincolnshire in 1981 on completion of my teacher-training course. Ever since then I seemed to have been studying on one course or another in the name of staff development, quite voluntarily I hasten to add. The more memorable courses have been those involving longer periods of study with research being the driving force.

Research as such was not a new phenomenon to me, as I became a Medical Laboratory Technician on leaving school. However, I soon discovered the difference between medical research and educational research. I was employed by the United Sheffield Hospitals based at the Jessop Hospital for Women in the days of pioneering work into fertility treatments for women. The results from these scientific experiments, as I remember, were very much more clear-cut than the results from any subsequent research that I have undertaken. There were no grey areas or issues open to debate as in educational research.

The educational research I undertook was quite different and enabled me to focus on issues within my organisation and develop my own professional practice that could also be beneficial to others. For instance, the research for the Diploma in Professional Studies in Education considered the value of IT workshops as opposed to traditionally taught lessons and a series of learning materials were produced as a result. This led to further research into teaching a GCSE subject to mixed ability students that resulted in my Masters degree. The work was an action inquiry that challenged assumptions I had made based on my previous year's experiences. The students' diaries were central to the inquiry with the emphasis being on student empowerment and the use of critical friends. This resulted in students displaying greater confidence in their own abilities and a measurable improvement in time management skills. It also led me to rethink my approach to teaching this particular type of group. Although this was beneficial at the time, in terms of contributing to a wider understanding of teaching and learning, action inquiry was not appropriate for this research, as I discussed later.

However, I had enjoyed the process, my interest in research had been aroused and I was keen to continue to develop this skill in the context of my work. By the time I gained my MEd I had been teaching for thirteen years and met a wide range of people and taught on an extensive number of courses at different levels. The mixed group of students who were the focus of my MEd were almost a microcosm of our student population;

school leavers, unemployed, single parents, adult returners, overseas students and disabled. They had very diverse needs as well as differing abilities and disabilities. These students had been provided with the opportunity to continue their education but, having worked closely with them over the year and gained a greater understanding of their backgrounds and problems, I came to consider whether there might be other potential students who were denied that access.

This then led me to broaden my thinking beyond my own college and embark on research that would encompass further education more widely, not just in relation to access but also the declarations that were, and still are, being made in Equal Opportunities policies. My concern was whether these policies were of value and valued and, as such, monitored with a clear sense of ownership. Ownership in itself would not constitute best practice in my opinion, as it would mean nothing without consulting stakeholders and then disseminating the information. There was no evidence to indicate that having policies in place guaranteed they were monitored and owned. Neither was there any assurance that information was devolved from those who had devised the policies.

I had chosen work that would fit in with my children's schooling when they were young, running a Playgroup and then part-time teaching that eventually became full-time. Several friends with children of a similar age chose jobs as Dinner Ladies or Midday Supervisors to accommodate the needs of their children and made the decision not to resume their careers once their offspring had grown up and left home. That was not to say that they made the right choice or I made the wrong choice but it did cause me to think about questioning access and provision in colleges for women who wanted to return to work or make a career change, whether or not they had children.

Were colleges denying women access to work and/or training? Did they know that they were discriminating? Although there were now more private nurseries and childminding facilities available, if my own locality is representative, it could not automatically be assumed that women were

able to access courses or careers of their choice. For instance, colleges could be inadvertently disadvantaging women if the courses they needed were not timetabled appropriately or childcare facilities were not available when required. Cost could also be prohibitive.

I recognised that the problems of being a working mother multiplied: for example, the start and finish times to the day, children's illnesses, being able to attend school events that clashed with teaching, meetings after school hours. Although these were concerns for other colleagues and me in a similar situation I recognised that they could also be a problem for my students, which is why the same question was asked of the students who were surveyed in this research. I doubted whether we took many if any of these needs into account when designing our courses and timetables, being dictated by financial issues, with the result that we were excluding certain sectors of the community from further education. In fact, at the time of writing up this research, empirical evidence suggested that the problem was still not being addressed: timetables stipulated an eight forty five morning start and a late finish to some days. I also became aware of discrimination against certain female lecturers in College A in relation to staff development, promotion and incremental rises on the salary scale. This could have been an isolated incident but one that was to be followed up in the research.

Although I am not naïve enough to believe everyone is able, or even has the urge to want to experience further education, this research did allow me to challenge many of my own assumptions about those who work and learn in colleges. It also provided an opportunity to add to the body of knowledge of working practices in the field of further education where there is, seemingly, a distinct lack of active research other than that conducted for Government purposes.

This research challenged my own position in my different, often conflicting roles as a woman: researcher, wife, mother, lecturer and me – the individual. As a practitioner-researcher I recognised it was essential to try and maintain objectivity when collecting and analysing data particularly

during the interview phase when there were opportunities to control and direct the discussion. This was difficult in practice as I discovered when the interviewees and I relaxed. I was conscious of interjecting, at times, with my own anecdotes and had to mentally restrain myself from interrupting and taking over the stage. I was aware of the need to allow the information to be free from any influence on my part for as Griffiths (1998a, p137) advised:

“There is, on the one hand, the claim that research from outsiders will be biased – and the reverse charge that research from insiders will be biased. On the other hand, there is the charge that insiders may have gone over to the academy, and become biased themselves, in that they have taken on its values, attitudes and beliefs to the extent that they are no longer true insiders”.

But she also argued (1998a, p137) that:

“no one in educational research is a complete insider or outsider”.

My concerns with the needs of disabled staff and students came from anecdotal evidence about the lack of provision and sensitivity to their particular needs. Students in wheelchairs found several areas of the college were inaccessible and even doors in a new extension were too heavy to open unaided. Desks for users of wheelchairs had been of the wrong height and makeshift furniture had been hastily provided. A wheelchair user who had muscular dystrophy and limited use of his hands needed a special computer programme to input assignment work. This particular programme was lent grudgingly by another department that had to be accessed in a very small room, away from the rest of the class, which barely had the space to accommodate his wheelchair let alone his carer.

A diabetic student needed to snack but there was a rule forbidding eating or drinking in college, except in the refectory. Another student, who had only one hand as the result of thalidomide, had to wait several weeks

before a computer company could be tracked down who would loan her a specially adapted keyboard. She eventually developed skills that far exceeded those of the rest of her class. Again there was a delay of several weeks before a student with limited vision could have access to the enhanced computer screen he needed.

A disability that had been impossible to detect was dyslexia. One particular student had not wanted to have a statement of educational needs at school and therefore it remained undetected at college for several months as she used computer packages to produce coursework. This left staff open to reaching the wrong conclusions when she found it difficult to concentrate or was constantly forgetful.

These were examples of students who were being disadvantaged as a result of the failings of the colleges' reactionary stance rather than being anticipatory when attempting to provide for their individual needs. For staff it was often a process of elimination or chance conversations that identified a problem and subsequently produced the contacts or resources needed. Equal opportunities should be about pre-empting the needs of potential staff and students and not waiting until a situation presents itself and then dealing with it.

I would suggest that if monitoring mechanisms had been in place and staff and students had been involved in a consultation process then these issues could have been identified and resolved. Without ownership, questioning and monitoring of practices and comprehensive feedback staff would be unaware of the needs of their students and managers would not be able to respond to the needs and expectations of their staff and students.

It was as a result of my own experiences of inequality in my younger days, as a woman, a mother, a student and subsequently as a member of staff that I felt qualified to take on the role of the Equal Opportunities Representative in the college. This role was short-lived however as during

one of several re-organisations it was decided that equal opportunities was “old fashioned and out-of-date ... we prefer to use the term widening participation and develop our provision in that area” and therefore, it was explained, a representative was superfluous to the needs of the college. I chose not to take the loss of this role personally but it did lead me to consider whether other colleges were following a similar line. This then led on to the question as to how equal opportunities were being monitored and who had the responsibility for its implementation and disseminating information.

Chapter Two was a review of the literature that also picked up the debate that the terminology had changed and moved on. The notion of equality and opportunity has been debated, discussed and dissected at length, to the point where new terms such as ‘Social Justice’ have evolved and, on occasions, used as a substitute. It could be the very fact that the terminology associated with equal opportunities is worn out along with the old campaigns. As Griffiths (1998a, p86) remarked when justifying her preference for the use of ‘Social Justice’:

“Terms like ‘equality’ or ‘equal opportunities’ may be claimed back at a later date. For now, their devaluation is a reality that needs to be acknowledged.”

Griffiths chose to use the term social justice (1998b, p301):

“because it is a broader concept than say, equal opportunities or even equality”.

But the question posed here was whether these terms had been devalued or were now being used in a different context to embrace wider social issues. This was an area of questioning that I pursued during the interviews in order to obtain a broader understanding of the perceptions and usage of the expression.

Language could be a very powerful and persuasive tool and colleges may not have been aware of the messages that were also being shaped by the language in their policies and the messages that were being sent out to the external and internal customers as a result of terminology used and the extent of information provided. Lack of information could be as misleading as an overload of detailed jargon and could create the impression that equality was not a priority in the operational issues of the college or central to its mission. As I said in the next section, there was little evidence to suggest that there had been any wider debate on policies that have been implemented or that there had been any feedback from stakeholders, ie the students and staff that these documents should benefit.

Colleges advertised their commitment to equal opportunities but I questioned who was monitoring and evaluating the policy, as this was not evident. Therefore, I included questions on the monitoring process, in both the questionnaires and the interviews. I considered Cockburn's (1989, p214) description of the knee jerk reaction by management to the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and Race Relations Act (1976) and speculated whether the result would be similar:

“a short term commitment to the ethos of equal opportunities but long term disappointment for its proponents”.

This led me to consider whether we needed a policy at all in order to be embracing the ethos of equal opportunities and I became curious to know what purpose it was intended to serve. I wanted to find out whether colleges used their policy as a valuable working tool in terms of monitoring provision that was in place. It was important to know who was responsible for this monitoring and took ownership for implementing changes and whether there was any consultation and communication amongst staff, students and owners of the policy.

Thus this research questioned claims made by Colleges of Further Education that they were committed to equal opportunities. Colleges have

developed Equal Opportunities policies and policy statements in response to government legislation, local government policies and the policies of professional and validating bodies. Equal Opportunities could be seen as a political and moral minefield with legislation constantly changing and being revised. Acts of Parliament and the findings from the Kennedy Report (1997) and Tomlinson Report (1996) have required colleges to adopt a more pro-active approach to equal opportunities whether they feel compelled to buy into the culture or not. Government legislation has developed to support and enforce the rights of individuals through:

- The Equal Pay Act 1970 (and 1986)
- The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 (and 1986)
- The Race Relations Act 1976
- The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (updated 2002) (post-16 provision of Part 4 – education section – amended from 1 September 2006)
- The Human Rights Act (1998) that came into full effect on 2 October 2000.

Government inspections have also necessitated greater accountability with more pressure being exerted under the new OFSTED influenced regime for inspections that came into operation from April 2001 when it then became an essential requirement for colleges to demonstrate active consideration of Equal Opportunities issues. Colleges had to indicate the extent to which their provision was educationally and socially inclusive with the learners being central to the inspection framework. However, it still remained difficult to gauge whether there had been any progress towards greater equality of opportunity within the sector. OFSTED inspections were very one-sided and tended to focus on equality of opportunity for the students rather than on the staff who serviced the industry. I argued that those colleges without effective monitoring mechanisms in place were in danger of failing on both counts; morally and legally.

Although policies may have existed, it was not a guarantee that they were effective or held any currency with staff and/or students within the organisation. Anecdotal evidence indicated policies were honed and figured more prominently prior to government inspections and validation processes rather than being central to the organisation's strategic plan. The interviews allowed more detailed questioning comparing the commitments expressed publicly in policies with procedures and practices on the ground.

The focuses of the investigation were on women and disability as both groups have experienced serious discrimination but were very different in terms of issues that were raised. These two groups represented quite individual facets of the equal opportunities framework whilst sharing other parameters that could not be overlooked, for instance, race, religion, age and also a history of unfair discrimination in the work place that became apparent in the research process.

Context

There was a dearth of evidence in the literature to suggest that any consideration had been given to policies in practice within further education, other than from HMI and FEFC inspection reports. Evidence from these reports was one of the motivating factors for undertaking this research. Over a 7 year span between the HMI report (1991) and reading individual colleges' FEFC reports in 1998 there appeared to be a downward move away from an observable commitment to equal opportunities in the colleges selected for inspection. The FEFC reports identified sixty two per cent of colleges having weaknesses that outweighed strengths with only twenty eight per cent being commended for their approach to equal opportunities. Interestingly, in ten per cent of cases, the FEFC Inspection Team made no reference to equal opportunities, although there were comments relating to inclusivity and widening participation. This raised the question as to whether this was an early indication that terminology was changing. On the other hand there

was the possibility that certain inspectors could have had equal opportunities issues higher on their agenda than others, bringing into question the validity of the inspection process.

The journey through this research had already seen changes in further education, not least the demise of the FEFC Inspectorate and the emergence of the Learning and Skills Council which had a remit to draw up national and local equal opportunities strategies. Robin Bream (May 2001), who worked in the DfEE's LSC policy division, responded to my email enquiry about the current state of equal opportunities as follows:

“The levers for ensuring equality are all now in place but the new LSC and inspectorates have to make sure they are understood and taken seriously by learning providers. LSC staff will find it much more difficult than their predecessors in FEFC and TECs to ignore provider failure in this area as Section 14 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000 requires the LSC to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between people from different racial groups, between men and women, and between people with a disability and people without. This duty will be reinforced by the new Race Relations (Amendment) Act, and the new Special Educational needs and Disability Act (which extends the coverage of the Disability Discrimination Act to the FE sector.”

I expected there would be many colleges who felt that they had already embraced the ideology of equal opportunities and had it firmly embedded in the culture of the college but there would also be those organisations where any overt reference to policies and practices had been avoided, or was, at best, minimal. The question was raised in the interviews as to whether these colleges were any less successful at promoting equal opportunities than those who brandished their achievements publicly. It could have been that equal opportunities was such a complex issue - even theorists had widely differing translations - that colleges found it difficult to allocate the time required to successfully integrate it into the culture of the

organisation. It might be that colleges did not regard its implementation as high on a list of priorities that included producing data on target setting, monitoring, achievement and retention in order to achieve funding. This research questioned how colleges monitored and assessed the quality of equal opportunities and good practice within their organisation, particularly where there was little evidence of the promotion of equality of opportunity. It also sought opinions on who should be responsible for the monitoring and assessment process, ie who should have ownership of the policy and how information should be cascaded to the rest of the organisation.

Rawls and Saunders views illustrated the diverse opinions held on this complicated subject. Rawls' (1975) interpretation of equality underpinned his theory of justice, which, he argued, required an understanding of the person and their interactions with others. His concept of a well-ordered society involved all of its members understanding and adhering to the same principles, leading, ultimately, to the creation of an ideal society. Saunders (1990), however, in presenting his theory of stratification, disagreed, believing that equality was based on legislation and the notion of entitlement. He also advocated treating individuals differently if there was to be equality of outcomes and justified the use of positive discrimination. With such multifarious explanations, the problems for colleges and for this research was to establish whether those colleges who were not overtly proactive in supporting the principles of equal opportunities were any less committed to the ethos and a movement towards an egalitarian society than those who were enthusiastic and had taken the initiative to create a quality environment.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to re-open, re-vitalise and further the debate on equal opportunities and also to fill a gap that appeared to exist in research in this sector that was not government directed. This

investigation tested the current climate, providing fresh insights into equal opportunities in further education and explored what was happening on a number of different fronts. It provided an opportunity to review the literature on equal opportunities in general but, more importantly, to evaluate critically the extent of current literature relevant to equal opportunities in further education. Research does not always sit comfortably in some Colleges of Further Education and many reports and articles that have emanated from these institutions have tended to be large scale commissioned reports from, for example, the Further Education Funding Council and the Equal Opportunities Commission, rather than from researchers working at grass roots level. At the opposite end of the spectrum, much Further Education research has been very small-scale without the weight to inform national policy and practice. There has also been the tendency for this research to be individually based with little or no opportunity to disseminate the findings to colleagues, let alone more widely.

This research investigated actual practice on the ground in relation to intentions set out in college policies, and identified the existence of these policies. It discovered how colleges had planned, implemented and monitored equal opportunities and compared the content of a range of policies. Further research explored whether policies had been devised and adopted in response to Government legislation and whether they were central to the college's strategic plan. As a consequence, this led to a review of policies in practice from the view of the stakeholders, discussed in the light of acknowledged theorists in this particular field. It was also an important consideration to build up a picture of the understanding that employees and students had of equal opportunities and the effect that their college's policy had on them. It was hoped that evidence that emerged from the findings of this work could inform best practice in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies. The suggestion for a way forward for equal opportunities in further education was that it should be accepted as an integral part of quality assurance. It was acknowledged, however, that practices, opinions and legislation were

changing on a regular basis and the development of equal opportunities should be an ongoing process. This research only provided a snapshot of the status quo at the time that data was collected.

It was impossible, given the constraints of the time available, to explore the whole gamut of equal opportunities provision within the sector. However, I was also mindful of Richardson's (1990, p63) remark that:

“no campaign could realistically pursue a single cause ...more than one issue would be uncovered which could not be disregarded”.

I therefore elected to focus on 'Women' and 'Disability' in order to explore a range of issues, but at the same time to limit the scope. Although these two diverse areas of society highlighted the different aspects of equal opportunities they also shared other parameters that could not be overlooked, for example, race, religion, age, sexuality and unfair discrimination in employment.

The Labour Force Survey (2000) by the Skills and Enterprise Network, indicated a rise in employment in general during the quarter June/August 2000 but, most significantly, there was faster growth in employment amongst women who made up 45% of the total number of people in employment during that period. Yet they remained concentrated in part-time work, with worse conditions and pay than men. Seven years later a similar picture was still in place according to a report in the TimesOnline (2007) on the latest survey findings from the Equal Opportunities Commission. Again, although there had been evidence of more women in work only 10% held directorships in the UK's top 100 companies and just 20% were MPs. The report considered that there was a need for 6,000 more women in the most senior positions in industry in order to become more representative.

It has been increasingly recognised that people with disabilities can contribute fully to working life and organisations are being encouraged to

retain employees who become disabled, if at all possible. The DfEE, Labour Market and Skills Trend (August 2000) indicated that approximately 12% of people in employment could expect to become disabled at some point in their working lives, with the incidence of disability increasing steadily from the age of forty-five. Kline (2007), reporting on the Disability Equality Duty, indicated that:

“Only around 2% of staff in universities and colleges declare themselves to be disabled in some way. The Disability Rights Commission says as much as 20% of the workforce consists of disabled people. We believe many college and university staff may be failing to declare their disability for fear of being stereotyped and wrongly considered unfit for demanding work.”

Legislation inevitably changed throughout the course of this research with the most recent being the Disability Discrimination Act (2005). Changes to the disability equality law affected all public sector organisations including colleges and universities. The new Disability Equality Duty came into effect on 5 December 2006 with the aim of addressing disability equality in the workplace before it could become an issue of discrimination. Colleges and universities had specific duties outlined and were required to produce their Disability Equality Scheme and action plan by 4 December 2006.

It was of interest to me to establish whether the policies were live working documents or had merely been produced as a result of changing legislation and increased pressure on colleges to be more accountable. More importantly, who was responsible for producing the documents, reacting to these changes in legislation and cascading the information to staff and students? As commented earlier, the new OFSTED influenced regime for inspection from April 2001 could have galvanised colleges into a more proactive response to equal opportunities than had perhaps been seen since the Disability Discrimination Act was introduced in 1995. On the other hand colleges at that time may have been more responsive to the

Government's challenge to raise skill levels and review the financing of adult learning. In his speech responding to the final report of the National Skills Task Force, the then Education and Employment Secretary David Blunkett (2000) declared:

“Opportunity for all is not only a right, it is an economic necessity. No longer can we educate just an elite to the highest levels – we need to develop the talents of every member of the workforce to their full potential. ... There are too many areas vital to our economy where there are not enough skills to grow out businesses.”

Research of this specific nature, relating to policies within further education, was relatively uncommon although research on equal opportunities in general had been well documented by individual researchers such as Cockburn (1985, 1989), Cooper (1992), Davidson (1992), Griffiths (1998) and Morris (1991) and through organisations such as the Equal Opportunities Commission, FEDA and the DfEE.

Reference was made to the database established by EMFEC (1996) as part of a desk study and also to a NATFHE (1997) database to support this investigation and to highlight the considerable variation in the content of Equal Opportunities policies. Neither of these databases were available at the start of this research, phase one.

In Chapter One I set out the purpose of my research in the context of further education and equal opportunities. The aim was to challenge the status quo and whether policies held any currency with staff or students within their organisation. The focus of the investigation was on women and disability as two individual facets of equal opportunities but also acknowledged other shared, distinct parameters.

Chapter Two shaped the framework for this investigation. I had my own pre-conceived ideas that were most likely determined by my own experiences. The literature review opened up the opinions and views of

others who shared my beliefs or who disagreed with them and allowed me to compare my own research to theirs. It also pointed the way forward to the design of the research tools. The literature review acknowledged different perspectives on terminology in general use and the links to the terminology or changing use of the terminology of equal opportunities.

During the course of this research there were considerable changes to legislation that ultimately affected further education. The initial stages of this research were conducted when the ramifications of the Disability Discrimination Act, for example, had not impacted on the management of colleges and their policies. Reference was made to these changes as part of this review.

Decisions on the most appropriate approach to research were discussed in Chapter Three. Justifications for using qualitative and quantitative methods in the same research programme were made in the light of other researchers debating that one particular method was preferable. Comparisons were made with other methods and an argument was put forward for the methodology used.

The pilot survey was important to this research as the honesty of the students I worked with allowed me to re-define my questions. This was discussed in this chapter. The pilot also helped me avoid any ambiguity in the wording of the questionnaire. However, some ambiguity remained as would be seen from feedback later as it was still possible for questions to be misinterpreted. I explained how a mix of open ended and closed questions were incorporated to try and gain general information as well as leaving space for students and tutors to comment further on their feelings and attitudes.

Chapter Four was a review of policies that were available and in place at the time of this research. The review analysed the policies that were submitted and categorised the content of the documents under specific

headings. These results were linked to government figures and the findings from other significant groups at that time.

Chapter Five described the process undertaken to survey the staff and students in a representative number of colleges across the country. The data resulting from these questionnaires was analysed and presented here.

There followed a description of the interview process that was used to develop and complement the limited qualitative data gained from the questionnaires. This chapter was concerned with describing the type of organisations chosen and the role of the individuals interviewed. The views, opinions and attitudes of the interviewees resulting from these in-depth interviews were discussed in this section.

Chapter Six brought together all the evidence collected during this process and explores the relationship between the views and perceptions of those who participated in the interviews, linking them to the responses from the questionnaire analysis. Interwoven in this chapter were references to the literature that informed the structure of the questionnaires and subsequently the framework for the interviews.

There was also a discussion on my own stance to equal opportunities during the interview and data collection process. It also considered the practical implications of research and data collection and how challenges were met on the journey through this research. An up-date was provided on the current state of equal opportunities and, in the light of these changes I offered my own observations on the future of equal opportunities within further education.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW – THE RELEVANCE OF EXISTING LITERATURE TO THIS RESEARCH

In this chapter I presented my investigation into the literature. First I set out the purpose of my research and reasons for reviewing the literature which were, essentially, to develop the thoughts that I had in relation to equal opportunities in the further education sector. I set out the broad areas that I intended to investigate based on the results of my own experiences and initial explorations of the literature.

The purpose of my research was to investigate the effect that Equal Opportunities policies have had on Colleges of Further Education in relation to women and disability and how equality and opportunity are perceived within those organisations. As a result I anticipated gaining a broader understanding of how policies operated in terms of the stated intent being translated into practice. Whilst I would suggest the purpose and context of this research in further education has not been widely explored there has been extensive research and writing in the field of equal opportunities in general. It was to these authors and their publications that I referred in order to establish current and previous knowledge and to establish a basis for discussion. That is not to say the literature would only be reviewed at the beginning of the research process, rather it was the start of an ongoing process throughout this research. Books were used as a rich source of information published by previous researchers on this subject. More up-to-date information was accessed through Government reports, the Internet and reports in academic publications and journals. I also referred to unpublished research that, at the time of writing, was in progress. Government legislation was, and still is, constantly changing throughout the period of this research and it was necessary to keep evaluating the process and reviewing the research question in the light of these changes.

Personal experiences, observations, empirical evidence and curiosity defined this research topic and raised the initial questions relating to the usefulness, or otherwise, of policy documents. For instance, it was not obvious whether there were any commonly established communication systems in place within colleges to inform staff and students and disseminate information relevant to equal opportunities. I agreed with the many, including Herbert (1990, p12) who regarded empirical knowledge as the trust worthiest form of knowledge. He suggested there were extreme and contrasting possibilities:

“At one extreme is intuitive belief ... asserted by an individual as his or her view about an aspect of the world ... grounded on personal experiences, or it may be a belief based only on other people’s stories of their experiences”.

Herbert (1990, p12), however, also raised the problem with intuitive belief citing the narrow experience of a child who

“may be mistaken ... may over-generalise and identify (say) all cats as the family pet”.

He suggested (p12) that even as adults our experience of the world could be limited “and our knowledge of it may be biased as well as incomplete”. He considered that the “stereotyping in racial, sexist and other forms of prejudice typify these problems”. Atkins (2005, p6) also takes up this issue when justifying “the wish to research ‘with’ and not ‘on’. This was as a result of her

“concerns about the validity of empirical research in which the interpretation is exclusively that of the researcher, one whose positionality may be very different to that of the research participants. The nature of researchers is often that they are educated (academic), relatively affluent and hence the power relationships between the researcher and participants are skewed.”

I recognised the need for caution and acknowledged that personal experiences were not sufficient grounds for developing a hypothesis as insufficient evidence and personal bias could lead to exaggeration and misinterpretation of events. Reviewing existing literature was an on-going process that initially shaped the areas for questioning in the questionnaires and in the interview sessions and highlighted theories to be tested. The literature provided information on previous research, although, again, not specifically in further education and the purpose of the review was to support or interrogate evidence from the data collected. Previous researchers in the field may have drawn similar conclusions to my own but the question was whether we had arrived at the truth. Exploring the literature as the research progressed developed and deepened my own understanding of the issues but also opened up other areas to probe.

The literature review provided me with background knowledge and a greater awareness and understanding of previous research. I had specific areas of curiosity that were developed and refined through the literature. Although I had no pre-conceived theories there were questions and ideas that I pursued as I explained in the previous chapter.

It was, however, recognised that research in this field in the Further Education sector was almost non-existent by comparison with the wider debate. Cole (2000, pp 203 -204), commented on the

“paucity of research in this area” [and indicated that] “post-compulsory education generally would benefit from further studies of gender and FE management, particularly in respect of women managers.”

She recognised

"the small but growing amount of research on this (gender) in relation to schools and universities but, as in other aspects of educational research, much less in the Further Education sector."

Wallace (2002, p1), also highlighted the dearth of research within a specific area of the sector indicating that

“little has been published on the perceptions of lecturers new to the FE sector”.

The Further Education Development Agency, now the Learning and Skills Development Agency, made limited contributions through the publication of statistical data relating to retention and achievement within the sector. However, there were recommendations for good practice, compiled by Dadzie (1998, pp19-21), that emanated from a FEDA consultation workshop that suggested Equal Opportunities Policies produced by colleges should show:

“Commitment – as demonstrated by:

a written policy that is clearly linked to the mission statement, strategic plan and charter

a sub-committee of governors and a staff or student/staff committee with overall responsibility

a senior member of staff with responsibility for implementing the policy

an action or implementation plan.

Ownership – as demonstrated by:

regular communication and publicity to ensure awareness of the policy

frequent opportunities for students, staff, external clients and others ... to discuss, evaluate, review and influence the policy

staff induction and development opportunities to promote ownership.

Internal action – as demonstrated by:

data on ethnicity, gender, age, disability and other relevant information is collected for review purposes

all governors and staff are trained in the effective implementation of the policy

data is monitored

targets are set.

External action – as demonstrated by:

regular consultations with ethnic minority, ...under-represented groups

monitoring work placements and work experience

projecting and promoting itself in the community as an equal opportunity employer and service provider

seeking advice on equal opportunities ...from outside agencies

providing information and marketing material in community languages ...and key information ...is made available in different formats.

Outcomes – as demonstrated by:

fair representation of people from targeted/under-represented groups at all levels

participation by a wider group of learners

consistently high levels of student retention and achievement

enhanced reputation in the community

increasing levels of customer satisfaction

favourable publicity from the media

wider range of work experience available

fewer grievances and complaints.

Meeting funding body requirements – being able to demonstrate they are:

committed to equal opportunities

meeting the needs of targeted/under-represented groups in their local communities

able to meet funding body criteria relating to provision for targeted/under-represented groups.

I believe that commitment to equal opportunities cannot be demonstrated through a written document alone, this is merely a statement of intent. Questions in this research were intended to identify whether colleges were active in their commitment to the ethos of equal opportunities or whether documentation had just been produced to satisfy legislation. Dadzie (1998) recommended governors, staff, students and senior managers should take an active role in demonstrating this commitment but the question was to what extent did they see it as their responsibility, if at all.

Commitment could also be demonstrated through ownership but the question was, who would take on the responsibility of communicating information, organising meetings and disseminating information? The bureaucracy and paperwork linked to teaching and managing has meant many staff have limited time left for additional responsibilities and similarly students' heavy workloads have often restricted any extra-curricular activities. However, the recommendations from this report were that involving all members of a college was important to ensure the policy was effective. This research aimed to identify whether these practices were in place in the colleges surveyed.

Action to monitor discrimination and barriers to equal opportunities should come through internal action according to this report. This involved data collection that had to be collated and subsequently monitored. Similarly there was a need to demonstrate a commitment externally through work placements and consultation with appropriate outside agencies. This implied extra work for existing staff or the need to employ another member of staff to take on this role. Questions asked during this research were intended to identify similarities and/or differences in colleges' approach to this requirement.

Wilson (1991) questioned whether equality of opportunity actually made sense in education. It was the distributive element that was a concern and which Wilson felt could not be applied in the learning context. Whilst he considered it was physically possible to provide fair shares of votes for example and claimed equal rights for women made sense, there were certain contexts when equality was not feasible. Wilson suggested equality of opportunity was a more acceptable idea in education rather than the unattainable ideal of trying to make everyone equal or the same. His basic interpretation of equal opportunities was based on the chances that we in education could provide implying free scope for natural talent, but if those chances were not communicated and transparent then access was being denied. However, Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) argued that socio-economic factors made it impossible for education to provide equality

of opportunity in any real sense. It was those ideas that were explored and developed further in this research with consideration given to the concept of social justice.

Social Justice

According to Bauld (2004, p1):

“Social justice is concerned with the distribution of resources and issues of equality and inequality. As such it provides a useful framework for examining how inequalities in society affect how disability is perceived and experienced as well as how health is conceptualised.”

Social justice in education is about entitlement and engaging non-traditional learners, which is where colleges have an important role to play in enabling people to participate fully and be valued as individuals. I would suggest that the regular monitoring of a college’s equal opportunities policy would provide data that could highlight examples of good practice and indicate areas to be targeted for improving resources and including non-traditional learners. Equally it should be possible to gauge how disability is perceived within the organisation and whether, in fact, disabled people feel disadvantaged. These were areas of questioning both through the questionnaires and in the interviews.

Griffiths has written extensively on social justice, justifying the use of the term social justice (1998a) in preference to equal opportunities, claiming, “social justice is a broader term than equality”. Griffiths (1998a, p89) argued that

“there are plenty of times when strict equality would be waived for reasons of social justice”.

A range of examples supported her reasons where the term 'equal opportunities' had created more difficulties than it had resolved. Griffiths (1998a, p89) then went on to provide us with a working definition of social justice:

- 1 "It is the good for the common interest, where that is taken to include the good of each and also the good of all, in an acknowledgement that one depends on the other.
- 2 The good depends on there being a right distribution of benefits and responsibilities".

A report from the Social Justice Commission (1994, p18), overseen by the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR), defined social justice as;

a "hierarchy of four ideas:

- 1 that the foundation of a free society is the equal worth of all citizens, ... expressed most basically in political and civil liberties, equal rights before the law and so on;
- 2 that everyone is entitled, as a right of citizenship, to be able to meet their basic needs for income, shelter and other necessities ... the ability to meet basic needs is the foundation of a substantive commitment to the equal worth of all citizens.
- 3 that self respect and equal citizenship demand ... opportunities and life chances: 'That is why we are concerned with the primary distribution of opportunity, as well as its redistribution'.

- 4 to achieve the first three conditions of social justice, we must recognise that although not all inequalities are unjust ...unjust inequalities should be reduced and where possible eliminated”.

Whilst I can accept these ideas as making sense Flew (1993, p2) considered the term was being used by individuals who really had no idea of its meaning. In his opinion;

“Certainly many politicians, both professional and amateur, do nowadays employ ‘social justice’ as a virtually vacuous expression of commendation. These people, more or less regardless of the actual direction and intentions of whatever policies they may from time to time be advocating, will commend these for promoting social justice.”

He then concluded:

“But there are also, much more importantly, others for whom social justice is closely associated if not identified with a kind of equality.”

Whether or not colleges chose to use social justice or equal opportunities as the platform for articulating their commitment to providing opportunities for all groups of students and/or staff they needed to ensure that this provision was monitored and measurable. Griffiths (2003, p21), when discussing her approach to social justice referred to considerations that should be given to the focus of policies:

“it has been the source of bitter arguments within the politics of social justice, as various identity groups (identified by combinations of class, disability, gender, global position, race, religion and sexuality) have found themselves overlooked and silenced [plainly] it is impractical to have a separate policy for each kind of injustice for each strand. There are too many strands and anyway all of them change over time and context. [However] equally, a policy that does

not recognise differences is falling into the same kind of trap as the single perspective that diversity is trying to get away from.”

De Lyon and Widdowson Migniuolo (1989) challenged students and colleagues to become aware of their working conditions and how they are singularly affected. The only way they suggested equality could be achieved was to develop every employee's awareness of equal opportunities. If they were unaware of what constituted unfairness and inequality then they would not know if they had been the victims of discrimination. The implication was that everyone should be more knowledgeable about the issues in order to lead to a fairer society but my question was whether colleges did provide training and awareness-raising sessions. Based on this information the questionnaires and interviews focused, in part, on how involved students were in determining their preferred learning styles and materials for instance or whether they were aware that they could be questioning the presentation of information.

DeLyon and Widdowson Migniuolo (1989) aimed to engage everyone in becoming aware of a process that affects us all. It was ignorance, they believed, that was perpetuating inequality of opportunity rather than outright bigotry although this hypothesis was not substantiated in the text. Based partially on this information this research also questions the frequency of training and awareness sessions for employees and students' opinions were also sought to discover if they were aware of what constituted unfairness and inequality. Raising awareness was a consideration that also emerged for them in relation to teacher training. They highlighted the opportunity trainees have to change attitudes and beliefs and develop a forward thinking approach to equal opportunities. If colleges were to monitor their policies and develop a sense of ownership, particularly within this group of employees then they could have a rich source of cascading new ideas and expertise.

Clements and Spinks (1996) attempted to demystify the whole issue in a straightforward, generalised account of the main issues of equality,

unravelling the terminology and presenting the reader with the opportunity to challenge and confront their own prejudices. They raised awareness of the fact that discrimination was an every day occurrence affecting individuals who were seen to be in the minority either as a result of ethnicity, gender, disability, religion or sexuality. They claimed that if this unfairness and inequality was eradicated then equal opportunities would have been achieved.

Terminology

Clements and Spinks (1996) attempted to unravel the terminology but colleges created a set of their own interpretations. Colleges have devised their own strap lines, mission statements and advertising to promote themselves as equal opportunity employers. The question, for the purpose of this research was whether there was any substance to these proclamations or whether they were empty words that were cosmetic additions to advertisements to attract potential employers and/or students. A study in the future could focus on how relevant these statements were in advertising materials, whether they were read (given the cost of producing promotional material) and whether they were a persuasive element in the decision making process.

The following were examples from the teaching vacancies section of the Times Educational Supplement (April 2005):

“Working towards equality of opportunity”.

This would suggest that this college has gaps in its provision.

“... is an Equal Opportunities Employer and welcomes applications from members of ethnic minorities who are currently under-represented in the workforce”.

Discriminates against other groups.

“... is working towards equal opportunities and we would particularly welcome applications from ethnic minority communities and people with disabilities”.

Again this could be seen to discriminate against other group.

“... aims to be an Equal Opportunities employer”.

Every employer should have this aim, given current legislation.

“We are an Equal Opportunities employer”.

The latter is a very bold statement that invites further investigation.

One of the longest strap lines came from a college with one of the worst OFSTED inspection reports at the time of researching this information:

“We are committed to the development of positive policies to promote equal opportunities for all people regardless of race, colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin, religion or belief, age, disability, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, ex-offending background or any other potentially discriminatory factor. We particularly welcome applications from people of an ethnic minority who are currently under-represented in our workforce. Candidates with a disability who meet the essential requirements of the role are guaranteed an interview”.

I suggest the following example conveys the same ideals more succinctly:

“We are working towards equal opportunities and welcome applications from all sections of the community”.

Women

There have been numerous debates into the reasons why women encounter difficulties in the employment market. This raised concerns for me in this research from the point of view of both staff and students within colleges. It was important to identify whether there were opportunities to continue training or progress a career. This information, that should have been evident if data was monitored, could have indicated to colleges whether they were discriminating against women.

Pringle (1989, p196) for instance, when discussing the contribution made by the woman's occupation, assumed that the male was the breadwinner and overlooked the single parent family and families where there had been a conscious decision for the woman to be the breadwinner and the man to remain at home. Following on from this role reversal it was noted that legislation now made it possible for the man to take paternity leave and I was interested to establish through questioning whether this option had been taken up. I considered Pringle's work was narrow in focus since it only appeared to focus on the individual male and female status or husband and wife groups.

Questionnaires and interviews with women employees and students in further education would raise these questions and explore the notion that they could have been disadvantaged in their career progression as a result of changes to their status, for example, marriage or parenthood. Pringle's (1989) view was that women, whether married, widowed or divorced were vulnerable and would be considered less favourably in the job market because they had chosen to place marriage and possibly motherhood ahead of career progression. Hefferman (2004, p1) similarly believed that:

“Women's role in the family meant that they entered the workforce with one hand tied behind them. [Although] we have, on paper at least, formal equality in access to education, jobs, political life and

pay, combined with greater freedom to divorce, to have sex outside of marriage, and access to contraception and abortion.”

Taking into account the strength of feeling from these accounts there was the need to establish what provision was made in colleges for women returners and whether they would be returning to lower status jobs. Pringle (1989, p206) suggested there was an assumption that women who took a career break returned to more menial jobs. This was a view endorsed by Hefferman (2004, p1) who considered:

“ ...the majority of us remain laughably far from equality, let alone liberation. We work in routine service industry jobs structured by low pay with shift patterns dictated by childcare.”

I asked in this research whether there was any basis for this assumption and whether colleges were being proactive in raising women’s aspirations in the career stakes. This could only be evident if they were monitoring their policies.

Cockburn (1985, pp234, 243) described work, not as hurdles but rather as a series of ladders with men using the rungs to distance themselves from women and so preserve them from any comparisons with women in equivalent roles. Men, apparently, reached the top fairly quickly, even in a predominantly female occupation. Their only concern for men within a traditional female environment (hairdressing) was the lack of numbers of men entering the profession, as they (men) were perceived to be the managers of tomorrow. Richardson (1990) claimed that perceptions and stereotypes were being reinforced on a daily basis through schools, teachers and the curriculum. Kilminster (1996, p1) similarly highlighted the role that colleges played in perpetuating stereotypes, particularly in relation to working class women’s education and expectations:

“The ‘women’s areas’ within further education are, of course, secretarial studies, health and social care (including child care) and

hairdressing and beauty therapy which clearly illustrates the power of education to reinforce and reproduce social relations.”

She highlighted the fact (1996, pp1-3) that, although colleges relied on women students for income, they were not addressing their specific needs.

“Working class women are now the largest group in many further education colleges and are essential to the colleges’ survival. ... Without mature students further education would fail to meet its recruitment targets and therefore would lose funding but further education fails to meet the educational or social needs of women students.”

Furthermore colleges were accused of creating barriers to their learning.

“Once a woman does manage to enter further education, despite the obstacles resulting from government policy, she is unlikely to find the climate conducive to extending or developing students. ... The future appears to have arrived in further education and it leaves and will leave working class women where they have always been – between a rock and a hard place.”

Cockburn’s research (1985) similarly focused on the poor representation of women, for instance, in the engineering industry and she also described how they had become less involved in technology as technology advanced. I questioned whether this was the situation in further education. Cockburn (1985) identified an eighty per cent increase in the number of women in skilled, male trades between 1960 and 1980 with a significant increase in engineering and technology courses by 1982 but her predictions for a steady increase in women’s participation in non-traditional areas was not realised. According to a report for HMSO (1994), *The Rising Tide* the few women who did train on these courses were less successful than their male counterparts. Women’s inability to find appropriate employment, particularly in a male environment only reinforced male supremacy in these

occupations. The report stated that 59 per cent of males found employment compared to 39 per cent of females. What these statistics did not reveal was the reason behind these low figures and whether women had the opportunity to embark on this type of career. It was important for me to identify whether there had been a breach in these barriers, whether women did have access to training on male gendered courses and whether, in fact they would even consider applying for this type of course. This linked into the questions that aimed to find out how easy it was for women to return to education and training.

Stott and Lawson (1997) reported on a representative sample of views of women principals who considered everyone should have access to education, irrespective of different needs and abilities, echoing the views of Tomlinson in the 1996 report *Inclusive Learning*. The problem for colleges, I would suggest is how to expand provision whilst remaining competitive and, at the same time, financially viable. One college in Lincolnshire, for instance, has excluded single people from specific dance classes with enrolments only being for couples. With this in mind I asked respondents to the questionnaires to indicate whether they had found it difficult to enrol on a course, listing possible reasons and inviting additional comments.

Unfortunately women are seen to be disadvantaged as Further Education is still considered to be a male dominated environment at senior management level according to Stott and Lawson (1997). Davidson and Cooper (1992, p45) suggested that there was no difference in performance levels between male and female managers and therefore this could not be used in the argument that there were fewer women in managerial positions than men. They argued that one of the reasons was the fact that their skills and attributes were neither recognised nor fully utilised. They supported this theory with a number of examples of highly qualified women being channelled into monotonous, demeaning work that clearly frustrated them. Similarly, Shain's (2000, p224) research highlighted women's feelings of marginalisation and lack of recognition. This resulted from:

“being paid less than their male peers for carrying out comparable work [and] being excluded from the senior executive level, despite being a ‘director’.”

One possible reason that I questioned was whether women had been considered less favourably in the job market if they had placed family life before career progression and whether they could only gain low status employment after a career break.

Whilst Davidson and Cooper (1992, p46) never questioned the abilities of women as managers they claimed that there would always be those employees who could not accept a female as their superior. Traditionally men have been accepted and stereotyped as leaders compared to female managers who have conjured up images of bossiness. This mirrors Stott and Lawson's (1997, p25) findings that women principals think others could view them as “tough, direct, firm, arrogant and ruthless.” They also pointed out there were further difficulties for women in developing their careers through networking with associated agencies such as TECs that, again, were predominantly male controlled. The questions in this research asked whether individuals had found difficulty in taking promotion, offering a range of possibilities and an opportunity to comment.

What I pursued through the interview process was the recruitment of women to more senior positions and whether there had been discrimination in favour of men. Cockburn (1989) suggested men were puzzled by career-minded women but I preferred her earlier argument (1985) that they felt threatened, in terms of job security, loss of power and exposure to inadequacy. Cole (2000, p205) considered;

“More women at the top [in further education] would bring specific skills and diversity that would be an advantage in the rapidly changing business world. [But warns of] a male backlash with men

being unlikely to welcome more competition for fewer, less secure positions.”

Stott and Lawson’s research (1997, pp18-24) into further education also identified an increase in the number of female managers but it did not indicate whether this increase indicated a significant breakthrough for women. What I also questioned was how great a threat this increase posed to men and what barriers women in senior positions encountered on their way to the top of their profession. They reported on a representative sample of views of women principals who considered everyone should have access to education, irrespective of different needs and abilities, echoing the views of Tomlinson (1996) in the report *Inclusive Learning*. Valuing all staff equally, teaching and non-teaching, was considered vital by the female principals interviewed in this research.

Davidson and Cooper (1992, p32) suggested there was a predominantly male culture at management level and an imbalance of work-related pressures that discriminated against women. Stott and Lawson (1997, p34) reinforced this view from the results of their research into the role of women principals. What I sought to identify was whether this overload affected all working women irrespective of their role within the organisation and whether this also applied to female students, particularly women returners, and whether any provision was in place to encourage and support their return.

Women have traditionally been categorised according to their seemingly more natural roles of caring and nurturing. As a result this has created barriers to education and certain careers. It has been noticeable that men still dominate certain professions, for example, judges and company directors and this has also been reflected in the further education sector. The key findings from recent research by the Women and Equality Unit (2005, p2) and funded by the DTI indicated:

“Women’s employment continues to be concentrated among the service sectors with the majority of female employment found in the public administration, education and health sector and the distribution, hotels and catering sector.”

It has been a concern that evidence was still emerging that minimal progress has been made to improve the position of minority groups within the sector. A report from the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) *Leading Change in Diversity and Equality* (2005, p5) claimed:

“under-representation suggests that individuals have been denied support in achieving career progression, and accessing personal and professional development, and this is often an issue of power”.

There followed a recommendation that colleges should:

“have more open and accountable recruitment procedures, and for their appraisal systems to be more transparent”.

There was the recommendation that colleges should have their staff equality and diversity procedures scrutinised at inspection as:

“Inspection reports comment on inclusion in relation to learners, then why not the learners?”

Although the report focused on race issues, highlighting the fact that there were only five black and ethnic minority principals in all of the colleges in England, it also identified the existence of discrimination in other areas.

The report claimed:

“bias is also prevalent in relation to gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, age, working patterns, and socio-economic background only twenty six per cent of college principals are women”.

This reflected a similar situation in secondary education where a slightly higher number of women, thirty one per cent, were heads according to the latest government figures. It was also revealed, in a survey conducted by the National College for School Leadership (2005) and reported in The Times Educational Supplement (18 March 2005), that:

“fifty per cent of female secondary school heads experienced sexist and discriminatory attitudes at some point in their careers”.

The survey identified an increase of approximately five per cent in the number of women heads since 1997 but reported:

“there is still a common expectation that a head teacher, particularly of a secondary school, will be a man”.

A recent report from the Equal Opportunities Commission, *Free to Choose* (March 2005, p11-13), suggested that females were still being disadvantaged as the current vocational education and training system segregated according to gender, those women and girls from the lower socio-economic groups being particularly affected. The report claimed that:

“boys take 99% of modern apprenticeship places for plumbing and construction and girls take 97% of childcare training. Meanwhile, 80% of girls and 55% of boys said they might be interested in learning to do a non-traditional job”.

Tomlinson's report (October 2004) presenting recommendations for the reform of the curriculum and qualifications for the 14-19 year olds was intended to establish an overarching qualification thereby eradicating the status and snobbery attached to academic qualifications and the stigma of the less attractive vocational qualifications that, in turn could reduce gender segregation. However, at the time of writing this thesis, the government

did not totally endorse Tomlinson's proposals, instead offering a diluted version that still retained the mix of academic and vocational qualifications.

The Women and Work Commission was established by the government in September 2004 and chaired by Baroness Prosser with a remit to examine the problem of the gender pay gap and other issues affecting women's employment. The Commission identified the following key facts in the report 'Shaping a Fairer Future' (2004):

- Between 1971 and 2004 female employment rate rose from forty two percent to seventy percent.
- Women make up only thirty two percent of managers and senior officials
- Sixty four percent of public sector workers are women against forty one percent in the private sector
- Having two children reduces earnings by an average of ten percent while three or more children cuts earnings by fifteen percent
- The full-time gender pay gap (percentage difference in hourly earnings) is eighteen percent
- The part-time gender pay gap is forty percent.

The Fawcett Society reported (2004) on pro-family policies claiming that the very policies designed to help working parents were, in fact, detrimental to women's equality. They claimed that improving maternity leave and offering part-time work had reinforced the gender stereotype of women as carers, particularly as similar options had not been extended to, or taken up by their male counterparts. The report recommended more should be done to encourage men to become involved in caring and unpaid work and for the government to set targets to reduce the pay gap. They concluded recommendations and encouragement were to be applauded but would be ineffective whilst negative attitudes still existed.

Although girls have outperformed boys at school, obtaining more GCSEs and A levels at higher grades, this has not translated in the work place, as women have not been entering professions that are higher paid and dominated by men. This view was reinforced by Madden (2004, p95) who provided evidence that:

“This is particularly the case for women from lower socio-economic groups, despite them having better qualifications on average than their male peers ...all the available evidence points to the fact that gendered subject choices at school are linked to inequality in the workplace and to women’s greater likelihood of poverty throughout their lives”.

The Women and Work Commission (2004) had evidence that school children were receiving limited advice about work placements in jobs dominated by the opposite sex, a view supported by the Equal Opportunities Commission (2005). In a report published in March 2005 they found that vocational education did not provide girls with a full range of career opportunities, they were not informed about careers dominated by men and were not advised that jobs dominated by women were often lower paid. NATFHE’s response to the report (The Times Educational Supplement 8th April 2005) was that:

“students are being channelled into vocational training too young, encouraging them to choose stereotypical careers teenagers would make more informed choices when they are older further education should play a bigger role in helping teenagers to choose from a greater range of careers, free from the influence of parents and their peers at school many will be influenced by stereotypical images and peer pressure to choose traditional vocational options”.

The Government has introduced paternity leave in an attempt to highlight the benefits of men as carers in the family and also their value in this role in the workplace. The Equal Opportunities Commission (2005) report also focused on the role of men, as statistics showed that only three per cent were enrolled on childcare modern apprenticeships and their aim had been to increase the number in childcare to six per cent by 2004. Madden (2004, p95) offered the reasons for low male participation as being

“low social status of caring, poor salaries and the belief that this is simply not men’s work.”

This was a view I intended to challenge in this research.

Disability issues

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 impacted on Colleges from September 2002 when adjustments to auxiliary aids and services had to be in place from September 2003 and physical features had to be adjusted to accommodate the needs of disabled people by September 2005. The problem for providers was how to define ‘disability’. Houghton (2006, p169) considered organisations needed to be aware of the models of disability in order to respond appropriately, particularly when changing policy and practice.

“The two dominant models are both subject to interpretation and encompass a range of subsidiary frameworks that share their originators overarching focus. For example, the medical or individual model focuses on individual need and objectifies the disabled person as a recipient of treatment, support, or assistance. ... the social model focuses on the role and responsibility of society, structural and organisational systems that shape provision, including teaching and learning experiences.”

In order to provide equality of opportunity, Houghton (2006, p169) recommended adopting the social model, as it:

“may begin to shift the problem from individual to organisation [but] it does not, however, remove the challenges.”

Others have defined the medical model as:

“Blind, deaf or dumb and other persons who are substantially and permanently handicapped by illness, injury or congenital deformity or who are suffering from a mental disorder within the meaning of the Mental Health Act”. (The Disabled Person’s Act 1986)

Wood (1980, pp27-29) presented the World Health Organisation’s International Classification of Impairment and Disability although this was not universally accepted because of the assumptions it made:

“Impairment: In the context of health experience, an impairment is any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure of function ...

Disability: In the context of health experience, a disability is any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being ...

Handicap: In the context of health experience, a handicap is a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability, that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal (depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors) for that individual.”

Oliver (1996, p34-35) discussed the perception of normality and the notion that disabled people were trying to achieve this normality. He discussed the issue that:

“increasingly the disability movement ... is rejecting approaches based upon the restoration of normality and insisting on approaches based upon the celebration of difference.” [and quoted UPIAS social model as an example].

“The disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activity. Disability is therefore a form of oppression”.

(Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976)

“The principle of recognising that someone’s disability is caused not by an impairment that they have, but by the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a society which takes little or no account of people who have impairments.”

(National Disability Authority 2000)

An example given was that of a wheelchair user who was unable to access a college because of the planning and design of the building or the attitudes of the provider.

The descriptors ‘Disability’ and ‘Learning Difficulty’ are often used synonymously when in fact there is a distinct difference between the two. Disability relates to a physical or mental impairment as previously defined but a disabled person could also have a learning difficulty. The Learning and Skills Act 2000 defined a learning difficulty as someone who found it more difficult to learn compared to most people within their age group. Examples given were; dyslexia and attention deficit and hyperactivity

disorder (ADHD) whereas a person with Down's syndrome would be classed as disabled and having learning difficulty.

Houghton (2006) sounded a note of caution for colleges when developing and or changing policies in that they needed to be aware of models of disability but it is equally important for these organisations to have distinguished between learning difficulties and disability in order to be clear about their provision. Consulting with these particular groups, as with women, would allow the voice of individuals to be heard and their specific needs to be considered. This was an area that was addressed in the questionnaires and interviews.

Cockburn's research (1989) found that disabled people were a minority group of people whose needs were frequently overlooked. Her views reiterated the frustrations of disabled people I have met who claimed it was the organisation that disabled them and not they who were disabled. It was, therefore, important that this research identified the requirements of disabled people and to what extent these were being met by the organisations. As Houghton (2006, p170) noted:

"There is no guarantee that institutional policy statements ... will automatically result in a corresponding practice."

Questions relating to access and support were therefore included in the questionnaire and the interview schedule.

There was, however, more than one issue here. It was not just about providing for the specific needs of disabled people it was also about the effect the actions of non-disabled people had on the self-image of the disabled. Morris (1991) challenged non-disabled people's perceptions of disabled people and their particular needs but this was not research based, indicating there was a gap in the knowledge here that was filled, in part, by the results from this investigation. It was with this in mind that I chose to explore the wider issues in further education, for instance, to identify the

perceptions held by non-disabled people of those people with a disability as well as exploring practical support that was available. This research invited opinions from participants in the interviews and respondents to the questionnaires in an attempt to establish non-disabled people's attitudes to disabled people and whether disabled people did hold a negative self-image. Morris (1991) was quite adamant about the negative attitude of non-disabled people, to the point of implying hostility and the creation of barriers. What she did not appear to consider was the possibility that this could have been apathy that was being misinterpreted or maybe disabled people's own perceptions of the feelings of others were being distorted. The self-image of any individual could be shaped by the interaction and responses from other groups within society whether they were disabled or not.

Morris (1991) discussed her attempts to understand the negative attitudes of non-disabled people whilst urging disabled people to generate a more realistic concept of disability. She offered the possibility that it was a fear of being in a similar situation that created such negative reactions and set non-disabled people apart from disabled people. She provided a balanced argument in favour of disabled people banding together to achieve solidarity in lifting the prejudices of non-disabled people. She also offered words of caution about the limitations of forming secular groups that could re-generate and reinforce the negative assumptions of disability. Integrating into the 'normal' world and appearing to engage in 'normal' activities could, she suggested, offer some degree of acceptability. Perceptions of normality that guaranteed acceptance into society were at the heart of her work. Anyone considered to be outside the norm was either feared or rejected. Morris (1991) acknowledged that there were fundamental differences in people and she, herself, would not want to be a part of the normality defined by non-disabled people. She did put forward the view, however, that a more realistic concept of disability could be generated from disabled people themselves. Questions used in this research aimed to assess whether the respondents felt that disability did

isolate individuals and if disabled people were always integrated into other social groups within their college.

Pam Evans (1991, pp16-38) contributed to the work of Morris, sharing her thoughts with the author in graphic detail from her own experiences: the assumptions that were held about disabled people and what she had determined made them different. I questioned whether her extensive account of traumatic verbal attacks and negative reactions was representative of the majority of disabled people. It was claimed that individuals' isolation and an ensuing lack of confidence was the price that was paid for being on the receiving end of this type of treatment. I questioned this situation, not to disbelieve Evans, rather to establish whether this was the norm, as I had not encountered such extreme views from any colleagues or students. Questions inviting opinions were included in the questionnaire and the interview schedule.

Rawls (1975) offered the opportunity to consider a perfect individual in a perfect society where everyone understood and adhered to the same principles. His notion of equality underpinned his theory of justice, which required an understanding of the person and their interactions with other people. He suggested that ideas about people were in the mind of the individual and formulated from experiences peculiar to that one person. Questions on disability were included to establish views on the extent to which disabled people were integrated and the reactions of non-disabled people to those who were disabled. Colleges promote equality of opportunity and this research aimed to establish if this existed in practice for people with a disability or whether there was institutional discrimination,

The Disability Rights Task Force was established in December 1997 and pressure was exerted on service providers under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to provide appropriate services for the disabled. Target dates of 1999 and 2004 were set for service providers to make the necessary alterations to enable disabled customers or service users easier access to their facilities. Amendments were made to the post-16 education

provisions of the Act, effective from 1 September 2006, in order to conform to the European Employment Framework Directive. The result of this change was that students would find it less difficult to prove discrimination as the onus had been moved to the colleges. Following on from this amendment further changes came into effect on 5 December 2006 when colleges (as well as all public sector bodies) had a general duty to actively support equality between disabled and non-disabled people. As such they were required to produce a Disability Equality Scheme and Action Plan by 4 December 2006. This research attempted to gauge awareness of these earlier proposals that were in force at the time of the fieldwork and what changes had been made in colleges, particularly in the economic climate at the time.

The 2001 Census revealed a minority of the population knew that one in eight of the working population (4.3 million) has a disability and overall 9.5 million people indicated they have a long-term illness or disability. More recent data from research by Hirst and Thornton (2005, pp9-11) and funded by the Disability Rights Commission indicated that currently:

- “There are 6.8 million disabled people of working age in Britain, one fifth of the total working age population.
- Disabled people are twice as likely as non-disabled people to have no qualifications. This difference is consistent across all age groups.
- Disabled people are seven times more likely to be out of work and on benefits compared to non-disabled people.
- Half of disabled people of working age, 3.4 million people, are in work and 1.2 million disabled people without a job want to work
- About 20 per cent of learners may need some extra help with learning at some time.

Riddell (2002, p2) highlighted the dilemma that colleges faced however when it could be virtually impossible to know whether students had a disability.

“It should be borne in mind that the majority of disabled students have dyslexia or unseen disabilities such as diabetes, asthma and ME, and less than 10% have significant physical or sensory impairments.”

Nevertheless this could not be used as an excuse as Riddell (2002, p16) pointed out:

“the DDA [Disability Discrimination Act] demands that anticipatory reasonable adjustments will be made to ensure that disabled students do not experience substantial disadvantage.”

Unfortunately she found “the nature of adjustments being made was very limited”. This could have been as a result of lack of consultation with staff and students, a theme that was explored in this research.

Cockburn offered a wide range of theories as to how equal opportunities could be successfully implemented. She (1985) suggested colleges should discriminate positively in favour of women when enrolling students on to courses. I was not sure how realistic this was in practice and took the opportunity to develop the interview questions along this line. There was also the theory (1985) that an ideal situation would be a women-only learning environment, but I questioned whether this was realistic and whether women today wanted to be taught by women in a women-only class.

Cockburn (1989) suggested that the success in adopting an equal opportunities agenda could be measured in terms of its achievement to bring about a change of attitude and practice however great or small. It

was always going to be challenging trying to measure changes in attitude although changes in practice could be more obvious.

Her theory (1985) was that there were two factors that divided labour. She suggested people and occupations were gendered and the workplace was structured hierarchically, which worked to the advantage of men. I challenged whether this was reality in further education and if colleges monitored data to inform best practices.

Cockburn (1989) cast doubts on the success of different pressure groups to highlight and overcome discriminatory practices in the work place. It was suggested that the commitment to the ethos of equal opportunities by management would be short term and be a source of long-term disappointment for its proponents.

She recommended (1989) self-organising groups and a working partnership with a trade union as being the pre-requisites for taking the agenda beyond the needs of management and a way of facilitating the role of the Equal Opportunities Officer. The Equal Opportunities Commission (1986, p8) echoed this view and suggested:

“Trade Unions have a very important part to play in implementing genuine equality of opportunity and they will obviously be involved in the review of established procedures to ensure that these are consistent with the law.”

They also recommended giving consideration to:

“setting up a joint Management/Trade Union Review Committee in order to monitor the policy on a regular basis and ensure that it is working in practice”.

This research intended to establish the extent to which trade unions were involved in the consultation and monitoring process within colleges.

Morris (1991) also argued the case for disabled people banding together to achieve solidarity in lifting the prejudices of non-disabled people. Whether all colleges had an Equal Opportunities Officer or adopted self-organising groups was an issue I pursued through the questionnaires and interviews. I needed to determine whether colleges had Equal Opportunities representatives and whether they were allied to a particular union.

Further Education Colleges could be denying certain groups of people access to education because appropriately qualified staff have not been appointed, or have been made redundant in certain areas. Richardson (1990) highlighted personnel procedures as a contributory factor to inequalities of opportunity. Equally there could have been other valid reasons for individuals not enrolling; therefore questions relating to applications for courses and recruitment procedures were included in the research.

Cockburn (1985) expressed women's concerns that male ownership of training dictated power and control, inhibiting women's learning. She advocated training for women by women as the only way to change the status quo. Cockburn (1985) cited Haringey Women's Training and Education in London as an excellent example of a women-only training initiative but, after enquiries I made on 29 October 1998, it appeared not to exist. Similar support groups and women-only training groups also seemed to be short-lived, for example TOPS (Training Opportunities) training courses for women returning to work and ESF (European Social Fund) funded courses are no longer available. Although Cockburn (1985) portrayed a women-only learning environment as being ideal I intended to see how far this existed, or was indeed desirable within further education today. For instance, one particular college offers women-only technology courses but male and female lecturers staff them. Staffing of courses has usually been determined by the skills and qualifications of lecturers and not according to the gender of the applicants. Whether the gender of the

lecturer would be an issue for students would be determined through the questionnaires and interviews with staff.

Cockburn was so concerned about these issues that she advocated the unions should take a lead. Ten years after her report a cumulative effort by four bodies resulted in a Childcare Campaign Pack being produced that offered practical advice to both students and staff on taking up the issue of childcare on campus. The organisations involved were; the Association of University Teachers, NATFHE, the National Union of Students and Working for Childcare. These guidelines were produced in response to a survey conducted in 1992 by NATFHE to establish the extent of childcare provision for staff and students. There had been varying responses but, in the main, where crèche facilities did exist, they were seen to cater exclusively for students. This research set out to assess whether this level of provision was representative of further education in general and whether there had been any improvement since the report was published.

Morris (1991) discussed the more apparent physical or behavioural differences that set disabled people apart from the accepted norm and thereby dictated specific needs and provision. She clearly identified the practical support that was essential to enhance the quality of life of a disabled person and it was this factor that separated them from non-disabled people, thereby attracting the label 'disabled'. At the time of writing Morris highlighted the problems that have arisen as a result of Sign not being accorded the status of a language (although it has since been recognised) and Braille not having the same status as printed material and yet these are essential methods of communication that should be provided for staff and students alike. This was used to illustrate, yet again, non-disabled superiority and dominance over the disabled and the consequences that have affected their daily lives and self-image.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter I outlined the focus of the research and offered a justification for the approach taken. I discussed other methods that could have been used and whilst acknowledging their worth, gave reasons for my selection being the most appropriate. The purpose was to gauge the diversity or commonality of policies and establish the effectiveness of policies in practice. The three phases to this research were explained; Phase One being the content analysis of policies. The purpose of this analysis was to gain an insight into the content of policies that have been developed and review them in the light of guidelines for good practice provided by FEDA. Phase Two investigated, through a questionnaire survey, the views of staff and students on issues relating to policies. The final phase, Phase Three, complemented the results from Phases One and Two and drew on the perceptions and feelings of individuals through in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Definition

Elias (1986) claimed that the aim of research was the same in all sciences, social and physical, that was to make something known that had been unknown and to advance knowledge through discovery. Jankowicz (1995) preferred to think that research was carried out so that discovery could be systematic, thereby increasing knowledge. The emphasis here was on systematic research that was methodical and planned with obvious links in the data rather than being grounded in untested beliefs. I would disagree with Elias's claims that the aim was the same in all sciences but in the case of this research the aim was to make something known that had been unknown (in relation to equal opportunities policies) and advance knowledge.

Methodology

The focus of this research was an issue to be explored rather than a question to be answered, a hypothesis to be tested or a problem to be solved. The issue arose out of a personal interest in the subject and the problems I perceived in the way management were implementing a policy that had considerable social impact. Personal experiences as a mature student and subsequently as a lecturer provided informative, empirical evidence and an insight into the development of this research.

Walford (2001, p98) made a sweeping generalisation by referring to “all research”, claiming that:

“All research is researching yourself ...and that all research has a subjective element. ... All research involves the researcher in making decisions about the choice of topic and how the research is to proceed. These decisions always involve individual choices, and often evolve from previous personal experiences and commitments”.

Although I can only account for research that I have undertaken I had to agree with these observations, as they were very relevant to my own experiences. They did also raise the question of researcher/interviewer bias, for instance when deciding which questions to ask or which answers to follow up.

This investigation took an interpretative approach to the research that aimed to discover perspectives on equal opportunities policies in further education, focusing on their formulation, implementation and monitoring practices. It was my intention to reflect on what was happening in further education rather than adopt an interventionist approach. There was no plan to introduce change, per se, rather make recommendations to the existing situation.

An interpretive approach to this research enabled individuals to provide an indication of the situation they were in. It offered an opportunity for the views of the individuals to be heard.

The outcome could have been different if this research had been the focus of action research and an interventionist approach. This would have involved me actively in researching, evaluating and reflecting on the issue in one particular college with a view to improving practice within the organisation. Zuber-Skerritt (1992, p15) encapsulated the benefits of action research in her opening chapter of examples and reflections;

“The main benefits of action research are the improvement of practice, the improvement of understanding of practice by its practitioners and the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place”.

Elliott (1982) described action research as “the study of a social situation, with a view to improving the quality of action within it”. But it was only my perception that there needed to be an improvement and there was no intention to reflect on practice and subsequently make changes in individual organisations. Action research would be more focused on self evaluation and improving the quality of professional practice whereas this research encompassed a broader more general field of study, although that is not to say a change or improvement in practice would not be indicated as a result of the research. I have used action research in previous enquiries and found it to be very personal and related to my own practices within the classroom. It provided an opportunity to reflect on my approach to teaching and to consider the individual needs of my students. Evaluating my own practice led me to challenge accepted practice in other colleges and provided the impetus for the focus of this research.

The methodological paradigm was constructivist rather than critical, building on theories, points of view and opinions of those involved in this research – constructed reality. The qualitative method was used to collect

these opinions through interviews that provided more in-depth, richer information. This data also supported the evidence collected quantitatively in phase one from the questionnaires. Although the questionnaires focused primarily on retrieving quantitative there was also the opportunity for respondents to elaborate on their responses and contribute to qualitative evidence. This multi-method approach was considered in order to provide a breadth of information. It could be argued that this research should have used the interviews as phase one in order to determine the categories for classification in the questionnaires. However, these categories had been identified from a research of the literature in the early stages of this enquiry and from previously conducted research that had been discussed.

This methodological paradigm relied on a hermeneutical process that tried to comprehend experiences from another's point of view and how they arrived at that conclusion. Interpretation of the work of acknowledged authors within the field of equal opportunities was used to understand, inquire and interpret the opinions and feelings of those responding to this investigation and make sense of their experiences. This phenomenological approach was intended to focus on the experiences of the individuals in their particular role within the further education sector.

Method

The research, however, did not fit exactly into the qualitative category, as the use of quantitative methods could not be disregarded. Quantitative methods alone would have been inappropriate for this study, relying as they do on statistical analysis, as there would have been limited opportunities for richer data to emerge. Although the questionnaires were designed to invite further comments this would still be restrictive as it was not possible to challenge opinions and clarify ambiguous statements from anonymous respondents. There would be no opportunity to probe deeper into the individual's experiences, attitudes and perspectives.

There has been a considerable amount of debate surrounding qualitative and quantitative approaches to research with various standpoints emerging. Hartley and Chesworth (1998, p1) considered both sides of the argument in their suggestion that:

“Qualitative studies ... can be fascinating and insightful but they many leave readers with a quantitative disposition worrying about the generality of their findings. Quantitative studies, on the other hand, whilst providing data from larger and more representative samples, seem more mechanical and arid to qualitative researchers. But both methods have advantages and disadvantages and the results from different methods can complement each other.”

I agreed with their observations as qualitative studies can provide a rich source of insider information whilst quantitative studies can provide supporting evidence from a wider field. This was discussed further in justifying the use of both methods. Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p8) made a clear differentiation between qualitative and quantitative researchers but suggested that researchers were “doing the same things differently”:

“The word qualitative implies an emphasis on processes and meaning that are not rigorously examined, or measured (if measured at all), in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurements and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Inquiry is purported to be within a value-free framework.”

I disagreed with Bryman (1988, p104) who suggested:

“To many qualitative researchers, quantitative research produces superficial data. They tend to view survey research, for example, as a source of surface information which relates to the social scientist’s

abstract categories. By contrast, the quantitative researcher may be suspicious of the limited generality of a study.”

I preferred to identify with Woods (1999, p3) who described qualitative researchers as seeking:

“lived experiences in real situations ... they try not to disturb the scene and to be unobtrusive in their methods. This is an attempt to ensure that the data and analysis will closely reflect what is happening”.

As Denzin and Lincoln have observed (1998, p3):

“Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.”

However, Bryman (1998, p14) suggested the differences between qualitative and quantitative research were not as clear as the interpretation I gave above.

“Part of the confusion comes from the narrow association of qualitative methodology either with particular modes of data gathering ... or its non-numeric character” and concludes “method is more than data alone. The gathering, analysis and interpretation of data is always conducted within some broader understanding of what constitutes legitimate inquiry and warrantable knowledge.”

He claimed (1988, p15),

“the quantity-quality debate has been anchored within two apparently opposed epistemological positions ... experimental,

hypothetico-deductive or positivistic and the naturalistic, contextual or interpretive approaches respectively.”

Bryman highlighted the importance of distinguishing between the two as:

“there are competing claims regarding what constitutes warrantable knowledge.”

He argued (p17) that:

“qualitative and quantitative research procedures are but different forms of the analytic practice of re-representation ... in that both seek to arrange and rearrange the complexities of raw data.”

His summary (1988, p108-9) encapsulated the reason for my approach.

He concluded by offering one perspective that:

“the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is really a technical matter whereby the choice between them is to do with their suitability in answering particular research questions.

I chose to use both quantitative and qualitative approaches to this research for the very reason that they had particular questions to be asked and to access the different kinds of data that would be generated. The survey of staff and students was very structured and I had decided on the focus with the questions that were asked, arguably throwing up accusations of researcher bias. Whilst the same argument could be levelled at the decision to hold semi-structured interviews this qualitative approach provided the opportunity to widen the debate and explore different perspectives. The purpose of using both approaches came from being “concerned about the individual’s point of view”. (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p10). The benefits of using qualitative research were pointed out by Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p10) and echoed my reasons for using interviews as:

“... qualitative investigators think they can get closer to the actor’s perspective through detailed interviewing.”

Combining methods

This was a study set in two, arguably diametrically opposed epistemological paradigms as outlined above. I was not interested in simply conducting a survey to gather and analyse data, but was more curious about people’s understanding and interests from a phenomenological perspective (individual’s perceptions). My understanding of a quantitative approach to research was demonstrated in the second phase of this investigation, that was, to collect, analyse and present limited statistical information from a wide group of people. The subsequent stages of this work used a qualitative research method that involved drawing a large amount of detailed information from a small group of people from diverse occupations within the sector to gain a broader understanding of how equal opportunities policies ‘worked’ in colleges.

This research worked with both qualitative and quantitative data, collected using a variety of methods to establish different viewpoints. I acknowledged the findings could only provide a snapshot of events at any given point in time but recognised changes, for example, in legislation or curriculum developments that were identified and discussed in context. I also acknowledged the limitations of this research, as the data collected from the questionnaires could not claim to be representative of all of the further education sector, for example, higher education and 14-16 school links have not been included. The data collected from the interviews was representative of equal opportunities in Further Education in the Midlands at the time of conducting the interviews. It was intended to achieve the aims of this research by:

- Analysing the content of Equal Opportunities policies that existed in Further Education Colleges from a convenience sample of ten

selected from the Education Year Book 1996/97 to identify differences and commonalities.

- Comparing these findings with existing research data from EMFEC and NATFHE databases.
- Conducting a pilot survey with the intended questionnaire to indicate the relevance of questions and detect any ambiguity in wording.
- Collecting primary data using the revised questionnaires sent to College lecturers and students, systematically sampled, to establish perceived links between policy and provision and test attitudes to current equal opportunities practices.
- Using semi-structured interviews to conduct an explanatory study into policies in practice, monitoring mechanisms and their effectiveness. Convenience sampling will be used at this stage, the sampling framework for this study being six members of staff selected from five colleges reflecting differences in geographical location and size. It was acknowledged that this technique is prone to bias but time and financial constraints dictated using these cases because of ease of access.
- Reviewing the literature as an on-going process to inform and re-define the parameters of the research as my current knowledge advanced.

Phase One

In Phase One a random sample of ten colleges, from those listed in the Education Year Book 1996/97, were asked to provide copies of their Equal Opportunities policy for content analysis. Guidelines have been published as to what constitutes good practice in formulating, implementing and monitoring an Equal Opportunities policy by organisations such as the

Further Education Development Agency (FEDA, 1998) and the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC, 1986). However, they were just that, guidelines and there was no definitive blueprint. This was apparent when comparing the EOC's list of criteria that they expected to see included in most policies with FEDA's more flexible approach. FEDA's (1998, p13) guidelines suggested:

“Individual colleges will need to develop their own approaches to equal opportunities policy development and implementation to reflect their current stage of development ... the equal opportunities process is a continuum ... the pursuit of equal opportunities never stops”.

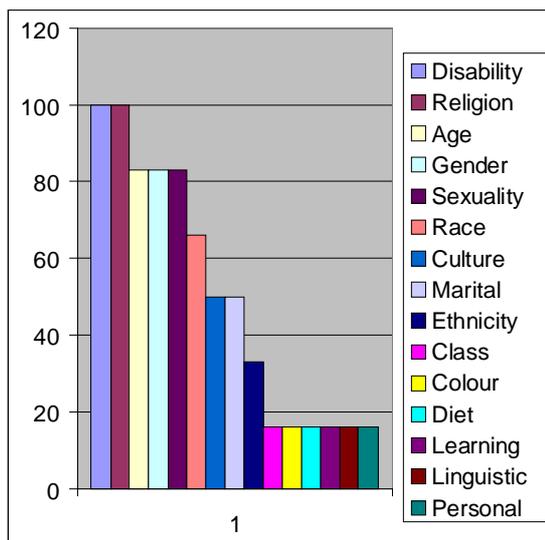
Six out of ten of the colleges responded with some giving positive notes of encouragement and others offering to co-operate further in this research if required. It was interesting to note later in the research that there was a higher response to supply information when they were contacted with a request for a prospectus. **All** of these colleges replied, the majority by return of post and yet they seemingly found it difficult to submit a copy of their Equal Opportunities Policy. One reason could have been that there would be a member of staff, usual administrative, who was responsible for distributing prospectuses whereas it may not have been as easy to identify who had ownership of the equal opportunities policy. This was an issue that was followed up in subsequent stages of the research.

Whilst a content analysis of the policies I received identified commonalities there were also striking and interesting differences. Some were very detailed and wide ranging in the extent of the coverage of the policies and the areas that were addressed, whilst others made bland, vague statements that conveyed little information and appeared to lack any commitment. It was not possible from reviewing these policies whether similar concerns could be raised, as in the later EMFEC (East Midlands Further Education Council) study, as to the skill and knowledge of the person(s) who had drafted them. The colleges who submitted copies of

their policies had clearly made an effort to comply with legislation in their stated intent. It was this stated intent that would be investigated in more depth through the questionnaires and interviews.

Presentation of the information varied from an A4 folded sheet of paper to high quality, professionally produced glossy brochures, possibly demonstrating the college's level of commitment or, on the other hand, lack of funds. There was also a noticeable difference in the emphasis and importance given to certain aspects of the policies that could, on further investigation, mirror the geographical and cultural diversity of the organisations involved.

The following categories were identified in the colleges surveyed:



At the time of collecting this data I discovered EMFEC (East Midlands Further Education Council) was undertaking desk research on a small scale for their region. They had conducted a partial survey of 28 colleges investigating equal opportunities in further education and a database was being created by Lilley (1996). Comparisons were made with Lilley's (1996) database and raw data from a survey being conducted by NATFHE at that time.

Permission was given to make reference to the desk study and use their data, subject to acknowledgement of its source. This database was not in existence at the start of my research and EMFEC were keen to build on their findings. The results supported the findings from the content analysis for my research and indicated a considerable variation in the content of Equal Opportunities policies. They also highlighted the problem that individuals with responsibility for drafting them were inexperienced and had not been recruited specifically for that purpose. Even more disconcerting was the fact that they had no skills in that particular field and had not been given any training. This was a regionally based survey that may not have been representative of colleges across the country; hence my research took a wider geographical approach to the study of policies in practice.

Pilot Survey

Aim and Implementation

The pilot survey aimed to identify any ambiguity in the wording of the questions and to invite comments from respondents on the ease of completion of the questionnaire. It was anticipated that it could also suggest a need for clarifying and redefining the research question and that data collected could indicate the relevance and validity of the questions, the clarity of instructions and inform the re-writing of the questionnaires that would be sent to a wider audience.

The sample groups were chosen from my own college on the basis of classes that should provide an equal male to female ratio and had recruited both full time and part time students with a range of abilities. Fink (1995) suggested a minimum number of ten for a pilot survey to ensure significant variations in responses. Seven groups were targeted in order to achieve this recommended number. Walford (2001, p37) suggested conducting preliminary research on potentially suitable organisations and

“prospecting ...for someone who might be sympathetic to whatever it is that you are selling.”

As I already knew some of these students and had a good rapport with them I trusted they would be sympathetic to my cause. However, I was sensitive to the ethical issues involved with students and their freedom of choice. Although it was intended to conduct this pilot survey as a whole class activity it was made clear that there was no pressure on them to take part, either from their lecturer, their peers or me. It was also stressed that, although many of us had a close working relationship, any information would be treated in the strictest confidence.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was designed to include a combination of open questions to produce quantitative data and closed, rating questions using the Likert-style scale technique to explore opinions and attitudes towards equal opportunities within the college. Closed questions focussed on the respondents' personal details with the opportunity for additional comments. The form was designed deliberately with four possible responses so that the respondents did not automatically select the middle option. However, some participants ticked between “Tend to Agree” and “Tend to Disagree” for instance to indicate indecision. One respondent went as far as to say they would have preferred even more options, for example “Don't Know”, “Not Applicable”.

Space was allowed at the end of each section to allow respondents the opportunity to express freely any comments and opinions that had been restricted through the closed questions. A series of statements was used to assess perceptions and, as advised by Kervin (1992), the response categories were kept in the same order to avoid confusing the respondents. There were five pages to the questionnaire and an explanatory front sheet. Although the general rule was to keep questionnaires as short as possible Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (1997,

p265) “found that ...for self-administered questionnaires an optimal length is six to eight A4 pages”.

The questions were based on issues raised in the literature and from questions resulting from the survey of policies I had undertaken with consideration given to commonalities in the surveys from NATFHE and EMFEC. I chose to include the question on marital status as I felt, at the time, that it could influence a particular bias when analysing data. This was not the case when responses were analysed although there are some amusing comments; “Single but looking!”, “Don’t know, ask the wife!”

Each questionnaire was encoded with a number in a box in the top right hand corner of the first page to enable these documents to be tracked. Saunders et al (1997, p271) recommended following DeVaus’s (1991) advice by

“placing a unique number on each questionnaire ...this makes it easy to check who has responded”

but warned against this if respondents had been guaranteed anonymity. I argued that the respondents could be assured of anonymity as the numbering only identified a particular college that had participated, which was for record purposes only. Also the responses from staff or students were only coded to differentiate between the two groups and could not identify particular colleges or courses, this was merely to facilitate analysis. In the case of the pilot survey the numbering only related to a particular course within the college that could not be identified.

Pilot survey analysis

Forty-four students return completed questionnaires from seven different groups within the two subject areas. The Area 1 students provided the majority of the responses - thirty from four groups compared with fourteen from three groups in Area 2. This could either be a reflection of the greater

enrolment figures in this area or the perseverance and enthusiasm of this particular lecturer to ensure all students present on the day completed a questionnaire.

The groups' responses were coded as follows:

AREA 1	GROUP 1	7 responses
AREA 1	GROUP 2	6 responses
AREA2	GROUP 3	3 responses
AREA1	GROUP 4	11 responses
AREA1	GROUP 5	6 responses
AREA 2	GROUP 6	8 responses
AREA2	GROUP 7	3 responses

Personal Details

In total there were thirty students from Area 1 classes who responded and fourteen from the Area 2 classes. Although more than half of those responding (56.8%) were in the 16-19 age group, the ratio was almost equal with twelve males in the group and thirteen females. The predominance of female participants in the survey overall (twenty seven to seventeen) could have been attributed to the trend referred to earlier in which the DfEE (2000) indicated there had been a significant increase in women returners (three times the number of females to males).

The ethnic origin of the respondents reflected the predominantly white, monoculture of this rural community and I did not expect this to be representative of a wider survey involving colleges with a more multicultural background. On the surface, this survey could be seen as biased, as there appeared to be significantly more Chinese and European students in college that I was aware of (4.5% had been allowed a voice in this survey). This, in fact, turned out to be an almost exact representative proportion of the total number of students enrolled. According to Grantham College's Management Information System (March 2000) there were

12,879 students registered for the 1999-2000 Academic Year. Of these ... 4.3% represented ethnic backgrounds.

According to Cockburn (1989), one group of people who were most frequently overlooked were the disabled. She recounted the views of people who claimed it was the organisation that disabled them rather than they who were disabled. These were also a reflection of the opinions of disabled and non-disabled people I have spoken to. However, this survey identified 22.7% of the respondents had a disability but only 4.5% were prepared to disclose the nature of their disability. This did have implications for the degree to which individual organisations were able to respond in the light of information available. If staff or students chose not to indicate a disability then it was difficult for colleges to meet their needs, or indeed be open to accusations of discrimination.

Similarly, 30% of those surveyed indicated that they had a learning difficulty but there was no evidence as to the nature of their difficulty. From empirical evidence there have been students who have not indicated a learning difficulty, for whatever reason. This has been picked up inadvertently during the course of their studies, for instance, in initial diagnostic tests for Numeracy and Literacy to assess students' level of ability and indicate any additional support that may be needed. Computers with spell check facilities and grammar checks have, however, enabled students to complete their work to the required standard without a learning difficulty being highlighted.

Course Details

I needed to reconsider the relevance of these questions and the context in which the data was to be used. I decided that the title of the course (for student questionnaires) and job title (for staff questionnaires), together with an indication as to whether they were full-time or part-time, was sufficient at this stage.

Recruitment and Progression

The majority of those questioned responded positively to this section with the exception of Group 7 who disagreed with the statements. Possible explanations for their negative reactions came from the follow-up interviews. From the entire responses 78.5% considered they had been given unbiased advice to help them choose the right course. But whose agenda was being followed? Cockburn (1985) had hoped there would continue to be a steady increase in women's participation in non-traditional areas. She advocated an 80% increase in the number of women in skilled, male trades between 1960 and 1980. However, statistics for 1995 supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the Department for Education and Employment to the Equal Opportunities Commission (1998) indicated that gender stereotyping still existed in education. Did this then suggest that advice should become more biased so as to avoid reinforcing this traditional branding of individuals? Or maybe there was another, hidden agenda to protect one's own job. It was encouraging to note that 87% were better informed about their rights and responsibilities.

Re-visiting this section raised concerns for me in terms of the narrow focus and phrasing of the questions. I knew which route I was trying to follow but reading the questions again, and having talked to some of the students, I could see that their interpretations and my intentions were not necessarily the same. I now realised that the focus was on induction, which did not stand out as a problem at the time of writing. It was a problem, however, for a student in Group 4 who did not have an induction for that particular part-time course. 'Induction' was clearly the wrong word to have used.

This became even more apparent from the comments sent in by Group 5.

"The word induction is hard to understand".

"The way things were explained to me unbiased - helped me to understand"

“What is expected of you and what other people could not do, ie bullying.

Difficulty understanding question”.

“Understanding of unbiased, induction. Have you told what you could/could not do in college and what/how you could expect to be treated by others” (sic)

“Some of your questions are very difficult for special needs students, eg EO, biased, induction, evaluating, monitoring. I don’t understand wording without explanation”.

The lecturer’s annotations on the returned papers indicated that she had to totally rephrase the statements to enable her students to understand their meaning, a salutary lesson.

Difficulties Enrolling

The number of responses was low in this section and the following section on barriers to promotion at work. There were only two sample groups who encountered difficulties enrolling on courses of their choice, Group 1 and Group 5. Only one person indicated age had prevented them enrolling for a course (Group 5) but five indicated their disability had been a problem with a further four considering their learning needs had prevented access to courses of their choice. Two people suggested their personal needs had created a problem whilst one person’s sexual orientation had been a difficulty.

Recruitment and Selection

There were negative reactions to the section on Recruitment and Selection and some negativity attached to the questions on Disability. Again, this centred on non-disabled people in College reacting negatively to those with

a disability. Morris (1991) offered the possibility that it was non-disabled people's fear of being in a similar situation that led them to distance themselves from the disabled. It was almost as if their disability was contagious. It was not evident from the questionnaires returned whether these students in Group 1 were speaking from personal experiences. As there were no additional comments it was unwise to draw any conclusions, as there could well have been different interpretations of the classifications put forward. This reinforced the need for me to re-visit the phrasing of statements or consider alternative methods for collecting the data.

Difficulties Taking Promotion At Work

Groups 1, 3, 4 and 5 all had reasons for finding it difficult to take promotion at work. This was contrary to Davidson and Cooper (1992) view who emphasised the predominantly male culture at management level and Stott and Lawson (1997) who reinforced this view; there were more men in my survey who appeared to have greater problems than women in taking promotion. This was not an outcome I had expected but I was reassured by Griffiths' (1998a, p130) argument in favour of researchers having opinions as,

“without some acknowledgement of initial opinions, including beliefs and values, the research will certainly be biased. ...opinions start, but do not end, the research. ...your research should be able to surprise you. Otherwise it is certainly biased’.

Reasons identified were age, gender, learning needs and sexual orientation. Four people who had experienced difficulties in gaining promotion at work attributed it to their age: three of these, one female and two males were in the 16-19 age group and the other male was in the 20-25 age group. Three people considered their gender had created problems, one female from Group 4 aged 51-55, one male from Group 5 aged 20-25 and another male from this group age 16-19. It did occur to me that there could have been some collusion in Group 5 as both respondents had also

identified learning needs and sexual orientation as being a barrier. There were also near identical responses in the other sections and their completed questionnaires were also together in the pile of papers handed in to me.

It would have been useful to have an insight into why the female attending the Group 4 evening class had reached 50+ and found her gender a barrier to promotion. I would also have been interested to know what type of work the two males in Group 1 were involved in and the exact nature of the difficulties they were experiencing.

After collating the responses I felt the questions in this section were also very limited and either needed extending or leaving out altogether.

Alternatively the possibility of collecting richer, qualitative data from group interviews with students and/or staff as a follow up to the questionnaire was considered.

Equal Opportunities Policies

Colleges have flagged up their commitment to equal opportunities in response to the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Race Relations Act 1976. Equal Opportunities values appeared to have been embraced, but had this knee jerk reaction by management, described by Cockburn (1989) produced a short-term commitment to the ethos of equal opportunities? Certainly the evidence collected did not suggest a heightened awareness of the existence of an Equal Opportunities Policy or an understanding of its content by those interviewed. Sixty two percent of those surveyed knew the College had a policy but curiously a higher percentage, seventy-two per cent, understood what the policy had to say.

There were strong reactions from students who indicated they wanted ownership of the policy. Ninety one percent of those surveyed considered it important to be involved in contributing to the content of the policy and an

equal number stressed the importance of being allowed to become involved in the monitoring and evaluating of the document.

Women

Cockburn (1985) expressed women's concerns that male ownership of training dictated power and control, thereby inhibiting women's learning. She advocated training for women by women as the only way to change the status quo. A women-only learning environment was portrayed as the ideal and my questions in this section were set around this belief. The responses that were returned did not support Cockburn's (1985) ideal. Eighty eight per cent of students thought that the course description could be attributed to males or females. Ninety five per cent of the sample did not think the college offered women only classes when in fact there had been several advertisements targeting women returners under ESF funding. Ninety five per cent of students did not expect their class tutor to be the same gender as them and when asked if they would prefer their tutor to be the same gender ninety per cent disagreed.

Ninety five percent of students did not consider they had been enrolled as a result of their gender and, contrary to Government initiatives, eighty eight percent of students in this college would not consider applying for a course that traditionally attracted the opposite gender. I also discovered that my questionnaires were so transparent that they allowed the author's gender to be revealed to more than one respondent. Of course it was the male respondents who drew attention to this fact which prompted me to reflect on one of the seven reasons Russ (1984, p76) offered for excluding women's writing from mainstream consideration: "She wrote it, but look what she wrote about".

Disability

A significant number of students (76.5%) appeared to be well informed about the existence of support groups. Morris (1991) provided a balanced

argument for disabled people in particular to band together in order to achieve solidarity and lift the prejudices of non-disabled people. However, Morris did offer words of caution about the limitations of forming secular groups that could re-generate and reinforce the negative assumptions of that particular group.

Modified questionnaires

Following the pilot survey I devised one set of questions and hoped that they had been phrased in such a way that one size fits all. It was necessary to modify the wording of the questions in the light of responses from the pilot survey and it was the re-worked questionnaires that were used in Phase Two for the Staff and Student questionnaires (Appendix 1). The questionnaires appeared to work in the majority of cases but where there were queries as to the relevance of the questions I considered, with hindsight, two different sets of questions could have been devised, ie, one for staff and a separate one for students. The questions could have related to the same topic and focus but been worded to reflect the differences in position, as staff or student, within the organisation.

There were obvious disadvantages in using questionnaires. Some questionnaires were completed as far as the personal details on the first page and one person indicated that they had learning difficulties and left the rest of the questionnaire blank. Another ticked a response to just one question on each page, which raised the possibility that this could have been random ticking of any box or the fact that insufficient time had been given to complete all of the form. There was also the possibility that the questionnaire was too long, containing too many questions that may not have been read properly. As a result, the reliability of the data could have been challenged.

The design of the questionnaire could have been problematic and affected the response rate. I arranged the questions in topic areas with varying numbers of questions in each topic. The topics focussed on disability,

policies, women, recruitment/enrolment and progression. The aim was to gain a broader understanding of the extent to which colleges made their staff and students aware of their intentions that were stated in the equal opportunities policies and, whether staff and/or students wanted to be made aware.

As there were so many questions it was difficult to maintain an acceptable balance between displaying them in an average sized font or reducing the font size and spacing between the sections. Using twelve point Arial would have created a seemingly lengthy document that could have been off-putting to complete and yet printing fewer pages using smaller type and providing less space for comments may have been equally discouraging. It could also have been problematic for staff and students with a visual impairment. Saunders et al (1997, p265) recommended printing on pastel coloured paper, yellows and pinks, as these colours tended to generate a higher response rate than cool colours, notably greens and blues. A lack of time and the availability of these specific resources were constraints that dictated the impossibility of testing out this theory so I accepted their alternative view that “white is a good neutral colour”.

On a more practical note I considered whether it was preferable to print all of the questionnaires back-to-back to save on postal costs for the sender and recipients. In terms of completing the questionnaire it would be natural for the recipient to read the page on the right of a multi-page document and overlook the one on the left so back-to-back printing was not necessarily an advantage. This could therefore lead to non-completion of the left-hand page and loss of data. The danger of being eco-friendly was evident when some questionnaires were returned with only the right-hand page being completed, but there was no guarantee that this was the reason, it could have been the nature of the questions that had led to a nil return. The cost of returning the questionnaires should not have been an issue for the recipients as a Freepost address was indicated, although not everyone took advantage of this and there was no evidence that it encouraged or hindered the number of returns. Other financial implications were the cost

of photocopying or printing directly from the computer, the vast quantities of paper and envelopes of a size suitable for the package being sent and the cost of postage for the sender. Then there were the costs in terms of time, time taken in design and the input of the questions, the time it took to copy the hundreds that were sent out and finally the time it took to collate, staple and package into envelopes.

Phase Two

Questionnaires

The aim of further research was to identify from questionnaires and interviews whether colleges had acted on the basis of their stated intentions. For instance, could they demonstrate their commitment to being an equal opportunities college where specially targeted courses had been provided and minority groups encouraged? The values and assumptions of the organisations were also challenged as these could have an influence on the progress of individual groups. The complexity of terminology was already evident: race, culture, ethnicity, colour as examples and it was recognised that the overlap between these groupings would be addressed together with any associated stereotyping.

There was never any intention to impose a standard model but it would appear some colleges were more explicit in addressing equal opportunities from teaching and learning through to governance and management. That was not to suggest that those colleges who were briefer in their documentation had any less a commitment to the ethos of equal opportunities. Further investigation through interviews and questionnaires aimed to clarify how successful colleges had been in raising awareness of equal opportunities and whether this success could be attributed to the existence of live working documents that were monitored and clearly owned with information being communicated to both staff and students.

Staff and student questionnaire

Questionnaire Implementation

In Phase Two, further investigation through a questionnaire survey aimed to clarify how successful colleges had been in addressing equal opportunities and how far this success could be attributed to the existence of live working documents. Postal questionnaires were used as the most appropriate method for collecting data on the attitudes and perceptions of individuals from as large a sample of respondents as possible. Comments and criticisms from the pilot survey informed the refining and amendment of these postal questionnaires that were sent to a total of 470 lecturing staff in 47 randomly selected colleges across the United Kingdom.

The quality of students' experiences was assessed by questionnaire analysis during October when most of them should have settled into college life and been exposed to the provision of their particular organisation. The survey had been carefully designed and re-visited in the light of the responses to the pilot survey. The intention was to provide data on their perceptions of the learning environment in relation to equal opportunities to identify whether colleges were meeting their needs and to explore their interpretations of commitment to equality. A total of 500 questionnaires were sent out to 10 of the colleges who had previously participated, based on a representation of their size and geographical location. The data was analysed using the SPSS package as it had the advantage of being able to deal with both numerical and non-numerical data.

The questions were linked to issues that had been raised in the literature review coupled with empirical evidence. A covering attachment explained the purpose of the research with an assurance of confidentiality. There was an option for individuals to return their replies using the freepost address and a telephone contact in the case of queries and concerns. Batches of ten questionnaires were directed for distribution through the

Human Resources Managers on the assumption that this would be the most appropriate route. I had to revisit the reasons for this choice, or the channels that had been provided for returning the responses, as I was totally unprepared for the emotional responses that were triggered and the concerns and suspicions that were raised about my choice of gatekeeper.

A covering letter was sent with each batch of questionnaires to the Human Resources Officer at the selected colleges but I did not assume that it could be guaranteed that its content would be relayed to the participants in the survey so the first page of the questionnaire included a brief introduction explaining why the survey had been sent and assured the respondents that all information would be anonymised and would be treated in the strictest confidence. Instructions were given on how to complete the questionnaire and how it should be returned. There was also the option to contact me by email or telephone if they wished to discuss their responses further in greater detail and in confidence.

The format of the letter took account of the recommendations of Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (1997, p266) who concluded,

“the messages contained in a self-administered questionnaire’s covering letter will affect the response rate”.

The letter inviting the organisation to be part of the research project was presented on official letterhead paper from the University and used the recipient’s name, where it had been possible to find this information. The letter explained the purpose of the research and how and why that particular college had been selected. Assurances were given about maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, indicating the information provided would remain with my two supervisors and me. It was explained that this information would be used to inform best practice and offer a framework for operational issues in relation to specific minority groups. The recipients were thanked for their time in considering the request to participate and there was the invitation for the college to be up-dated on

the findings from the research as the project progressed if they so wanted. My email address, telephone number and fax number were included as contact points if there were any queries. The problems that may have arisen here were that my email address had changed as well as the telephone extension number.

Responses

Forty three per cent of colleges responded with a total of twenty eight per cent individual responses, providing a fairly limited amount of information. As it was helpful to have a higher proportion of data to analyse it was decided to target those colleges who did not reply in the following September, inviting them again to become part of the research

Responses to the questionnaires suggested there was richer data waiting to be revealed but it was clear that a different research tool was needed to access them. There were also some surprising comments, a reaction that highlighted caution and the need to address my own personal bias in the research process. Griffiths (1998a, p130) who was in favour of researchers having opinions and being surprised offered some reassurance.

“...without some acknowledgement of initial opinions, including beliefs and values, the research will certainly be biased, ... opinions start, but do not end, the research. ...your research should be able to surprise you. Otherwise it is certainly biased.”

The challenge, for me, was how to interpret those comments and opinions.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The advantage of this method was that a large number of people could be surveyed from a wide range of geographical locations that would have been impossible to reach from my own location. It was a quicker way of

obtaining data than by interviewing and the format of the questionnaire allowed easier comparison of responses. Individually, I did not know the respondents at any stage in the research process thereby having the ability to provide reassurances of confidentiality. As a third party was administering the questionnaires the respondents could have had more opportunity to consider their answers but, conversely, time may have been at a premium depending on who was administering the questionnaires and the process of completion may have been rushed.

Researcher bias dictated absolute objectivity was impossible to achieve using this method. As the researcher I had already decided which were the most important issues and the questions to be asked, thereby determining the framework within which the debate for this part of the research would be carried out. However, the research procedure, in terms of how the information was collected, analysed and interpreted should be clear. I remained unconvinced, at this point, by Robson's (1993) assurances that all respondents would interpret the use of standardised questions in the same way. The pilot survey questions were clearly open to different interpretations and, despite re-writing, there was no guarantee that they were still free from bias.

Confidentiality

An information sheet was attached to the questionnaires for both staff and students that was a guarantee of confidentiality. I was concerned, however, as to how far that guarantee extended beyond my own assurances. I asked for the student questionnaires to be distributed and returned to Course Tutors but the very fact that the tutors and students knew each other well could compromise confidentiality and influence responses that were made. Similarly the staff questionnaires had been directed through the Human Resources Officer and this could have had an impact on response rates and the validity of views and opinions.

Genuine responses or not

Course tutors may have been reluctant to administer the questionnaires and allow students class time to complete them and absentees may not even have had the opportunity to respond. It was also possible that the tutor could have influenced the students' responses particularly if the question was not understood and help was given. As the researcher I did not have any way of checking whether the respondents did all understand the questions, relying on the pilot survey to identify any ambiguity or misunderstanding of the phrasing of questions. In addition, there was always the danger that responses to questions completed in a group setting were not necessarily the 'truth'.

“Respondents to self-administered questionnaires are relatively unlikely to answer to please you or because they believe certain responses are more socially desirable. They may, however, discuss their answers with others, thereby contaminating their response”.

(Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill 1997, p246)

In-depth analysis

On the positive side, these postal questionnaires were the most efficient and appropriate method for collecting data on the attitudes and perceptions of individuals from a large sample. However, whilst they could paint a broad-brush picture it would have been naïve to use them in isolation. Their use was complemented in Phase Three with more in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore and understand the reasons behind the answers. Interviews on a one-to-one basis provided me, as the researcher, with the opportunity to probe answers and open up the debate. The use of this multi-method approach added rigour to this study and enabled triangulation to take place. These interviews were arranged with interested representatives from five of the participating colleges during the Autumn Term. Work commitments obviously dictated the timing and availability of the participants.

Phase Three

Interviews

Aim

In-depth interviews were used as part of this systematic process to complement the questionnaire surveys, to explore further the reasons behind the answers and to provide richer data from a personal viewpoint. This interaction allowed the different perspectives of equal opportunities to be explored and the individual's approach clarified. The aim was to gather qualitative data that was unique to that person being interviewed, to provide an insight into their attitudes, perceptions and opinions that would not have been possible to probe in such depth through questionnaires. The interviews were small scale, in-depth, semi-structured and non-standardised, lasting on average an hour each.

Reasons for approach

Herbert (1990, p13) advised caution when sampling, as

“one cannot often ascertain the incidence of a particular problem in a community by interviewing every person in the community”.

A semi-structured, in-depth approach was taken as open-ended questions were used that did not necessarily follow a specific order. The order and questioning was varied according to the type of college visited and the role of the interviewee: asking exactly the same question in the same order at every interview would have been meaningless although it was important to ensure a core of questions remained.

Implementation

A list of topics and questions was devised to be used as a guide during the interview but the order was not prescriptive and was varied depending on the flow of conversation. I followed Elliott's (1991) recommendations to adopt a semi-structured approach using pre-set questions. This provided the interviewees with the opportunity to open up and express their own views and ideas without being constrained by the interviewer's set agenda (although I was mindful of my own personal bias that had to be checked on several occasions). The design of the interview list followed the format of the questionnaires that had been constructed around issues arising from the literature review and empirical evidence that provided the conceptual framework for this research. However, the questions were not necessarily asked in the same order during every interview, not all of the questions were asked every time and, in some cases additional questions were asked to explore responses and attitudes further.

Interview Process

The interviews tended to follow the direction of the interviewees' train of thoughts at times although, as interviewer, I still had some control over certain topics I wanted to introduce. This was preferable to using a questionnaire-based interview that could have turned the meeting into a formal interview, stifling the respondents and inhibiting a more natural conversational exchange that allowed space for insights and information to be volunteered that would otherwise have been lost. The challenge, or excitement here, was that new, significant avenues of the research were opened up whilst unwanted cul-de-sacs were revealed, the challenge being to keep the discussion on-track and not allow the interviewees to wander into their own meanderings that had no bearing on the research. A difficulty that I had encountered several times during this research. There was often this conflict between maintaining a friendly conversational approach and a desire to control and direct proceedings, bringing into play

one's own experiences and anecdotes. There was also the problem, highlighted by Herbert (1990, p53) who deduced:

“it is rarely possible to observe all instances of phenomenon, ie one cannot often ascertain the incidence of a particular problem in a community by interviewing every person in the community”.

Open-ended questioning allowed this discourse to take place within boundaries limited by the research focus. That was not to say that the discussions did not step out of those boundaries as the reason for selecting this approach was that there should be some degree of unpredictability and the unexpected with the power of control interchanging between interviewer and interviewee.

Recording Information

The majority of these interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the interviewee. This was advantageous when retrieving the information, as it was possible to repeatedly listen to the interviews and identify patterns of response. The disadvantage was the length of time it took to transcribe each interview that lasted for, on average, an hour. All of the interviewees appeared to be comfortable with being recorded and one interviewee asked for a copy of the tape, the recorder seemed to be acceptable and did not appear to inhibit responses, mobile phones were more of an intrusion in one particular interview. Another interviewee asked for the tape to be stopped after approximately three quarters of an hour and the remaining information was, and remains, confidential to the interviewee and interviewer.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The advantage of using interviews was that it allowed both the interviewer and interviewee to fully understand the meaning of the questions and to pursue the topic in greater depth. Both parties could challenge any

misunderstandings and ambiguity with the questions and responses immediately. As the researcher it was possible to select interviewees from different backgrounds and with different roles and compare their responses. It could be argued that this raised questions of reliability of the data in relation to interviewer bias, particularly as it was possible to change the direction of an interview in the light of previous discussions with other interviewees. It provided an opportunity for the interviewees to discuss, anonymously, their views and opinions at length without the need for committing these thoughts to paper. For the interviewer it provided a guaranteed, immediate response, once the interview had been set up. But this was more problematic than distributing questionnaires for this research. However, once established, it could be argued that the interviews provide a broader, richer picture of attitudes and perceptions than the questionnaires.

Limitations

Time for research was time that was left over from normal teaching, prepping and observing new staff. There was no time off allowed from the teaching timetable for staff development, lecturers cannot even apply for time off for courses that are now considered a necessity, such as the Certificate in Education, let alone time off for research. Time was a particular issue in the Summer Term with the entire end of year assignments to mark and also the marking and moderation for the Examination Board.

Photocopying of hundreds of questionnaires had to be undertaken in this time and there were also the financial constraints when photocopying was limited and monitored. Back to back photocopying combined with printing out on the computer was a way around this difficulty. Problems with back to back could be that respondents would miss out the left hand page completely and thereby skew the data, which they did, but it cannot be certain it was attributable to the format used. Printing out on the computer

was not necessarily an economical alternative bearing in mind the number of ink cartridges that were being used.

Interviewing posed the greatest problem. Setting up the interviews in the first place was very problematic in terms of being able to make contact with the Human Resources department, the Principal or other gatekeeper who had to find someone willing to participate in the exercise. The next difficulty was making contact with this person and then arranging to meet at a mutually convenient time. The actual interview was nerve racking but exciting and yet easy by comparison with the setting up process. The number of letters, emails and telephone calls to try and make initial contact with possible interviewees was endless and the whole process began again with another person once someone had agreed to participate.

Analysing the questionnaires posed the next challenge, as this was new territory for me. I enrolled on a six-week course at the University for SPSS that provided a taster, sensitising me to the main concepts of the package. This was not sufficient to provide me with a realistic working knowledge to analyse so many questionnaires in the time that was available to complete the research. I therefore enlisted the help of a colleague who was more familiar with the package than me and we negotiated a financial arrangement. At this point I lost ownership of the data and it was here that the whole research could have taken on a different interpretation and outcome. I had encoded the responses 'Agree Strongly', 'Tend to Agree', 'Tend to Disagree' and 'Disagree Strongly' from 1-4 and thought that we had a mutual understanding that this should be the interpretation. It was only when I had the support of another member of staff from the University who was experienced in SPSS that we realised that the interpretation of this data had been in the reverse order.

In practical terms some of the other difficulties with the interviews were as a result of geographical distances. These limited the number of interviews that could be carried out realistically within the time constraints and also limited the span of locations that could be contacted. The only way to

circumvent this problem was by telephone interview that was attempted on one occasion with limited success. The result was that the interview tended to be negative in terms of the responses the interviewee felt they could contribute and the length of time involved was considerably less than those interviews conducted face-to-face.

Ethics

I could identify with Peach (1995, p13) when differentiating between research and research ethics:

“Research concerns the integrity and intellectual soundness of data, whereas research ethics relates to the means by which data are obtained and the social consequences of their discovery and analysis.”

I recognised that there was a danger in having a deep interest and concern for a particular issue when conducting interviews and compiling questionnaires. On the one hand I had built up a range of useful contacts, people and addresses, but conversely this curiosity made it difficult for me to remain unbiased. To stand outside the box, as it were, and view a situation objectively was very difficult, particularly as the research process unfolded. I was mindful of Atkins’ observation (2005, p7) that: “the power in the relationship is with the researcher”.

I tested out the questions for the questionnaires in advance in an attempt to remove any bias but still one respondent said they “could tell it has been written by a woman” even though this had not been picked up in the pilot survey. The interviews were, I hoped, an opportunity for the voice of the individual to be heard and for richer data to emerge, although I still had some control over the direction of the discussion. That was not to say that the interviewee could not have similarly created cause for concern about the reliability of the data. Although I found some willing participants this was no guarantee that they chose to reveal all, or what they told me was a

true reflection of activities within their organisation. I had to agree with Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p24) who cautioned:

“there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity.”

It became apparent as the research progressed that the focus of this research was a particularly sensitive issue for some participants. A considerable number of colleges did not want to participate despite a positive approach and indicating the mutual benefits. There was the union official who was deeply concerned about the effect it would have on his members if they participated. I had to go to great lengths to reassure him that confidentiality would be maintained, as he was not aware of the covering letter guaranteeing anonymity had been removed before distribution of the questionnaires. Although there were numbered boxes on the front page I gave assurances that this was only to assist me in processing the data and complete anonymity would be maintained.

Taping the interviews was generally accepted although one person asked for a copy of the tape and another interviewee asked for the recorder to be switched off as further sensitive issues were discussed. The ‘off’ key was pointed out to the interviewees before the interview began so that they could be in control of the situation at any time.

Ethics and accessing data

Gaining access to data proved challenging either because individuals were unwilling to participate, did not have the time, were concerned about confidentiality or made it a rule not to become involved in any research projects. There was also an issue with the distribution of questionnaires and the role that gatekeepers played in this process. I used the Human Resources Department (Personnel) as the point of contact for receiving and distributing questionnaires and providing names of those members of

staff willing to participate in a one-to-one interview. I had considered emailing the questionnaires to colleges for immediacy and to eliminate the cost of printing and postage but was advised against this for reasons of confidentiality and possible lack of access to email facilities.

I received a telephone call from a UNISON shop steward who tentatively expressed an interest in being interviewed but was very apprehensive about the questionnaire as he did not have a good relationship with his Personnel Officer and was concerned about the confidentiality of his responses despite a letter being stapled to the questionnaire offering an alternative route to replying. It transpired that this person was averse to using emails and the letter was no longer attached to his questionnaire, raising concerns about the role of gatekeepers in any research. He was clearly anxious to protect his members and was extremely concerned about maintaining confidentiality if they were to respond. I attempted to be totally honest about my intentions as Peach (1995, p13) insisted:

“Certain ethical considerations, such as honesty in gathering and reporting data, are integral to the practice of research. They are part of the standards and norms that comprise the method.”

One member of staff had completed the questionnaire but taken it back from the Personnel Officer's pigeonhole, as she was worried about how her responses and comments would be used if read. The caller needed clarification and reassurance from me, as the full contents of my covering letter had not been passed on, merely précised. Unfortunately the staff in this college who had been invited by Personnel to participate had not been given all the relevant details and this limited communication had bred deep suspicions in what already appeared to be a hostile environment.

Lessons were learned for the future and these involved including my full home address on the first page of the questionnaire itself rather than just an email address and a telephone number. There should also have been the option to return completed forms individually rather than through

another party. This option should have been open to both staff and students, as I had directed the students to return the completed questionnaires to their tutor at the end of the lesson, which may not always have been appropriate. I had not appreciated the capacity these questionnaires would have to stir emotions nor anticipated the depth of reaction that could be aroused.

Self and Ethics

I was caught in a conflict, to a certain extent, between what I believed, what I had been taught and what I practised. On the one hand I believed it was the woman who should take the children to school and be responsible for their welfare but I also believed that a husband/partner should take equal responsibility in the house. This probably reflected on my own need to be in control in my own house. I wanted a career, which I believed was the right of all women, but I also believed that it was the woman who had to take on the maternal duties where there were children in the equation. This led me to question whether I really did believe this or whether I had been conditioned to think in this way. I was aware of these underlying influences and made every effort not to bias the research either through phrasing of questions or leading the interviews in a particular direction.

CHAPTER 4

THE REVIEW OF POLICIES

Colleges now have to be more accountable and demonstrate their ability to monitor performance as part of the Quality and Inspection process. The Inspection process usually focuses on the extent to which a college is educationally and socially inclusive and will consider the effectiveness of its Equal Opportunities policy. As a result all colleges will probably have formally adopted an Equal Opportunities policy in some form or other that attempted to meet the criteria. Unfortunately there was no blueprint that set out exactly how a policy should be developed or how practices should be put into place. I anticipated that individual colleges would be at different stages of development in their implementation of policies with some integrating equality more confidently than others. This review of policies was undertaken to gain an insight into how colleges had interpreted equal opportunities in the development of their policies and whether there was any intention to monitor them in order to retain them as live working documents.

The Equal Opportunities Commission (1986 p1) claimed a policy would:

“ensure the effective use of human resources in the best interests of both the organisation and its employees ...and the detail of the policy will vary according to the size of the organisation”.

However, FEDA's (1998, p19) guidelines did sound a note of caution that a policy alone was not sufficient to demonstrate commitment, there needed to be evidence of action otherwise:

“a statement that the college is committed to equal opportunities will be meaningless unless supported by a clear and explicit equal opportunities policy and implementation plan”.

SAMPLED POLICIES

It should be noted that the following surveys were all carried out prior to the changes to the Disability Discrimination Act that impacted directly on Colleges of Further Education.

Ten colleges were selected from the Education Year Book 1996/97 using convenience sampling with six out of the ten responding. Speculation could probably reveal a myriad of reasons for the others not wanting to be included in the survey, despite follow up calls, but it was interesting to note that when contacted later in the research for their prospectuses the result was an immediate response by return of post. All of the colleges who participated had clearly attempted to comply with legislation, to a greater or lesser extent, in compiling the content of their policies.

The presentation of this information also varied widely: a single A4 folded sheet of paper photocopied on coloured paper from College A, whereas College C produced two sheets of information on A4 headed notepaper from another. Two colleges (B and E) had printed their information on three sheets of A4 that were possibly part of a staff handbook. Another policy, from College D comprised of five sheets of general information but the most impressive, in terms of volume was a comprehensive fourteen-page document from College F that covered the equal opportunity policy, disability statement and equal opportunity code of practice.

The policies were analysed to identify if there was evidence of a policy on: age, disability, gender, HIV/Aids, lesbian and gay sexuality, ethnicity, religion and harassment. These were rated using a numerical scale from 0 to 5 where;

- 0 No mention
- 1 Mention only
- 2 Minimal policy
- 3 Detailed but not complete

- 4 More detailed but not complete
- 5 Comprehensive.

There was also further analysis to determine who held responsibility for the policy, if there were monitoring mechanisms in place and whether the question of equal opportunities in the curriculum was being addressed.

College	Age	Dis	Gen	HI V	L/Ga y	Eth n	Reli g	Ha r	Responsibl e	Monito r	Curri c
A		1	1		1		1	1			Yes
B	1	1	1		1	1	1	3	Sub- committee	1	Yes
C	1	1	1			1	1	1	Principal Staff Students	1	
D	1	1	3		1	3	2	1	EO Task Group	3	Yes
E	1	2	1		1	1	1	2	College Managers	2	Yes
F	1	5	3		1	3	1	5	Sub-cttee Academic Board	2	Yes

The lack of detail in the policy of College A reflected the presentation that was on a single folded sheet of A4 paper. This was in contrast to College F who produced a detailed policy document although the focus was on disability and harassment. Gender and ethnicity were also prominent in both College F and College D's documents. It was interesting to note that both Colleges F and D, from their geographical location could have had a strong ethnic minority student base. If this was the reason for their focus on ethnicity I was then curious as to whether this was why they also attached importance to gender and, in College F's case, disability. This provided a line of questioning to follow up in the questionnaires and interviews.

With the exception of one college they had all appointed a group of people to be responsible for implementing and monitoring their policy. That was not to say that College A did not have anyone in that position, rather it had not been stated. Again, it was an area to be questioned and explored further, particularly as there appeared to such a diverse range of groups taking on the responsibility. Although groups had been identified for taking on the responsibility of the policy, details of any monitoring were brief, in most cases, and non-existent in one. Again this was the college that had provided the minimum of information.

The overall results were as follows:

	Age	Disability	Gender	HIV/AIDS	Les/Gay	Ethnicity	Religion	Harassment	Monitoring
0	1			6	1	1			1
1	5	4	4		5	3	5	3	2
2		1					1	1	2
3			2			2		1	1
4									
5		1						1	

As the focus of this research was women and disability the results in these categories were of particular significance. The majority of colleges only made brief reference to women and disability in their policies with only one college producing a comprehensive document detailing their position on disability. There were differing opinions on who should take responsibility for the policy with little or no reference made to mechanisms for monitoring. There was clearly a gap in information here that could be addressed through the questionnaire survey and interviews.

NATFHE Database

NATFHE were in the process of establishing a computerised database at the time I was involved in this research and made available the raw data

from a manual summary of equal opportunities policies from 90 institutions.

The subsequent analysis used the same criteria as above:

	Age	Disability	Gender	HIV/AIDS	Les/Gay	Ethnicity	Religion	Harassment	Monitoring
0	30	12	12	83	35	11	32	40	38
1	51	36	47	2	43	45	53	7	19
2	4	18	11		7	14	2	9	12
3	3	12	8		1	7	2	14	11
4	1	7	6	2	2	6	1	14	9
5	1	5	6	3	2	7		6	1

Responsibility for the policy is divided as follows:

Equal Opportunities Unit	1
Personnel Department	1
Named Person	1
Task/Action Group	2
Equal Opportunities Officer	3
Sub-committee	4
Advisor/Advisory Group	4
Working Party	5
Co-ordinator	5
Directorate/Manager	8
Committee	20
No indication of anyone with responsibility	36

There was a fifty/fifty split between those who indicated that equal opportunities was embedded in the curriculum and those who made no mention of the fact.

Although this was work in progress it was interesting to note that, despite being a larger sample, the data reflected the findings from my survey in relation to gender, disability and monitoring.

EMFEC Database

During this research contact was made with Dan Lilley at EMFEC who was conducting a desk study analysis of twenty-eight colleges within the East Midlands region. The purpose was to establish a database of equal opportunities policies and this data was made available for analysis. Again these findings illustrated the lack of any sort of consensus concerning the contents of a policy and highlighted the considerable variations that existed. The analysis focused on six areas: who the policy was formulated for, recruitment and development, anti-discrimination and monitoring, admissions, access and curriculum. Analysis also considered whether or not the equal opportunities policies provided were expressed in terms of staff, students or both.

Who the policy was formulated for

Colleges should be expressing equal opportunities policies in terms of both staff and students to demonstrate they were committed to providing the best possible education and training for the students. Equally the experience of work for their staff should reflect good employment practice. Over half of those surveyed indicated both staff and students were considered in their policy, with almost a quarter of policies being written for staff alone and ten per cent were only relevant for students.

Staff	6
Students	3
Both	19

Whether or not participating colleges made reference to the specific categories listed within the broad area of recruitment and delivery

Over a third of colleges indicated that their publicity material relating to recruitment and delivery of courses was readily available. A similar

number stated that they targeted minority groups within their area, demonstrating an active commitment to equal opportunities. However, as far as staff were concerned only six colleges made reference to the promotion of equal opportunities between men and women in their recruitment process and even fewer offered careers guidance. Just two of the colleges surveyed had an internal promotion policy with a similar number offered a job sharing policy. Despite constant changes in legislation and the equality climate only eleven respondents offered equal opportunities training. This data provided an indication of areas of questioning to be pursued.

1	Accessibility of publicity material	11
2	Outreach to minority groups	11
3	Shortlisting and interview policy	6
4	Career guidance	4
5	Job sharing policy	4
6	Internal promotion policy	2
7	Equal opportunities training	11

Whether or not participating colleges made reference to the specific categories listed within the broad areas of anti-discrimination policy

Almost three quarters of respondents had an anti-racist policy but less had an anti-sexist policy. Legislation, at the time of this research placed the onus on individuals to prove that discrimination had taken place. The focus of this research was on women and disability and it was noted that the results here were similar to those obtained from my own survey of policies and those of NATFHE.

1	Anti-racist policy	20
2	Anti-sexist policy	19
3	Anti-hetero-sexist ethos	2
4	Sensitivity to HIV status	3
5	Grievance procedure stated	6

Whether monitoring was carried out

Policies need to be monitored otherwise it will be impossible to determine whether they are live working documents that translate into practice. Review procedures should be in place as evidence of good practice and these should be linked to the college's quality assurance system and mission statement. The results from this survey revealed monitoring was minimal. Although almost three quarter of colleges had an anti-racist policy (20) less than a third monitored ethnicity. Similarly more than half had an anti-sexist policy that together with the anti-hetero-sexist policies brought the total to three quarters of the colleges surveyed but on the question of monitoring the policy less than a third respond positively. Despite all the publicity surrounding disability and the amendments to the Disability Discrimination Act, again, only nine, less than a third of those surveyed actually monitored their policies. Only six colleges monitored the experiences of their students on work placements.

This data reflected the findings from both the survey of policies I undertook for this research and the findings from the NATFHE survey. It appeared that colleges had policies in place but importance was not attached to their monitoring.

1	Ethnicity monitored	8
2	Gender ratio monitored	8
3	Disabled ratio monitored	9
4	Work experience monitored	6

Whether or not participating colleges pledged to ensure admissions were accepted irrespective of the specific categories listed

A high proportion of colleges enrolled students irrespective of gender, race disability and culture or ethnicity. However, more than half of the respondents disregarded age as a barrier, with a similar number

discounting sexual orientation, marital status and religion. Three colleges indicated that union membership and long-term unemployment were not a bar to enrolment on courses and just one held the view that an individual's political belief would not prohibit entry on to a programme of study. This left questions unanswered and prompted further investigation, from the point of view of women and disability as the focus of this research. Whilst these colleges pledged to ensure admissions were accepted irrespective of these categories there was not a hundred per cent response rate which leads into the question whether women or people with a disability had been denied access to courses.

1 Gender	22
2 Age	16
3 Culture/ethnicity	18
4 Race	20
5 Nationality	9
6 Sexual orientation	13
7 Religion	13
8 Disability	20
9 Union membership	3
10 Marital status	12
11 Long-term unemployment	3
12 Political belief	1

Whether or not participating colleges made reference to the specific categories listed in the broad area of access

It was acknowledged that this research was conducted before the final phase of Part 3 of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) came into effect in September 2005 requiring educational premises to have made "reasonable adjustments to overcome physical barriers to access". However, legislation was in force at the time of this study and further education colleges were required to publish disability statements containing information about facilities for disabled people. It was a concern

then that the colleges surveyed appeared to discriminate against disabled people as less than half made any reference to facilities that they provided.

Pastoral care and advice, whether it was for counselling, careers advice or advice on courses was not a high priority for less than a third of colleges. Childcare facilities were only considered important for one in four colleges who responded. This was a particular concern as a barrier to women returners and an area of questioning that would be followed up.

1 Advice on courses	6
2 Disabled facilities	13
3 Childcare facilities	7
4 Financial advice	5
5 Basic skills support	4
6 Counselling service	11
7 Careers advice	9
8 Support for adult learners	4

Whether or not participating colleges made reference to the specific categories listed in the broad area of curriculum content and delivery

Only half of those colleges who responded indicated that their curriculum content and delivery reflected a diverse society with only four tutors who reflected a diverse society. Eleven of those participating claimed that their materials were non-discriminating with a similar number indicating their teaching and learning strategies were flexible. Only eight respondents claimed to review their provision on a regular basis. This was a concern as without a regular review of materials it would be easy to become complacent and insensitive to the needs of a changing society and working culture. Colleges should be proactive in the prevention of discrimination and encourage the use of a range of teaching methods and materials to promote equality of opportunity. The poor response rate indicated an area for questioning to determine whether monitoring of policies could have highlighted this failing in provision.

1	Provision reflects a diverse society	14
2	Tutors reflect a diverse society	4
3	Materials are non-discriminating	11
4	Teaching and learning strategies flexible	10
5	Career assumptions non-stereotypical	7
6	Provision is reviewed regularly	8

CHAPTER 5

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Student Survey

The survey of policies had been to identify their content and the stated intent of a range of colleges to gauge commonalities and differences. Phase Two was a questionnaire survey to both staff and students to gain quantitative data providing information on how many people were aware of policies in practice. The stated intent of colleges was not necessarily a guarantee that practices were, or were perceived to be in place.

Initially it was intended to send out fifty questionnaires to forty-seven colleges that had been randomly sampled from the Education Year Book 1996/97. The colleges were selected from the listings on the basis of every tenth entry. However, the manageability of the possible number of responses in excess of two thousand responses was questioned and it was decided to focus on inviting the ten colleges who had indicated a willingness to participate in the staff survey.

Four out of the ten colleges chose to be involved and a total of eighty-nine questionnaires were returned out of a possible two hundred (45%) from students enrolled on a range of courses. The majority of students were predominantly white and from the following age groups:

16-19	75
20-25	7
26-30	4
31-35	3

The students gave the title of their courses as follows with an indication of the number of respondents:

No course identified	18
A levels	4
AVCE Health and Social Care	7
AVCE Leisure	15
BTEC First Diploma Sports Science	10
CCE	20
DCEI	1
Diploma in Childcare	1
IBT3	1
Makeup Artists' Diploma	2
NDDS1	2
NVQ2 Care	2
Hospitality and Catering	4
PGCE	2

One student indicated they had a disability with a nil response from all the other respondents.

Data from the questionnaires was presented under the headings used in the questionnaire, although with hindsight it would have been preferable to have the 'Gender' section headed 'Women'. Women and disability were the focus of this research and the use of the term gender was intended to draw out the contrasting circumstances and highlight the situation of women in further education in the context of equal opportunities.

Recruitment and progression

The purpose of this section was to explore students' experiences of recruitment and progression and to find out whether staff had provided support and guidance for their individual needs.

Although the majority were satisfied with their introduction to college through advice and induction there were clearly some students who were left dissatisfied.

The comments of a student on an HNC course could have indicated a programme did not exist:

“Can’t remember an induction.”

Other students’ comments indicated where colleges could make improvements:

Q2a: Given fair advice to help me choose right course/career.

“Had none”.

Q2b: Satisfied with the way I was enrolled/interviewed.

“I did not receive my letter of enrolment until 4 days after the actual date!”.

Q2d: Induction programme helped me to understand my rights and responsibilities.

“Did not go.”

Q2e: Given advice to be aware of opportunities open in future.

“Nothing formal.”

“Would like progression routes for Cert Ed students to gain QTS.”

Reasons for difficulty enrolling on to a course

The following reasons were given with the number of respondents identified:

Age	2
Disability (cerebral palsy)	1
Finance	5
Culture (White, female, 16-19)	1
Personal needs	1

For those who gave reasons they were mainly financial difficulties preventing them from returning to college. The student who indicated 'personal needs' did not elaborate which made it difficult to know how that college was discriminating, if at all. This highlighted the problems faced by colleges when students, or staff, chose not to disclose information that could create situations whereby they discriminated, inadvertently against individuals.

Equal Opportunities Policies

The majority of students (89%) knew their college had a policy although fewer understood what it meant. There were also more female students (70%) than males (60%) who indicated they knew of their policy and understood what it meant. Whilst there appeared to be a lack of enthusiasm for being involved in contributing to the content of the policy and little more than half who attached importance to being involved in the monitoring process it was the female students who expressed an interest in the development of the policy. One reason could have been a lack of communication and not being invited to participate or the perception that it was not their role. The only comment to come from the students in this section was when asked if they were aware of other groups or individuals who could give support and advice. Although a significant number (86%) were aware, with more females than males it was clear that information did not reach everyone according to this respondent:

“Don't know anyone!!”

Gender

The majority of students agreed that their course had been promoted as being suitable for either gender but fewer male students were aware of whether there were classes available solely for males or females.

Cockburn (1985) had advocated women-only classes as being a preferred learning environment and two thirds of female students were aware that

they were available. However, three quarters of these female students indicated they did not expect their tutor to be the same gender with the responses from male students outweighing those of the females in their replies. The reverse was found in the responses when asked if they wanted their tutor to be of the same gender with more females than males not wanting a tutor of the same gender.

Students, in particular females, did not consider they had been enrolled on to a course because of their gender. However, given the option, they would not consider enrolling on a course that attracted the opposite gender. This was despite initiatives to recruit more women into engineering for instance. Interestingly there were more males than female students who would not enrol on a course that traditionally attracts females. Could it be these courses were viewed as reinforcing the stereotypical roles of women as carers and nurturers?

Colleges did not appear to be catering for the particular needs of women students who needed flexibility. If there had been consultation with this particular group of students these issues might have been addressed. Female student did not consider there was any flexibility for them whereas the male students were happy that their college offered a flexible timetable. However, in terms of access to childcare a significant proportion of female students responded positively and male students agreed that childcare provision met their needs. This was in contrast to Hefferman's (2004) concerns that equality appeared to be transparent in terms of accessing education but the reality was different. There were no comments other than the one below.

The only student comment to this question related more to the options available for responding:

Q5: Gender

I would have preferred a 5 option tick box – a middle one saying “neither agree or disagree” or an end one with “undecided” or “not sure” or “don’t know”.

Disability

Students were asked whether disabled people were always integrated into other social groups and it was a significantly higher number of female students who responded positively compared to the males. This raised questions as to whether females were socially more receptive and inclusive in their concerns than males but this was not a part of the research. Over three quarters of female students disagreed with the suggestion that disabled people were integrated compared to half of the male respondents.

There was a significant difference in the student responses with three quarters of female student respondents agreeing compared to half of their male counterparts. It should also be noted that significantly more male staff responded positively than male students and yet a higher proportion of female students reported positively compared to female staff.

There was a clear difference of opinion when it was suggested that disability isolated individuals. The views from the male students in particular was that disability does isolate individuals reinforcing Morris’s (1991) concerns that non disabled peoples’ negative attitudes towards disabled people created barriers. In this research it was the male respondents who considered disability isolated individuals with the views more clearly divided between female and male students with two thirds of female students disagreeing (65%:29%). It was the male students who held the contrary view with a considerable number indicating disability did isolate individuals but there was no supporting evidence to suggest where these concepts had originated.

The concern from this research was that a high proportion (48%) of students did not know of support agencies or personnel to contact, with the majority of these students being female

Again students had fewer comments to make but nevertheless they were significant and clearly impacted on their access to learning:

Q6f: College suitably planned and equipped.

“There are no lifts in some of the blocks which makes it harder for disabled people to get around.”

“No lifts in B block! I get out of breath! (Female, 46-50, no disability indicate).”

Staff Survey

Forty-seven colleges were invited to participate in a staff survey of Equal Opportunities in Practice and twenty-two (47%) chose to become involved. These colleges were a random sample from the Education Year Book 1996/97. A total of eighty-seven questionnaires were returned out of a possible two hundred and twenty (40%) from staff teaching on a range of courses. The majority of staff were predominantly white and from the following age groups:

26-30	2
31-35	12
36-40	14
41-45	19
46-50	20
51-55	14
56-60	3
61-65	2
Not given	1

Staff came from a range of different occupations within the colleges and gave their job title as follows with an indication of the number of respondents:

Not given	4
Administrator	1
Assistant Operations Manager	1
Catering Assistant	1
Course Leader	1
Course Tutor NVQ 1 and 2	1
Curriculum Leader	1
Curriculum Manager	1
Development Officer	1
Head of Hospitality	1
Head of School	1
Head of Travel and Tourism	1
HNC Counselling	6
ICT Administration	1
ICT Services Manager	1
ILT Development	1
IT Coordinator	1
IT Instructor	1
IT Lecturer	2
IT Team Leader	1
Lecturer	37
Manager	1
MGL Hospitality	1
On-line Programme Developer	1
Programme Area Leader/Manager	10
Section Leader/Manager	3
Senior Lecturer	2
Tutor	1
Tutor Technician	1
Tutor/Assessor/IV	1

There was only one member of staff who identified diabetes as their disability and another member of staff who had a slight short-term memory problem.

Recruitment and progression

The majority of respondents considered they had been given fair advice to help them choose the right course or career and a similar number had been given advice to help them be aware of opportunities open to them in the future.

Staff comments

However, comments from staff indicated they had not had support or advice to help them choose the right career. They were also not given advice to help them be aware of the opportunities open to them in the future “since most career/progressions seems to be self-motivated.” Not a great deal of communication and feedback on opportunities had been received by a significant number of respondents.

Further comments from staff indicated a poor induction experience. Although eighty per cent were satisfied with the way they were enrolled and interviewed almost half of respondents did not feel the induction programme helped them to settle into work quickly. The induction programme should also have provided an ideal opportunity to introduce these employees to their rights and responsibilities but from the responses it was evident this opportunity had been missed.

Additional comments included:

Five respondents who indicated they had not had any induction at all. The following comments suggested reasons for the lack of an induction programme:

“Been here too long – I have changed jobs at ***** and progressed from technician to part-time lecturer to full-time lecturer. I feel I have chosen to do this by myself, not with help from the college. Induction programmes are too new to include me. I have, however, given talks to incoming staff and I know that they are comprehensive.” (Female, 46-50).

“At time of employment no set induction in place.” (56-60)

“Induction programme does not take place owing to timetable issues.”

“My induction programme was undertaken a few years ago now. The programme has much improved now and is carried out early in a new member of staff’s probationary period.”

“I have been employed here for fifteen years. There is now a staff induction programme in place.”

“I started teaching after one hour’s notice, so I had to rush to the library and prepare teach (sic) notes. (Male, 36-40, full-time, Black Caribbean) This respondent also found it difficult to enrol on a course citing colour and ethnicity as reasons.”

“Induction took place a considerable while after commencing employment due to it being a general induction programme.”

“Induction is late – at least a month after starting. I have been employed by the college for 7 years and my induction was a long time ago. However, I can’t remember it having any real impact in terms of understanding rights and responsibilities – it is late and I have already started teaching. Most information that I needed I acquired from my line manager and Head of Department at the time (which I was satisfied with).”

“Actually the staff in my department are as busy as you can imagine, so while they have been welcoming and said “ask if you have any questions”, they haven’t actually talked me through much of the responsibilities of my role.”

“Staff are given a personal file with information about general college subjects which includes any induction, although I received this many years after starting work. I did not receive an official induction from my line manager when I first started work.”

“S.M. [Senior Management] not really interested in helping career development. Only that you cope with the changes and increased workload. My teaching time is now only 20% of what I was employed to do.” (No.141)

“At no time in 15 years have I ever been interviewed/advised re progression. Indeed, obtaining 2 degrees – BEd and MSc appears to have generated resentment, and has surely held back any hope of ‘advancement’.” (Male, 51-55, White).

Reasons for difficulty enrolling on to a course given by staff

The following categories were identified:

Age	1
Class	1
Colour	1
Ethnicity	1
Finance	6
Learning needs	1 (not very good at maths)
Personal needs	1

Again, as with the students, it was financial difficulties that stood out as the reason for not enrolling on to a particular course where a reason had been identified.

Reasons for difficulty in taking promotion for staff

Age	8 (Also 1 for taking a job)
Class	1
Gender	1(Female, 46-50, White),
Marital status	1
Personal needs	4
Sexual orientation	1 (not in my current college though).

Those who chose to comment tended to be concerned that age was a barrier although a predominantly male management structure and childcare issues were also highlighted.

“Turn 50 and your career is dead (unless your ‘face fits’) – younger staff are easier to impress and control/manipulate.” (Male, 51-55, White).

“College pressure due to my strong Christian beliefs made me want to leave my previous job in FE. One put up an open notice on a staff room board condemning me as a ‘brainwasher’ because I helped students to run a Christian Union.” (Male, white, 51-55).

“As an ‘over 50’, age is now a factor in promotion/career move.”

“I don’t have a degree, so after 3-4 teaching HND and BA Hons (very successful) my new HOS (Head of School) removed me from the teaching team.”

“As in most FE colleges, 80% of the lecturing staff is female, but 95% of the management is male. Because of the organisational structure there is nowhere to go! Especially after ‘a certain age’.” (Female, 46-50, White, No144)

“I have found in various institutions that ageism affects salary.”
(Female, 26-30, Mixed ethnic origin, single).

“What about height and weight?”

“Promotion would entail working every evening and with children this is not appropriate.”

“Not offered promotion for several years in my current post.”

Equal Opportunities Policies

Every member of staff who responded indicated that they knew of the existence of an Equal Opportunities Policy in their college and a high proportion (96%) understood what is stated. Interestingly it was the male members of staff who did not understand the content of their policy. Whether or not they had been invited to contribute and/or make comment on the policy was not evident. However, three quarters of the staff surveyed indicated an interest in contributing to the content of the policy with a significant number of males (81%) compared to females (69%) wanting to become involved.

In terms of monitoring the policy on a regular basis, again, it was male members of staff (78%) who appeared to be more enthusiastic than the female staff (69%). Female staff, however, were more knowledgeable about support groups that were available and where to go for help and advice.

In relation to policies staff comments ranged from positive encouragement to those who saw it as someone else's responsibility:

“Absolute support in this area. Members of staff encouraged to volunteer to be part of focus groups, working parties, and committees etc.

“Ageism – like any form of discrimination, should be outlawed.”
(Male, 51-55, White).

“I think it is the students who should be asked if they know/feel the policy is in place/working.”

“It’s all very well ‘being involved’ but most staff here don’t want to add any more tasks to their workload, and that includes me!”

“Other groups or individuals to give support and advice. My Union Rep. The Union.”

Gender

Overall staff appeared to disagree that the course description indicated their class was appropriate for males or females. There was disagreement over whether the course had been promoted as being suitable for either men or women with male staff considering it had been suitably promoted in contrast to the females’ negative responses. Barely half of the female staff knew whether there were classes just for men or women.

Just over half of all the staff surveyed did not think that the class tutor would be the same gender as the students, although more males held this view than females. When given the option of having a class tutor of the same gender the overall response was low but there were more male members of staff compared to the females who rejected this option.

Interviewing and enrolling students should be free from bias and yet students are being encouraged to study on courses that traditionally attract the opposite gender. Staff involved in this process would be caught in this dilemma. Two thirds of staff disagreed with the statement that students had been enrolled according to gender, particularly male staff, who also indicated they would not be attracted to a course that was female orientated.

Colleges have indicated that they are equal opportunities employers and, for the male members of staff they appeared to be satisfied that their college offered a flexible working timetable. They also had access to childcare provision that met their needs. This was in contrast to female members of staff who disagreed with the flexibility of their timetable and the lack of suitable childcare provision.

It has been suggested (Pringle, 1989; Heffernan 2004) that women would be considered less favourably in the job market if they had taken a career break and would be employed in low status jobs. The responses from female members of staff were split equally between those who agreed and those who disagreed. However, more male staff disagreed with this view and equally more male staff disagreed that men could only gain employment in low status jobs after a career break.

Individual staff commented:

Q5: Gender

“This is not so here at ***** but in the general job market discrimination is noticeable.”

Q5a: Course description

“All course descriptions are non-biased.”

Q5b: Classes advertised as being only for women, or men.

“All course descriptions are non-biased.”

Q5c: Class tutor same gender.

“Did not expect anything.”

Q5d: Prefer class tutor to be the same gender.

“Not bothered.”

Q5g: College offers a flexible working timetable.

“The college wants staff to be flexible not vice-versa.”

“My timetable is not flexible.” (Female, white, part-time age 41-45 also commented re difficulties taking promotion).

Q5h: Access to childcare

“We have a new state of the art nursery available to students. (Not staff).”

“No childcare provisions provided, however, I do not need it at this time.”

Q5i: Women and low status jobs after a career break.

“Depends on previous experience and qualifications.”

Q5j: Men and low status jobs after a career break.

“Depends on previous experience and qualifications.”

Q5k: Women considered less favourably in job market if they have placed family before career progression.

“And so they should be.” (Female, 46-50, White, Full-time Senior Lecturer, Married)

“Would depend upon the person and circumstances.”

Q5l: Men keen to take advantage of paternity leave.

“But depends on their priorities.”

Q5m: Colleges make it easy to return to education and training.

“Colleges do, the government doesn't.”

“Make it easy to return to education and training but not a job. Jobs should go to the most able/committed. Discrimination either positive or negative is a travesty that leads to resentment and ineffective management/workers etc.” (Male, 51-55, White).

Disability

Colleges have declared that they were inclusive but there was not conclusive evidence from the staff surveys that this was the case. When asked whether disabled people were always integrated into other social groups just over half of those surveyed disagreed, the majority being male staff. However, one person observed:

“This is changing, but sometimes people don’t want to be integrated.”

When it was suggested that disability isolated individuals, a view put forward by Morris (1991), there were more female respondents who disagreed than males. One person who agreed with the statement did add that:

“all efforts are made by staff to ensure this does not happen.”

Just over half of the staff responded to the suggestion that disabled people lacked self-confidence with a higher proportion of males disagreeing compared to the number of females. However, where there had been an agreement with this statement there were qualifying reasons given including one that indicated it was the age of the individual rather than the disability. The range of comments was:

“Agree. Depends absolutely on the individual.”

“Sometimes disabled people lack self-confidence.”

“Some.”

“Most teenagers lack self-confidence.”

“Sometimes - from experience.”

“To my personal knowledge in one specific case this is the case.”

However, three quarters of the staff surveyed disagreed with the view that non-disabled people in college reacted negatively to those with a disability. This contradicted views held by Morris (1991) about non-disabled people’s perceptions of disabled people and also their particular needs. One person’s opinion was:

“They react to anyone who is ‘different’.”

A high proportion of female staff (94%) considered their college could offer practical support to disabled students or employees. One respondent indicated there were:

“Good support systems here.”

although it was not evident what those systems were.

Again there were more female staff who felt their college was suitably planned and equipped to accommodate disabled people. However, individual comments revealed the situation was still far from ideal.

“College suitably planned and equipped.”

“Could be improved.”

“Some still in planning stage.”

“An older campus, so some buildings do not have wheelchair access.”

“Most of the time.”

“We are moving quickly to provide a very good level of access and support in these areas.”

It was also clear from the responses that information relating to support agencies had been communicated as a significant number of staff, both male (79%) and female (83%) were aware of who to contact if they had an issue or question related to disability.

It was in response to questions in this section overall that staff made a considerable number of more detailed comments. They clearly had an opinion, generally positive, and wanted to make their voice heard. General comments related to disability were:

“When I taught disabled students I always encouraged these students to integrate fully with other students being allowed to use the room alongside the group.” (Female, 46-50).

“The college is making great progress in these areas. Health and safety issues may prevent disabled people from being integrated into classes, ie Catering busy (main kitchen).”

“In my opinion, this issue is about removing barriers. The college and staff have to enable any student to access any course they are intellectually and physically capable of attempting. It is more difficult to change social attitudes than to provide open access. College staff are also under pressure to produce results (viz. the attempt to introduce performance-related pay for teachers). Exclusion on this basis could be seen as a form of discrimination. The gender issue concerning college staff is more connected to pay and promotion prospects – women are more likely to take the lower paid jobs if they fit in with domestic responsibilities. “

“Much is done to aid disabled but buildings design hamper these attempts, and Student Services do not respond fast enough to off-site locations.”

“The above comments (Q6a-6g) are difficult to answer, it depends on the individual person. The college has a Health and Safety Officer who assesses each individual case for suitability etc (in the case of wheelchair users) and prior to attending a course Student Services interview anyone with special needs to find out their requirements and needs for the duration of their course (no matter what the disability is). On the application form and resorse (sic) form if the student has notified college of any disabilities or difficulties or problems these are normally resolved as not to ‘interfer’ (sic) with their learning experience.”

“I find the above question a little difficult to answer bearing in mind the range of disabilities that may be relevant – does this question relate to physical, mental or both? I work with students who have some learning difficulties (ie difficulties in spelling or dyslexia) and the department has some students who are deaf, these are supported by interpreters. Another tutor within the department also deals with students who have more special needs in terms of hearing difficulties which are more acute. I do feel that the college tries to integrate these students as much as possible.”

Comparison of Student and Staff responses

Equal Opportunities Policies

A total of one hundred and seventy six questionnaires were completed and returned from a survey of staff and students. The majority of respondents were either full time employees or students on full time courses. A significant proportion of participants classified themselves as white and an

equally high number declare that they did not have a disability or learning difficulties.

A high proportion of participants overall (94%) knew that their college had an Equal Opportunities Policy. Every member of staff who responded indicated that they knew of the existence of an Equal Opportunities Policy in their college and a significant proportion of students overall (89%) were aware that one existed. However, fewer male students (81%) agree that there was a policy in college compared to the number of females (93%).

Less understood the meaning of the policy (82%) with a significantly higher proportion of staff (96%) than students (69%) who understood what the policy stated. Although the staff were unanimous in their knowledge of a policy document, there were fewer male members of staff (92%) who understood its content. This was compared to all female staff who, not only said they knew of a policy, but also indicated they understood what it stated. Although the figures for respondents were considerably lower from students than from staff there did follow a similar pattern where the females had more of an understanding than the males. Only sixty six per cent of male students felt they understood the policy with slightly more females (70%) having an understanding.

Even fewer (69%) wanted a say in what the policy should contain and just two thirds of those surveyed considered it important to be involved regularly in checking the usefulness of the policy. However, more staff than students expressed a need to be involved in structuring the policy. Three quarters of the staff surveyed indicated an interest in contributing to the content of the policy compared to two thirds of the students. There was a significant number of male staff that were interested in having a say in what the policy stated (81%) compared to their female counterparts (69%). However, it was the female students who were the ones declaring an interest in the development of the policy compared to the male students, with little more than half of the males (59%) who showed any positive response.

Again it was the staff rather than the students who were more interested in monitoring the policy with the numbers mirroring the responses to the previous question that related to being involved in contributing to the policy. When the respondents were asked if they wanted to be involved in checking the policy regularly it was the male staff who appeared to be the more enthusiastic, seventy eight per cent compared to sixty nine per cent of females. Interestingly there were also slightly more male than female students who expressed an interest in monitoring the policy once it had been developed.

A high proportion of both staff (90%) and students (86%) were aware of other groups or individuals in their college who could give support and advice, with slightly more staff than students who responded positively. There were, however, significantly more females both staff (97%) and students (91%) who knew who to contact compared to the males. Eighty four per cent of male members of staff knew of contact groups but, by comparison with the others, only seventy seven per cent of male students had this information.

Gender

Only half of those questioned thought the course description suggested the class was suitable for males or females. Relatively few (17%) knew whether the college advertised classes specifically for women or men. Over half did not expect the class tutor to be the same gender with a similar number indicating they had no preference for a tutor of the same gender. Eight out of ten who replied did not consider gender had been influential when it came to enrolling students but more than half would not contemplate applying for a course that traditionally attracted the opposite gender.

Overall staff appeared to disagree that the course description indicated their class was appropriate for males or females whereas a significant proportion of students agreed. The same percentage of male and female

students (77%) agreed that their course had been promoted as being suitable for either gender. There was not a high response to this question from staff and, whilst the male members of staff actually agreed with the students it was the female staff who disagreed with the statement.

Both staff and students disagreed with the statement that their college had classes aimed at either men or women; three quarters of students disagreed compared to half of the staff who responded. Again there was a low response to this question from staff but the survey revealed there were more male members of staff and male students who disagreed than females. Barely half of the female staff knew whether there were classes available just for men or women compared to two thirds of female students.

Just over half of all the staff surveyed did not think that the class tutor would be the same gender as the students, but a higher proportion, over three quarters of the students, held this opinion. All males and females disagreed with the view that it was expected that the tutor would be of the same gender with the male students outweighing the female students in their replies (85%:75%). Although the staff held a similar view there were, again, more males than females who disagreed with less than fifty percent of females responding.

When given the option of having a class tutor and students of the same gender all staff and students were of the opinion that they did not want the class tutor to be of the same gender. There was a significant difference in the percentage of responses to this question with more students (84%) than staff (52%) who disagreed. However, male staff and female students were the dominant groups with just over half of the male members of staff indicating they did not want the option compared to forty seven per cent of females. The reverse was found in the responses from the students when more females (86%) disagreed with the proposal than males (81%).

Asked to consider whether they thought students had been enrolled by gender all respondents disagreed with significantly more students (89%)

giving this response than staff (69%). There were more male than female staff who held this opinion but slightly more female than male students with the same view.

When asked if they would consider applying for a course traditionally attracting the opposite gender thirty eight per cent of staff indicated they would not with nearly twice as many students providing a similar reply. The responses were almost equally divided between the male and female students' responses and those of the male and female staff. There were marginally more replies from female students indicating they would not apply for a course that attracted the opposite gender. However, more male staff than females would not be attracted to this type of course, according to the replies returned.

Overall staff and students appeared to agree that there was flexibility in their timetables with a greater percentage of students agreeing than staff. However, this question did seem to create a division of opinion between males and females whether they were staff or students. More male staff (44%) and students (59%) agreed that their college offered a flexible working timetable if and when they needed it. This was in contrast to female staff where more disagreed than agreed (39%:33%). Female students also did not consider there was any flexibility for them with fifty two per cent disagreeing compared to forty three per cent who agreed.

Three times more students than staff judged childcare provision within college was accessible. Male staff and male students agreed that they had access to childcare provision that met their needs with a significant proportion of female students (72%) who responded positively. However, the responses from female staff signified that they were not satisfied with the provision available to them with more disagreeing than agreeing.

All of the respondents disagreed with the statement that women could only gain employment in low status jobs after a career break, a significantly higher proportion of students disagreed compared to staff. The responses

from female members of staff suggested they were not convinced either way with almost a fifty-fifty split between those who agreed and those who disagreed. This was in contrast to eighty per cent of female students who disagreed with this view, almost half disagreeing strongly. Although seventy four per cent of male students and sixty five per cent of male staff disagreed neither group held any firm opinions or indicated they disagreed strongly. Only a third felt that women could only gain employment in low status jobs after a career break with a similar number indicating this would also apply to men. However, almost half of those who replied thought that women were considered less favourably in the job market if they had placed family life before career progression.

Again a significantly higher proportion of students than staff (82%:62%) disagreed with the suggestion that men could only gain employment in low status jobs after a career break. The group with the highest percentage of respondents disagreeing was the female students where eighty four per cent disagreed with this notion and almost half disagreed strongly. This was in contrast to the staff where more male staff were in disagreement compared to their female counterparts, almost half of those disagreeing expressed their opinions quite forcibly.

Although the general consensus of opinion was that males were not disadvantaged by a career break the opposite seemed to be the case for women, but only according to female staff. An analysis of the data from all staff compared to all students appeared to reveal that the staff group agreed that women were considered less favourably in the job market if family life had taken precedence over career progression whereas the students disagreed. Further analysis identified that it was the male students who disagreed with the statement, coincidentally the same number that disagreed with the suggestion that women could only gain low status jobs after a career break.

Paternity leave was now available for men but nearly half of the respondents thought men were not keen to take advantage of it.

More students than staff disagreed with the statement that men were keen to take advantage of paternity leave. Male staff and male students quite clearly disagreed when compared with the respondents who agreed.

However, there was a more favourable response to the question regarding how colleges had facilitated a return to education with more than three quarters of those surveyed indicating it had been easy for them. A high proportion of students thought that their college made it easier to return to education and training, considerably more than the seventy five percent of staff who agreed. Although the difference in the responses from male and female staff was marginal, overall males agreed with this statement, some agreeing strongly. Over eighty five per cent of male students agreed that it was easy to return to education and training compared to just over three quarters of female students.

Disability

There was a considerable difference of opinions between males and females and staff and students in this section. Respondents were asked to consider whether disabled people in college were always integrated into other social groups. Over half of those taking part in the survey agreed that they were always integrated. However, there was a significant difference in the student responses with three quarters of female respondents agreeing compared to half of their male counterparts. It should also be noted that significantly more male staff responded positively than male students and yet a higher proportion of female students reported positively compared to female staff.

Differences of opinion were also highlighted when it was suggested that disability isolated individuals. The data from staff and student groupings in general mirrors, almost identically, the data from the previous statement. A more in-depth analysis revealed the male staff were almost equally divided between disagreeing and agreeing (47%:44%). Just over half of the female members of staff disagreed with this statement (55%) with the

same proportion of female staff agreeing as male staff (44%). However, the majority of female students disagreed with the statement whilst most male students considered disability did isolate individuals.

In general considerably more students disagreed with the suggestion that disabled people were lacking in self-confidence, over two thirds of students compared to just over half of the staff. Exploring the data further it was noted that there was a significantly higher proportion of male staff (60%) and over three quarters of female students (77%) who disagreed with this statement compared to female staff and male students. Half of all female staff and half of the male students who responded did not think that disabled people lacked self-confidence.

There appeared to be strong views on the question as to whether non-disabled people in college reacted negatively to those with a disability with considerably more staff than students disagreeing. Approximately three quarters of male and female staff and female students disagreed with this suggestion. Male students were divided in their opinions and although the majority disagreed this still represented less than half of the group (48%) compared to forty per cent who agreed with the statement.

There was a favourable response to the question relating to practical support available in college. A high percentage of all respondents thought that their College was able to offer practical support to any student or employee who was disabled with more staff than students agreeing. The number was particularly high from female staff (94%) with male staff and female students agreeing in similar proportions (84%:87%). It was noted that less than three quarters of male students agreed although this was still significantly higher than those who disagreed (18%).

Fewer felt the college was suitably equipped with just under two thirds of the replies indicating the organisation was suitably planned and equipped to accommodate disabled staff and students. Overall more staff than students thought that the college was suitably planned and equipped to

accommodate disabled people. When this data was analysed further it was found that there was a more significant difference of opinion between the groups. More female staff than male staff and a higher proportion of male students than female students agreed. Over three quarters of female staff indicated that provision was acceptable with a similar number of male students in agreement. However, just over half of male staff and a comparable number of female students indicated the layout and equipment was suitable.

A high proportion of staff, both male and female, knew which support agencies and personnel they could contact if they had an issue or question related to disability (79% male and 83% female). The data revealed that almost twice as many staff as students had access to this information. The students were divided between forty eight per cent who agreed that they knew who their contacts were and forty six per cent who did not. Further analysis revealed that more male students, two out of every three, agreed that they knew who to contact but the majority of female student respondents, over half, disagreed, indicating they would not know where to go for information and guidance. The implication here was that communications could have been an issue and that a rigorous induction programme might have overcome these difficulties.

Staff Interviews

Analysis of the policies (phase one) and postal questionnaires (phase two) provided the framework for the debate that would be complemented by in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

In this section I discussed the interviews that were conducted mainly face-to-face but in one instance the interview was conducted over the telephone. This interviewee was initially reluctant to take any part in the research and was not willing to commit or even ask any colleagues to participate. However, as the conversation progressed, valuable information emerged that I was anxious to retain and as a result very

hurried shorthand notes were made, with the permission of the interviewee. The other interviews were conducted in the interviewees' workplace and, with their permission, were recorded on tape. The interviewees had the option of ending the recording and/or the interview at any time and one person did ask for the recording to be stopped, although our conversation still continued. These interviews were conducted with employees from organisations chosen to represent rural, large rural/city, inner city and town colleges acknowledging the different constraints that these colleges could face and different working conditions for both staff and students. The employees who volunteered represented both academic staff and those in administration to give their own particular perspective on equal opportunities in practice in their college.

Rural College (Gina)

This college operated from two main campuses and was formed as a result of the merger of two colleges following discussions for a financial recovery plan. In 2000/01 there were 2,491 students enrolled with a third of the full-time equivalent students being aged 19 or older.

Initial contact was made by telephone with the Human Resources Department. The member of staff was very positive, polite and helpful and asked for the request to be in writing. After the initial letter and follow-up, numerous emails were sent and messages left on the answerphone. After 8 months the request was finally answered with an apology and news that the details had been sent to Ruth Lister who had since left the college and her replacement was still to be appointed.

Having taken so long to reach this point of contact and still not able to arrange a face-to-face meeting with anyone I did not want to lose this opportunity to gather information and managed to persuade Gina to agree to be interviewed over the telephone, although she was concerned that she would be wasting my time. Gina thought that the majority of staff would not

even know that a policy existed and did not think anyone would volunteer to be interviewed; therefore there was no point in pursuing the idea.

Inspection Feedback

At the last inspection in 2002 the inspectors recommended an improvement in the monitoring of equal opportunities. The college had already identified a need to provide courses for people whose first language was not English even though the proportion of people in the community from minority ethnic backgrounds was not significant. The inspectorate had criticised the staff for undemanding teaching and teaching skills but the students had praised their tutors for being friendly and enthusiastic, having relevant industrial experience, providing individual help and support and being treated as adults. Their main criticisms were related to the teaching and relevance of Key Skills, absenteeism and punctuality, décor and maintenance of the site, access for those with mobility problems and out-of-date equipment.

Responsibility for policy

According to Gina the responsibility for the policy did rest with Ruth Lister who dealt with any issues, in conjunction with an Equal Opportunities Committee, twice a year. Before she left Ruth was the Chief Executive who disseminated information down, “probably” to the Senior Services Manager who was involved with the students. Gina indicated the policy was really more for the students than the staff.

Gina continued to relate the problems of the transition phase from Ruth as Chief Executive, a post that no longer existed, to the appointment of two Assistant Principals. One of the Assistant Principal’s roles was the responsibility for the students within the college, but again, there was no one designated to take responsibility for the staff. Gina, almost justifying not following up my request, concluded that equal opportunities could be

the responsibility of anyone and any department therefore it was difficult to identify the person responsible to talk to about it.

Monitoring

Gina continued with an explanation of their monitoring process. Forms requesting information relevant to equal opportunities were included in application forms that were completed by prospective students. This information was monitored by the Human Resources Managers as evidence for Investors In People status. Whilst the students were taken into consideration there was nothing evident for staff. Details of newly employed staff were recorded and monitored; also information from interviews was recorded. Gina acknowledged that there was information being collected but it was not being used and no reports were produced from it.

At this point Gina becomes very apologetic and suggested that I tried another (named) college “where I would probably have more success”. She thought her own college’s policy and documentation were adequate and enough to “get by”. Gina recognised there was no documentation in place for staff but the students had been considered. However, she suggested the documentation created for students could be used for staff although it was not specifically aimed at them. Again she tried to offer me suggestions of a college that she was sure would have a policy. She explained that her college had a predominantly white background, attracting a wide range of students and concluded that they probably did need to reconsider their policy.

Large rural/city (Verity)

This interview was face-to-face with the Head of Student Services and was in stark contrast to the telephone interview that I had conducted earlier. It was obvious that this person was so enthusiastic and committed and I could not help but be drawn into her enthusiasm and passion for her work.

It could have been so easy to start and draw conclusions, at this point, about the attitudes of this college to equal opportunities in practice.

This was a large general further education college based on three sites, the largest being in a city centre. The students came from a wide variety of backgrounds within the city and surrounding rural areas. The college had seen an increase in enrolment; in 2001/02 there were the equivalent of 5,00 full-time students at the college. Approximately 2% of the students were from minority ethnic groups and 54% of the students were female.

Inspection Feedback

The college received a glowing report for its approach and implementation of equal opportunities in 2003. Although there was a recommendation that there could be improvements for access to some parts of the college for those students with restricted mobility the college was praised for “actively promoting equality of opportunity and identifying the importance of support for individual students in ensuring equality of opportunity.”

Responsibility for policy

This college did have an Equal Opportunities Committee. Some members were ex officio but every department was represented, although members did not always attend. There was a requirement for each department manager to produce a report that monitored targets on a termly basis. The manager or Equal Opportunities Representative took responsibility and it was a fixed agenda item for discussion. Examples of targets that were set for the refectory, for instance, following disability awareness training were: the introduction of adjustable tables in all areas for access by wheelchair users and Braille menus produced in-house. Demand led to the decision to produce menus in Braille, as there were forty-five to fifty in the group who were major users of the diner.

The staff were not involved in setting up the policy as Verity considered it would be difficult with such a large group of people. She felt it had to come from a sub-committee of people that were representative of the college and knew how to write a policy. As an employer, the college had just applied for the 'Work Life Balance Award' in recognition of their family-friendly policies. They would be the first college to receive this award if successful. It was pointed out to the assessor for this award that many of their staff policies were about equality of opportunity but staff would not necessarily realise that. The staff sickness monitoring and special leave of absence documents all related to equal opportunities. For example, if an employee had to care for a family member or had a disabled child to care for then that was acknowledged in this policy. Staff, however, did not automatically see this as being relevant to equal opportunities

Verity also explained that a member of staff knew sign language and was also employed for note taking. They ensured that this support was not just in the classroom but extended over the lunchtime, during breaks and for social support as well. The member of staff was attached to that student at all times, an approach that could be adopted by all colleges as funding was available.

Monitoring

Verity explained that the way the college made it a live working document was through the monitoring process. Each unit/school had to establish targets on a termly basis and provide action towards those, monitoring the action and reporting back to the Equal Opportunities Committee. The Committee was seen as much less of a talking shop but more of reviewing what was actually happening and what progress was being made towards achieving targets. The fact that managers had the responsibility made for greater ownership within the college.

There were separate policies and support groups at this college, for instance the Harassment Support Group that helped to diffuse issues and

monitor students going through the Harassment Support Network. There were also monitoring systems that acted on issues relating to discipline, ethnicity and disability.

There were two special interest groups that were being trialled, one for ethnicity and the other for disability. There was a high staff attendance at monitoring meetings but not as many students were present although the Student Union sent representatives. Equal Opportunities was taught, as part of the curriculum, in most subject areas and it was an integral part of tutorial. The college had also bought in some good vocational training materials that helped provide an understanding of issues in the workplace. These were tailored to individual needs, for example, specifically for motor vehicle students or those on catering courses, and were part of their induction.

Equal opportunities was a fixed item on the agenda for School meetings and the minutes were always sent to Verity. Any issues raised were always followed up, as the minutes may not have been an accurate reflection of what was said. Verity gave an example of a recent issue involving students from Performing Arts who had complained that the make up provided was not appropriate for their skin tones. The number of black and Asian students had been increasing but the Course Team had not picked up the need for different tones of make up. The college was based in an area that was not particularly racially mixed and yet these students had the confidence to raise this point, showing a real awareness of the college's commitment to equal opportunities in action.

One of Verity's targets was to improve students' awareness of the services provided by Student Services, particularly in relation to transport in the coming year. This also was an opportunity to review current provision. This target was to be measured through the Quality Survey, as would equal opportunities. If it was obvious students were unaware of its existence then their tutors would be approached to find out if they were covering it as part of the curriculum.

Ownership

Students, in general, did not have the opportunity to comment on the policy other than through the Students' Union who had an input. The Student Union Manager was involved in the Equal Opportunities group that wrote the policy. It was reviewed annually by whoever wanted to be part of the Committee but there was not usually change for changes sake. Verity is on the Committee but hopes that this is not permanent. The Student Union Manager was now the Liaison Officer and two members of staff used to belong but had since left. Other members could be co-opted on, for example, from Personnel or those who had the expertise such as the Health and Safety Officer and Director of Personnel.

Verity was of the opinion that people had come to terms with race and disability although gender posed problems for some staff and they needed help when setting targets. However, she did try and stretch people's perceptions of equality and had tried raising the issue of rural isolation that was characteristic of so much of the area. For her department targeting the problem of transport was high on the priority list. She raised it with OFSTED at the last inspection and pointed out that lack of transport and rural isolation were equal opportunity issues. A lack of transport meant a lack of cultural experience for people living in the country, some of whom were just "waking up" to the fact there was a college on the doorstep.

Commitment

Part of the strategic plan was that equal opportunities was always an agenda item at all meetings and it had to look at the implications for learners. This happened at all levels including Academic Board, College Management and the Health and Safety Committee. It was another way of making people stop and think about the decisions they made and the impact on the learners. Every time a report was written it had to indicate what the implications were for equality of opportunity.

There was considerable debate at the Equal Opportunities Committee about the changing terminology and whether the term diversity should be used. The whole of the college had attended training in diversity issues from an outside provider. This was a compulsory session that highlighted the difference between equal opportunity legislation and rules and the newer, different side of diversity, which was more about valuing and celebrating diversity in society. Both the Director of Personnel and Verity had experience of equal opportunities at Masters level and agreed that the College should remain with the terminology of equal opportunities and not move into the diversity argument as diversity did not indicate equality.

Verity was really pleased with the progress her college had made on the equal opportunities front and took great delight in quoting the phrase used by OFSTED when grading their equal opportunities – “high profile”. This had been after years of fighting when, in the early days, she felt as if it had been only herself and a couple of other people who had been interested. She considered herself “lucky to have a Senior Management Team who are firmly committed to it. The Principal and Vice Principal are totally committed, it is not just a token gesture”.

The first phase of their Equal Opportunities training had been to bring in an outside trainer and his health check on the organisation was positive. Attendance at this session had been mandatory although there was a separate training session for the College Management Team. Recommendations from this phase indicated they were ready to take everyone through to the second phase. This involved using existing procedures for classroom observations and feedback to tutors but concentrated on the teaching and learning process and differentiation within the class.

Verity points out that “the OFSTED inspectors **love** differentiation – they go wild for it – (hastily) but that’s not why we’re doing it, we’re doing it because we’re changing as an organisation and need to”. The college had a large number of people with disabilities and had gone a fair way to meeting the

needs of the widening participation agenda to attract non-traditional learners. Only 20% of their learners were in the 16-19 age group. As the bulk of their students were non-traditional learners then it was recognised that traditional learning styles would not work for them.

Verity explained how they try and break the traditional stereotypes by targeting women in their recruitment on to courses such as Painting and Decorating and Science and Engineering. As part of their positive action they encouraged women who felt they could apply for non-traditional jobs as well as people with disabilities and those from ethnic minorities. They were aware of where there was a gender imbalance and aimed to redress this imbalance, particularly when using agency staff. They had discussed the claim that men were also discriminated against but it had gone no further than making a comparison with other lesser claims of discrimination, for example, when staff were concerned about spending so much time with one particular student that others were being discriminated against. However, they did take positive action in situations where a course was almost full and a decision had to be made whether to give the final place to a male applicant or a female. The remaining place would usually be allocated to the woman rather than the man.

Communication

As part of the recruitment process the job advertisement clearly informed people that this was a live working document that the college firmly believed in implementing. A copy was sent to everyone who applied and it was a fixed item on all person specifications and job descriptions; it was part of what everyone was employed to do in the college. Everyone was encouraged to be aware of the Equal Opportunities Policy and promote anti-discriminatory behaviour. There was always a question during the interview process, regardless of the post being applied for, whether it was for the Principal's job or any other role within the college. The questions differed, depending on the job. For instance, at management level the question could be about target setting, at a teaching level it could be about

the curriculum and curriculum materials and for a support post the question could ask for an explanation as to what was meant by discrimination or how would the college's policy impact on the applicant.

The college was set in an area that was traditionally mono-ethnic but there had been considerable changes lately, particularly with the increase of the immigrant population. Whilst the college encouraged open discussion, negative comments were frowned upon. Verity was concerned about some of the most outrageous comments made, quoting the following: "Why are there so many disabled people in college, what can they gain?" "Is it fair that we have all these asylum seekers in this area?" The college was very proactive in trying to counteract this by listing, as gross misconduct in the disciplinary procedures, any flouting of equal opportunities.

They considered implementing policies was not considered sufficient; sanctions had to be in place. Verity did acknowledge, however, that "You can watch people's actions and do something about actions but you can't change what's in their head, they have to change that themselves. So when their actions belie what's in their head then you can take sanctions. We sometimes have done. A member of staff was dismissed recently as a result of gender issues and harassment".

It was so invigorating to find a person, and apparently a college, so enthusiastic and committed to equal opportunities, particularly after the half hearted approach demonstrated by the respondent in the first interview. It appeared to be an integral part of the culture and everyday life here.

Large rural/city (Geraldine)

This interview was conducted in the same college as described above but with a member from the academic staff. Geraldine began her employment as a 0.5 lecturer, rising to 0.6 in the same year as a result of demand for her subject area. As her workload increased and she started to do more external work for the college her contract had now become full-time. She

had Curriculum Leader responsibility, with Mathematics as her subject specialism, and was the trouble-shooter for Key Skills as she was particularly efficient at putting systems in place.

Ownership

The picture painted by Verity in the previous interview did not quite match up to the account I began to hear from Geraldine. There was a slight laugh before she told me that she knew very little about the college's Equal Opportunities Policy as it existed in relation to her as a person or in her role as a lecturer. She tended to make assumptions that there was one in place to "ensure Equal Opportunities prevails but I have not read the nitty-gritty". Geraldine's approach was that she:

"gaily sails through life, assuming people will not put artificial hurdles in my way. I am of an age where there was a time when hurdles were put in my way, but with the Sex Discrimination Act that came in when I was in my late 20s, that stopped, and I assumed, ever since, that people would not make judgements based on putting me in a category ... judge me as the person I am not."

Geraldine tended to teach in the same way and regarded all her students as individuals, supporting them to fulfil their aims and taking on any problems they had, helping them to deal with them. She monitored the reactions within groups to make sure she was not imposing unacceptable attitudes.

When Geraldine first started at the college she was given "loads of information in which there was some equal opportunities information". In her interview she was questioned about her attitude towards equal opportunities and then in her promotion interview she was asked about her views. The questions focused on what she did in her teaching, although in her initial interview she was not able to provide any evidence as she had been out of teaching for some time. In subsequent interviews she was

able to provide examples of where she had provided positive help to minority groups.

Monitoring

Apart from the questionnaire that was circulated Geraldine did not think that there was any other way that she had been involved in this process. The comments from the Student Feedback forms could be considered part of this process and it was a fixed agenda item for all meetings – although it was not discussed in depth. When problems arose then these were mentioned. There were a considerable number of disabled students, for instance, blind and deaf, but there was one member of staff assigned to them and this support was on a daily basis. Geraldine did not want to be involved in any of the committees or planning associated with equal opportunities. She was quite happy to implement the result of policy making unless the policy makers came up with a solution that was really ridiculous.

Commitment

The college did start to run training workshops. There were supposed to be two meetings for the whole of the college staff related to Equal Opportunities but looking at turning towards Managing Diversity. Geraldine attended the first lecture but, at the time of this interview, had heard nothing more. She was clearly disappointed that this had not been followed through as she felt that it was pointing the way to exactly what they should be doing as staff.

Geraldine was only aware of the Equal Opportunities training session during induction but admitted that she was not looking for other sessions herself. She knew colleagues who dealt with disabled students were going on a training day although that had been by invitation only. Geraldine acknowledged her skills needed updating and would always ask for help if she needed it. This was the attitude of most of her colleagues, according

to Geraldine, and her view was that staff training should not be imposed otherwise people would go into sessions with a different mind set.

Geraldine welcomed more staff training on the lines of a consultant coming in to college to explain the jargon, outline the initiatives and discuss what happens in practice. There had been a number of changes in legislation over the years and, despite receiving up-to-date information, Geraldine believed it was usually read, but not always, and then filed.

Communication

Geraldine's view was that to provide equal opportunities they had to be managing diversity (this differs from Verity, above). Geraldine thought that that was what they/she did and if that was also happening at a higher level and going to filter through then she was happy to accept that.

When asked about the different terminology that was now being used, for example, social justice, equal opportunities, managing diversity and widening participation, Geraldine considered they were "all part of the same thing". She felt that they were just new terms for equal opportunities but with slight changes to the perspective. To her it was just the same end and if it helped to move further along that pathway or make it more workable then it was really irrelevant, to her, how it was labelled – it was the principle that she was more concerned about.

Responsibility

Geraldine did not know who was ultimately responsible for Equal Opportunities within the college or who had taken the lead. She felt that she would only want to become more involved if there was something in particular that she thought she could offer – but she was not sure that she had that something. She admitted that she was not a great one for committees and producing endless reports and documents. She knew that she had to be doing that in her new job, to a certain extent, but she was "aiming to keep it to a minimum, short – I am, after all, a Mathematician".

That did not mean to say that Geraldine absolved any responsibility as she considered everyone had a responsibility at ground level but there needed to be systems in place for staff and students at a higher level. In her opinion it should be the senior managers who disseminated information and monitor the policy rather than drive it through. They were in a position to make any necessary changes although Geraldine was unsure about the extent of any problems. She was adamant though that the college did not need any more initiatives and she certainly did not want any more paperwork, as that was not seen to be the solution.

Gender and Career Progression

Geraldine did not think that being a woman had hindered her career progress, but that was because of her strength of character. However, she went on to describe the way she had coped as a student, being one of three women out of a class of forty students. At one point “I became ultra feminine – one of the boys – you developed strategies for dealing with it that held you in good stead in later life”. There was less of a need for Geraldine to use these coping strategies nowadays but she could not be sure whether it was down to the fact that she was older or whether attitudes had actually changed. There were still instances that she came across, for example, when parents were discussing the progress of their youngsters. One particular parent was only interested in hearing about the progress of their son as they considered the daughter’s examination results did not matter. Although it was happening less frequently Geraldine thought that instances such as these highlighted the necessity for legislation and staff and students should be prepared to challenge any issues of inequality.

Disability

Disabled students that Geraldine teaches were not seemingly disadvantaged in any way. She emphasised that every effort was made to ensure their needs were met and there were not any courses within her

curriculum area that could not be offered through a lack of expertise. There were potential situations that she did identify, however, when resources would have to be reviewed, for example, if a blind student wanted to enrol.

Geraldine's experiences helped her to see equal opportunities from different perspectives and deal with situations as they occurred in the classroom. It made her question why people reacted to her as they did. Were they reacting to her as a person, as a woman or as a Mathematician? It was important to Geraldine to be able to distinguish between these labels, although she accepted that if an individual was in a minority group then it was difficult. Her impression was that "it is difficult to identify why people are behaving like that towards me – is it me or their perceptions of me?"

City (Matthew)

This college was classified as medium-sized and located on three sites. In 2001/02 there were 11,482 students; 1,705 attended full time and the remainder were part time. There was a higher proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds than in the population; 11.2% were Asian or Asian British and 6.8% were Black or Black British. Only 5% of staff were from minority ethnic groups

Inspection Feedback

Widening participation was a strength identified in the 2004 Inspection Report. The college was praised for promoting equal opportunities through its work with the local communities. Although the college had recently revised its equality statement it was criticised for not dealing adequately with all equality issues. The Equal Opportunities policy and action plan were noted but there was no evidence of the Race Equality policy. The policies that existed did not meet the requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Special Education Needs and Disability Act

2001. There was also criticism of access for people with physical disabilities and signposting for the visually impaired. It was noted that the Equal Opportunities Committee met twice a term but action plans and targets were underdeveloped.

Matthew has been at the college for 25 years and his job role had evolved over that time. He was now one of seven Curriculum Directors with his area covering; Health and Social Care, Childcare, Sports courses, Public Services, English and Humanities and Communications. His colleague, Mark, who was no longer available for the interview, was responsible for ESOL and students with learning disabilities. Matthew assured me that they “both sing from the same hymn sheet, so I would have received similar feedback from him”.

It was difficult for Matthew to pinpoint the time when the college first introduced their Equal Opportunities policy, it was

“back in the mists of time probably around incorporation it was a different management scheme under County Council”.

As far as Matthew was concerned it had always been in existence and was implicit in the name of the college.

He had always had an open door policy when it came to the recruitment of students, unlike other colleges within the conurbation who tended to be quite selective. This was evidenced in the recent Strategic Area Review that criticised colleges in the conurbation for having over-provisioned at levels two and three and under-provision at Foundation and Entry level. The college had bucked the trend and although they had not necessarily called it equal opportunities they felt it embraced the spirit as they were trying to offer their curriculum to as many people as possible. According to Matthew the policy was not as important as what was happening in practice, pointing out that “sometimes you can have a policy, it’s on a piece of paper and people don’t always read it and don’t always follow it”.

Responsibility

The college had an Equal Opportunities Committee, its members drawn from across the college with representatives ranging from support teams to academic teams. The Community Sector Director and Marketing Director were serving members and the Vice Principal chaired the meetings every four to six weeks. Matthew was a representative of the academic staff and Mark represented additional learning support with a special remit for the Disability Discrimination Act and associated legislation.

The Committee had been set up before the current Vice Principal came into post although she had been at the college in another role before being appointed Vice Principal. Matthew was full of praise for the Vice Principal who “has really taken equal opportunities into another dimension for the college”. There was a very active committee and the staff had just been involved in a staff conference day that had included an interactive DVD on the Disability Discrimination Act. The decision to run this activity was taken by the Committee and not by Senior Managers and feedback suggested that it had been well received.

Sessions of this nature were ongoing and there was a very healthy staff development budget to support this training. Outside facilitators had been used and, more recently they brought in a person they had used several years running to discuss various aspects of race issues. All staff had taken two Learn Direct modules in Equal Opportunities: Harassment and Discrimination. Feedback suggested they were not well received and the process was very mechanical. There had been clear evidence that staff were not implementing the responses they had given in the modules, suggesting they had merely been jumping through the required hoops.

The college did have an Equal Opportunities Manager until recently but that role lapsed. Again, Matthew likened it to having a policy in that you could have a manager but that did not necessarily mean that anything was happening. The responsibility in this college was shared amongst the

Committee members and Matthew gave an example of how the Committee had become involved in collating a list of all the religious celebrations across the various cultures that the college ought to be celebrating.

Ownership

Matthew explained that the college no longer had a policy but had opted for a four-page Equal Opportunities statement. There was a statement in the College Charter and an Equality Statement that was in the process of being printed so that every student would have a copy during induction.

Everyone had the opportunity to input into the document, it was not just left to the members of the Committee. Matthew explained how

“staff from various strata within the college have been asked to serve on the Committee and have an input in the hope that they will feel they have ownership of the policy and can make changes, rather than having it imposed”.

He emphasised it was the Committee who drove the policy and, although there was a Senior Manager as Chair it was very much a case of listening to the views of the various representatives. Staff gave their time willingly, which Matthew attributed to the location of the college, the different ethnic mixes and the levels of social deprivation – the college was in the bottom 10% of the country. Disability was very much to the fore in terms of staff taking it on board. Matthew highlighted the fact that

“We’re not a Sixth Form College in a leafy suburb. Some of us have become frustrated by the Disability Discrimination Act as we’re obviously working in a 1960s building and access is a problem ... obviously we’re working towards overcoming that but it is not always possible to move at the pace we want to”.

Monitoring

Monitoring of disability discrimination was taking place through data collected from enrolment forms and "... is getting as good as it can be". The college was in the early stages of producing hard data and they were experiencing problems with their MIS system. They were aiming to generate data on ethnicity, gender and disability at sector level with a view to determining how this could be used at course team level.

Ethnicity was considered difficult for the college to monitor if they used the new Learning and Skills Council guidelines for breaking down the data. The Committee had devised their own broad bands on ethnicity that they had decided to use in the short term for monitoring and setting targets.

Communications

Students were not involved in formulating the Equal Opportunities policy and were not asked for feedback. It was not an agenda item at meetings although there were students representing full time courses who were invited to attend course meetings that were held six times a year. Matthew knew that his students would speak their mind and so if there were any issues linked to equal opportunities he was confident that it would be raised, either at the meetings or in the normal course of events.

Matthew was not able to comment on the extent of the unions' involvement with equal opportunities as he did not serve on the committee that met with the management. He did, however,

"know some of the characters involved with UNISON and NATFHE and I'm sure equal opportunities will have a forum there to move forward".

Commitment

Statements made in the college's advertisements aimed to actively encourage under-represented groups to apply and job specifications were constructed in such a way that they did not write out minority groups. However, the lecturers employed in Care (Matthew's curriculum area) were all female, with the exception of Matthew. He provided no explanation for this other than using the example of the changing gender scene in Sport. This section in the college had been female dominated then male and now was a mixture of both as a result of colleagues leaving. Advertisements have deliberately been left open, not requesting specialisms, in rugby or football for instance, which tended to be male dominated sports. The intention was to encourage both genders and also applicants from ethnic minorities. Matthew was aware that the culture across the college was predominantly white, particularly at senior and middle management levels, and was not a reflection of the community it served. He found it difficult to explain, other than noting the gradual change that had taken place since the college had changed from being a male dominated Science and Engineering Technology College.

Equal Opportunities was part of the college's induction programme and there was an assignment, devised by the college, that staff had the option of using. This was, however, the minimum standard that staff were expected to achieve with their students and many went beyond this as equality was an integral part of their curriculum. Students' level of awareness was tested and monitored through the Induction Survey and the staff were encouraged to continually reinforce messages of tolerance towards others.

Matthew was not aware of a Bullying and Harassment Policy in the college although they had experienced issues from time to time. He had taken his lead from the first person he remembered coming into the college and instigating the no-blame culture. This had helped him to deal with any incidences of bullying that he encountered with students and, as far as he

was aware, there had not been any problems with staff being bullied or intimidated.

There was a staff-mentoring scheme that had proved so successful the part-time member of staff employed as mentor had now been employed full-time. This person was an integral part of the college, being very supportive and pro-active. She was available for all staff, not just new employees, being willing to carry out lesson observations and provide feedback.

Disability

The college had taken a very proactive stance on disability with Mark as the focal point although Matthew was confident enough to provide advice if an issue had been flagged up. Mark headed up a team of experts that could be referred to, as it was the college's policy to meet anyone's requirements as far as was reasonably possible. The college did have one member of staff who was a wheelchair user but, as with gender and ethnicity, they were not representative of the community. Matthew's opinion was that it was very difficult to determine disability as the immediate impression was usually of a wheelchair user. He acknowledged that it could be the disability was not obvious and the person involved may not want to divulge this information. The college had now become more aware of its obligations, and also the restrictions, which inevitably meant some people would be let down.

Matthew reflected on the sound working relationships with staff, who he considered were the key strength of the college. He felt he could identify pockets of excellence where support and academic staff worked well together.

Matthew identified a bulging file on his shelf, "full of policies that are just gathering dust". He considered this to be

“typical of many colleges who have policy after policy, which is great under the old FEFC inspection regime ... but under the OFSTED regime they will fall flat, they will say “that’s fine, but now we’re going to test it”.

Matthew was confident, however, that the Equality Statement, given to every student, was a live working document. He was conscious that equality was high on the agenda of the OFSTED inspectorate, with special emphasis on the Disability Discrimination Act.

Town (Dev)

This college enrolled 1,076 full-time students in 2001 and 5,632 part-time students. There were slightly more 16-18 year old students who were full-time (53%) whereas a significant proportion of part-time students were adults (90%). Four per cent of students had a minority ethnic background compared to 3% of residents in the community.

Inspection Feedback

The college’s response to education and social inclusion was rated good in the 2003 inspection yet the framework for the promotion of equal opportunities was considered to be weak. The policy insufficiently addressed issues of race, gender and disability and was lacking in measurable commitments. Managers and governors were criticised for inadequate monitoring of the policy. The college also failed to comply with its statutory duties under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. It was recognised that the ‘Managing Diversity’ group met on a regular basis and individual support for students with disabilities was rated good.

Dev had been a lecturer at the college for almost seventeen years, initially part-time and then progressing to full-time, teaching across a range of subjects during the day and evening. Dev had been the only black lecturer employed in college in all of the seventeen years that he has taught there

and it made him question why nobody appeared to be interested in working at the college. The number of black people, and indeed the ethnic mix, had increased considerably since he came to the town in 1975 when it was possible to count not more than a dozen black people.

Ownership

Dev was actively involved in writing the first Equal Opportunities policy as a member of a committee of six that had been formed. Their remit was to review policies from other colleges and devise a suitable one for their own institution. After a year he did not receive any more contact from the committee. He thought the original idea to form this committee came from the Vice Principal in post at the time as the college lacked a policy document. Dev considered its purpose was to fill a gap, particularly as the local population had been changing and there was no policy to address that and

“we could be in a situation, find ourselves – well, not doing what we should be doing”.

He explained,

“that does not mean to say they would only consider ethnicity however, they also examined disabled access to the college”.

Dev became a committee member as:

“... they thought I was an overseas representative, something like that. They didn't call it ... say a black representative, they just had to have somebody else on the committee with another point of view”.

Dev was surprised that, after all the work that had been involved in writing the policy, it was discarded once the Vice Principal left and a new

committee was formed. The whole issue within college seemed to “die down again” and Dev heard no more for the next four to five years when it appeared to be time for a new policy. This was only to be a brief reunion as he

“no longer knows anything about the policy or who are the serving committee members; no-one has kept in touch with him as a past representative ...not at all, not at all, not at all”.

Dev was at odds to understand the reasoning behind this as he had considerable expertise, particularly on the legal side, that had been used in the past when compiling the policies. Other than a brief email from a senior manager who was looking into equal opportunities he was left totally bemused.

Commitment

When asked initially Dev considered the college did not discriminate against individuals. He explained how his first Head of Department always ensured he was informed about any training programmes that were relevant and was very supportive when one area of his work was becoming computerised: the training opportunities had always been there. Although Dev had seen many changes of line manager and Heads of School/Department he had always been well supported in his continuing professional development which he considered had not only helped him but it had also been of benefit to his students.

Responsibility

Dev did still want to be involved in equal opportunities within the college, but more out of interest than anything else. He was not anxious to become involved at committee level again but did want to know what was happening within the college with regards to equal opportunities. He felt that everyone should have an insight into the policy and related issues

although he knew of colleagues who were totally unaware of its existence in any form. In Dev's opinion the sole responsibility was with the college, being the employer, to ensure staff had ownership of the policy but he did not consider it necessitated union involvement. However, he currently felt "ignorant" about equality within the college as no information had been forthcoming and he had no idea how high it figured on the senior managers' priority list. As a result Dev now concentrated all of his efforts into his work and colleagues, although he was concerned that information and documentation on equality should be readily available.

"I'm sure somewhere, someone is doing something about it" he muses, "... because a small instance can generate a lot of ... er ...interest which ... let me stop this one".

At this point Dev asks for the tape recorder to be switched off. A discussion, that revealed sensitive and personal experiences, continued for a further half hour. It was agreed that this information would not be disclosed.

Town (Sian)

SIAN

Sian had taught as a full-time lecturer at the same college as Dev for approximately the same length of time. She had recently completed a term in office as one of the highest-ranking officials in her trade union. Sian was very well versed on equal opportunities issues and, as such, held particularly strong opinions.

Monitoring

Sian was aware of a number of documents within the college that looked at some aspect of equal opportunities but was convinced they were not implemented in any way. Despite the fact that it was a requirement, under

the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, to monitor and have action plans in place, there was no evidence that it had been undertaken. Sian was concerned that a quality audit had never taken place and neither had an equal pay review. The pay review was particularly important as this should not just focus on the differences between men and women's pay but also on the differences between the remuneration for full-time staff and part-timers. Sian's belief was that, under the conditions of the Equal Pay Act and Part-time Working Directive, part-time staff were not receiving pay that was pro rata to that of a full-time lecturer as they were paid a flat rate. The only time this disparity in pay had been challenged was when Sian took a case to court for equal pay. The employers won the case on the final point that it was based on market forces. In her opinion she did not believe the policy was "worth the paper it is written on".

Sian felt the way to change the current situation was for colleges to work with the Union in a "more meaningful way". She suggested working jointly to monitor policies and be involved in equal pay reviews. In this way action plans could be created that could deliver an equality policy that became part of the dynamics of the college and one that people would take seriously, rather than waiting for inspection.

Sian illustrated this by explaining how the college suddenly had a Dyslexia Policy two weeks before the OFSTED inspection. The problem was that it did not incorporate other aspects of equality; it was simply a Dyslexia Policy that had not looked at the wider arena, particularly the students. As far as Sian was concerned

"it simply became another piece of paper that we put in our Course Files that has no meaning".

Ownership

Sian's view was that the Unions should be involved on an equal basis when it came to writing and monitoring policies:

“Trade Unions and management ought to be working in partnership as they both have a vested interest in maintaining a good working environment”.

One of the reasons Sian felt it was crucial for the Unions to be involved was to ensure that colleges remained up-to-date with the latest regulations and act accordingly. She explained how her college should have been implementing the Sexual Orientation Regulations and Religious Belief and Non-belief regulations that came into force in December 2003. Fifteen months later and nothing had been put into place, there was no policy addressing these issues and nobody knew about the regulations as a requirement.

The reality was that, usually, most colleges were in a conflictual relationship with the Unions, a situation Sian attributed to the history of Further Education. As a result Sian believed it was difficult to work with management to try and implement policies that were meaningful and would work. To emphasise the point Sian explained how it had taken eighteen months for the latest college contract to be agreed and for the Staff Handbook to be re-negotiated and implemented. As the Staff Handbook formed the basis of the disciplinary, grievance and competence procedures Sian felt that it should have been discussed as a working partnership with each side providing suggestions and considering various options, but in fact the reverse happened and it became a state of opposition rather than negotiation.

Responsibility

The only time the Unions appeared to be involved in college activities was when there was an issue to be resolved. Sian believed there was an Equal Opportunities Committee but, as a Union, they had never been invited to participate and trying to find out who was a member of that committee was almost impossible. Minutes of meetings were not circulated to all staff

although Sian conceded they might be on the Staff Intranet, but this was not highlighted and there seemed to be little importance attached to them.

As far as membership of the committee was concerned Sian was adamant there should be members representing management, members of the Union and others who had a knowledge, understanding and vested interest in equality issues.

Commitment

Sian knew the college had an Equal Opportunities policy, but its whereabouts were not very well known and neither were its contents. There seemed to be no activity linked to equal opportunities, no monitoring of policies and no evidence of a committee. It was not driven from the top and never high on the Governor's agenda. Sian could testify to this, being a Staff Governor, and was astounded when the Governors' rated equality high in the latest questionnaire, bearing in mind there was no evidence that they were at all familiar with it. As far as they were concerned there was a policy in place and that was enough.

A member of the lecturing staff had the responsibility of implementing the Disability Discrimination Act when it was first introduced but Sian was certain that no procedures had been put into place since the amendment to the Act. She was particularly concerned that staff would be unaware that colleges now had an anticipatory duty, a point that had never been raised in staff training. Sian highlighted the Senior Managers' lack of knowledge on this issue when she mentioned to them, during the renovation of the library, that they were required to consider the anticipatory duties of the Disability Discrimination Act.

Sian went on to describe further physical restrictions within the college that made life difficult or impossible for students of staff with mobility problems. The location of the disabled toilet in Block A was inappropriate and inaccessible for wheelchair users; the wheelchair could not be reversed

into position, as there was a set of stairs in the way that led down to a Staff Room. It was also impossible for many classrooms to be accessed in this Block, again because of the stairs and no lift or ramp facilities. There had been missed opportunities for the college to consider how it addressed individual needs when new building work has been undertaken.

Women and Career Progression

In Sian's opinion there was a great deal of tokenism involved when it came to women and their career progression. There had only recently been a change in the male dominance of Senior Managers within the college and until the latest re-structuring only one of the fourteen Senior Managers was female, echoing the findings of Stott and Lawson (1997). This was generally a hostile environment, according to Sian, that was fuelled by a very macho, bullying, long-hours culture.

Sian painted a negative picture of the family friendly policies that were supposed to be in place.

“If you are to ask for it ... (flexibility) the reaction would be ... how could you possibly when other people manage ... if you want equality why aren't you doing eighteen night classes (laughter) ... because that's their view of equality ... it's not providing help and support for you to progress but quite the opposite, you should be doing the same as a man. It's not always possible for women to do that when they have a family and other commitments”.

Sian could only think of one member of staff who had an accommodating timetable and surmised that most women with a family or other dependent commitments chose to become hourly-paid part-timers. She argued that although this provided more flexibility for the individual the pay was less and there were no wages during the holidays, which was more beneficial to the college.

Sian proceeded to offer more examples designed to frustrate women in their careers and attempt to return to work. Limited crèche opening hours disadvantaged those women who taught or attended as students in the evenings; it was only possible to use this facility during the day. As Sian believed most caring still rested with women she considered barriers such as these merely provided a further impediment to career progression. Men, however, were not similarly victimised, it seemed to be on a more ad hoc basis. Sian quoted cases where it had been difficult for some men to take time out to care for their partners and yet for others it had been relatively easy. "It depends how you fit in".

Sian acknowledged that it was only when an OFSTED inspection loomed that any documentation was prepared. This was clearly too little, too late, as the last Inspection identified issues to be addressed; the second time that an Inspection had highlighted equality as a weakness. Although the paperwork was in place there was minimal evidence of implementation and monitoring.

Analysis of Interviews

Communications

The majority of employees and students would not be aware of the existence of a policy in one college compared to another college where they had a detailed policy that was considered to be a live working document by the Senior Manager who had responsibility for monitoring the process. However, this was not a view subscribed to by another interviewee from the same college who admitted to knowing little about a policy or its relevance to teaching but assumed one would be in place. The Senior Manager in this college was actively driving the college's mission to achieve equality of opportunity, which possibly explained their perception on commitment to equality. This college involved its Student Union Manager in the Equal Opportunities committee meeting that reviewed the policy annually. However, it was felt that equal opportunities was implicit in

many of the staff policies and therefore many staff may not have realised its existence.

Commitment

Those who worked closely at Senior Management level believed the Senior Management Team was totally committed to equal opportunities and it was not just a token gesture. This differed from the views of those interviewed who were not as close to the policy and its implementation.

One college did have a policy and action plan in place but the policy did not meet the requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 or the Special Education Needs and Disability Act 2001. Similarly another college did not have a Bullying or Harassment policy despite having experienced issues in these areas. A further college no longer had a policy but preferred a four-page Equal Opportunities statement that was given to every student.

Respondents were aware of a number of documents but remained unconvinced that they were implemented, monitored or actioned. There was this vague impression that there was a policy somewhere but its whereabouts and content were unknown. This view also extended to college governors who were only concerned that a policy should be in place with the results of a questionnaire indicating that they were not familiar with its contents. The overall view was that they were not worth the paper they were written on with examples given of policies created immediately prior to Inspection to meet the requirements of the Inspection framework.

Every effort was made to ensure the needs of disabled people were being met and lack of expertise was not a reason for excluding anyone. However, insufficient resources were identified as creating a possible situation where students could not access a course.

Monitoring

One college did not monitor equal opportunities at all and yet the need for EFL courses had been identified as a weakness. There was no access or, at best, poor access to some areas of this college and similar criticism came from another interviewee. Access for people with disabilities was criticised at another college, as was lack of signposting suitable for the visually impaired. Another interviewee noted an opportunity had been missed to include user-friendly directional signs for students with learning difficulties when the building was re-designed. Evidence also identified specialist access only being installed to a library area when legislation forced the issue. This same college had further physical restrictions to teaching areas and toilet facilities that created particular difficulties for students with mobility problems.

On the positive side vocational training materials had been bought in and equal opportunities was an integral part of the tutorial system in most areas of one college. Provision was according to demand rather than being pre-empted with one interviewee reporting Braille menus had been produced, adjustable tables provided and staff employed who could sign. Another interviewee commented on the daily availability of support staff for disabled students.

There was evidence that colleges aimed to allocate their budget to ensure sufficient resources were available to try and be all-inclusive but those responsible acknowledged that realistically there was never enough to meet everyone's requirements. The colleges who had smaller sites seemed to have fewer problems as they found it easier to monitor provision more closely.

There were concerns in one college where the framework for Equal Opportunities was considered to be weak although the response to social inclusion had been good. The policy, it seems, failed to address issues of race, gender, and disability and lacked measurable commitment.

Managers and governors were criticised for inadequate monitoring of the policy.

Two specialist interest groups, ethnicity and disability were being trialled by one college with a high staff attendance at meetings but the only student interest was through the Student Union representatives. Access and rural isolation had also been addressed as an issue and that college was monitoring this through target setting.

In most instances monitoring was limited and had little or no use. Human Resources Managers monitored to provide data for Investors In People and although information was collected from student application forms and staff interviews it was not used and no reports were produced from it. One college considered the data collected was "as good as it gets" although they acknowledged problems with their MIS system. Criticism was levelled at another college for inadequate monitoring of the policy. Yet another college had no evidence of activity linked to equal opportunities, no monitoring apparent and no sign of a committee in operation. This was a particular concern as, at the time of the interviews colleges should have been implementing the most recent regulations that came into effect fifteen months previously.

The more pro-active colleges wrote equal opportunities into person specifications and job descriptions and ensured questions on equality were asked at some stage in an interview, irrespective of the level of job application.

In one college it was recognised as a fixed item on the agenda at meetings of all levels, ie Academic Board, College Management, Health and Safety Committee and School meetings. Each Unit or School established termly targets, monitored the action and produced a report so that issues could be followed up. Individuals who were not involved in this process considered equal opportunities to be a fixed agenda item for all meetings but nothing was discussed in much depth. Another Equal Opportunities Committee

met twice a term but was criticised for underdeveloped action plans and targets. Where there was an Equal Opportunities Committee this was seen to be a forum to review the current situation.

Ownership

Students did not have the opportunity to comment on the Equal Opportunities policy other than through the Student Union. Similarly staff were not involved in setting up the policy, this evolved through a sub-committee of people who were representative of the college and knew how to write a policy. The belief was that equal opportunities would only be of value and recognised successfully if it came from the Senior Managers. Any serious breach of equal opportunities was referred to a higher authority, which was why it was considered necessary to have systems in place at senior level. One college had already taken disciplinary action and dismissed an employee.

Guidelines for policy writing and good practice suggested the inclusion of Union Representatives when creating policies. Unfortunately only one person believed the Union should be involved in joint decision making to create policies that could be taken seriously. In their opinion it was crucial for the Unions to be involved to ensure colleges remained up-to-date with the latest regulation and act accordingly. This would seem to be advice worth following in the light of gaps in knowledge and implementation discussed earlier.

Reasons put forward for this lack of involvement were the historical conflictual relationships with colleges making it difficult for the Unions to work with management to try and implement policies. The majority view was that it was not necessary for Union involvement although one interviewee did point out that they had a forum where their Union could raise issues.

Responsibility

Responsibility varied although the general consensus of opinion was that it should be a committee preferably drawn from Senior Managers. Often that responsibility was shared, as in one college, where the Chief Executive worked with the Equal Opportunities Committee and disseminated information to the Senior Services Manager responsible for students. It was suggested that the information could be diverted anywhere but their policy was more for students than staff. However, in another college the students were not involved at any point and were not asked for feedback although the same interviewee claimed that everyone had the opportunity to input into the document, not just the Committee. Another variation was a Committee that was formed from representatives drawn from every department in the college. Although members did not always attend these meetings they were required to submit a report each term that monitored targets. One college extended the representation to include support teams as well as academic teams who met twice a term with the meeting chaired by the Vice Principal.

One college did have an Equal Opportunities Manager but that role lapsed and it was not seen as being necessary. The view taken was that you could have a manager, in the same way that you could have a policy, but that did not guarantee any action. Again it was suggested that it was preferable for the responsibility to be shared amongst the Committee Members although one college was very casual in its approach. It did not include Equal Opportunities as an agenda item, being confident that any issues would automatically be raised by either staff or students.

Interviewees who did not want to be involved in any committees or planning felt they had nothing to offer and generally avoided this type of meeting or having to write reports. Although they did not know who was responsible for Equal Opportunities or who took the lead they thought it should be the responsibility of the Senior Managers who should then disseminate the information and monitor the policy as they were in a

position to make any changes quickly. One interviewee was not even sure that a Committee existed, as there was little evidence in the way of Minutes of meetings or open invitations to join a Committee.

There seemed to be a lack of communication within colleges as another lecturer was interested in the work of the Committee but did not want to be involved, again, seeing it more as the responsibility of the college as the employer to ensure staff had ownership. This respondent did not know what was happening in relation to equality policy in the college or how highly it was prioritised by the senior managers. It appeared that, after an initial surge of interest when Acts were amended or introduced, there was a lack of continued commitment.

Views on policies in practice

Women were specifically targeted in recruitment campaigns in an attempt to break the traditional stereotypes without any real impact noted in one college. Women were still identified as being disadvantaged in terms of career progression and one interviewee highlighted her challenge for equal pay that definitely impeded the development of her role. A lack of appropriately timed crèche facilities and inflexible timetables were also cited as hurdles women had to overcome in order to progress up the career ladder. The view was that there was still a male dominance at Senior Management level and family friendly policies did not operate in reality.

The general impression given at the start of the interviews was that colleges did not discriminate. Examples were given of advertisements that actively encouraged under-represented groups and job descriptions being structured so that minority groups were not written out, but that had not been successful in changing the gender bias in courses or occupations. The Equal Opportunities Committee in one college had on-going staff training activities but it was clear that staff were not implementing what had been learnt. A possible answer came from another college where those,

not at Senior Manger level, had been disappointed when workshops had not been forthcoming. These had been promised after the initial emphasis on training in equal opportunities and the importance attached to adhering to the policy. Although the view was that staff training should not be imposed it was expected the impetus would be maintained.

CHAPTER 6

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

“To look for perfection results either in killing the research, or the researcher. In writing up one begins to inhabit one’s text, exploring its corners, removing its cul-de-sacs and unwanted implications. A project is never ending. A piece of writing is never finished. It just stops. It has to stop sometime. New interests and demands arise creating the occasions for new journeys, new rationales, new messages”. (Schostak, 2002, p231)

Schostak epitomised succinctly my research journey speaking volumes about the feelings I had for my work and me. There have been cul-de-sacs that have provided compelling, yet fascinating and absorbing distractions testing one’s ability to remain focused. The research question left this writing open with other avenues to be explored within the context of further education. However, as Schostak rightly said “it has to stop sometime” [and now was the time to draw a line under this particular piece of research and look for] “new journeys”.

Research Questions

This research set out to question claims made by Colleges of Further Education that they are committed to equal opportunities. There was little evidence of research having been undertaken in the Further Education sector in the field of Equal Opportunities and this investigation was intended to fill that gap. From the dearth of evidence available it seemed that independent research was not part of the Further Education culture. This investigation addressed the balance, in part, particularly in the field of research that focused on equal opportunities, women and disability.

The research investigated equal opportunities practice compared to the stated intent in Equal Opportunities Policies in Colleges of Further Education. The focus was specifically on women and disability and how equal opportunities, relevant to these groups, was perceived within those organisations. Sub-questions aimed to identify;

- Whether there were clear and detailed policies in place.
- What relationship existed between policy and provision in the view of members of individual colleges.
- What monitoring mechanisms were in place in relation to policy and provision.
- The effectiveness of these mechanisms in maintaining equal opportunities' provision.

Questions relating to:

- Ownership and responsibility for the policies
- Commitment to the stated intent

arose through the investigation into monitoring of the policies and the relationship between policy and provision.

Equal Opportunities Overview

I advocated that most, if not all colleges of further education would have a policy and/or policy statement as a result of the requirements of OFSTED inspections. Advertisements of vacancies may have indicated the main elements and often guaranteed an interview. There was usually positive action to recruit disabled people. The term embraced both learners and employees but was often more fitting to the employee.

The statement usually suggested that the organisation provided open access to services and facilities allowing full participation and where everyone would be treated equally based on individual needs. The aim

was to allow an individual to reach their full potential and was seen as a constitutional right.

An Equal Opportunities policy was often more relevant to employers and employees and incumbent employment legislation and recruitment procedures that involved Job Descriptions, Person Specifications, Advertising, Application Forms, monitoring, short listing, interviewing and appointing. The process should have ensured everyone had the same opportunity that had been created by the removal of barriers to ensure a level playing field in the job market.

Equal Opportunities equated to fair play for all as I saw it. There should have been no unfair privileges for anyone, either staff or students, in getting jobs or passing examinations. Promotion should have been purely on ability and potential irrespective of whether individuals came from minority groups. Individuals should not have been unfairly penalised because they were from a minority or different majority group. Equal Opportunities should have been a commitment to give people the chance to make the most of their skills and talents whether they were students or employees.

According to Malik (1998, pp3-4) equality was about

- “valuing a diverse, multicultural, multilingual and multiracial society
- valuing individuals’ genders, disabilities, cultures, religions, sexuality and lifestyles
- offering and providing equal chances to everyone in society, irrespective of variation within the population
- maintaining and upholding each individual’s human right not to be discriminated against and denied their equality

- actively opposing negative discrimination and encouraging a positive world view of people valuing diversity as equal
- having an equitable society, with everyone receiving equal treatment under the law
- equality is a right, not a privilege”.

Equal opportunities should ensure that no person received less favourable treatment or was discriminated against in any way unless it was on their ability, experience and potential to do a particular job or study on a particular course. It was not about treating everyone equally or as being the same. By our very nature we cannot be the same. It was possible, however, for colleges to create an equal opportunities environment by making sure everyone had the same opportunity to learn, by removing barriers to learning. It was the organisation, its design and facilities, or lack of them, and the people within that organisation that could be the obstacle to learning, not a specific characteristic of that person.

Findings

I began with the sub-questions because they were relatively concrete and then went on to consider the main question in more detail. Evidence came from an analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from small-scale empirical research in Phase One, a larger-scale survey using questionnaires in Phase Two and in-depth interviews in Phase Three.

The main findings to the research questions were:

Are there clear and detailed policies in place?

Colleges were reluctant to provide samples of policies for analysis and where these were made available it was clear that there were wide

variations in the content and less than three quarters were written for both staff and students.

The high percentage of respondents (94%) to the questionnaires indicated they were aware of a policy although fewer knew what it meant. This evidence conflicted with the views of those who participated in the interviews where it was indicated that the majority of people in college would not be aware of its existence or only assumed that a policy was in place compared to those who knew that there were no active policies. The only interviewees who gave a firm response to this question were those who were actively involved in driving the policy.

Provision in place

There was criticism of colleges' provision for disabled people across a high percentage of the questionnaires submitted and in the majority of interviews. Although there were pockets of good practice and adequate provision it was often no more than this, adequate. In some cases facilities had only been provided in response to Government legislation or according to the needs of individuals. Opportunities were missed to incorporate improvements in the redesign of buildings with older buildings clearly posing a problem for some providers.

The interviews revealed colleges were offering courses that were not restricted to any particular gender, which answered the question raised in the literature review. Cockburn's (1985, p225) predictions for a steady increase in women's participation in non-traditional areas was not realised and according to the results of this research there was still limited interest from either gender to apply for these courses despite the opportunities available. Cockburn (1985, p239) also intimated that women-only learning environments were ideal as male ownership of training dictated power and control, inhibiting women's learning. The opinions of female staff and students in this research contradicted that view, with a significant majority

being female students who did not want their tutor to be of the same gender.

Flexible timetables created even greater opportunities for access to education although it was the students rather than the staff who benefited from this flexibility. Students again had greater access to childcare facilities according to the responses with a significant number of female members of staff being dissatisfied with the provision available. This supported the claims made in the report by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (2005) that under-representation suggested individuals had been denied support in achieving career progression.

There was a general agreement from staff and female students that women were considered less favourably in the job market if family life had taken precedence over career progression but seventy four per cent of male students disagreed with this view and also with the suggestion that women could only gain low status jobs after a career break. The Government had introduced paternity leave in an attempt to highlight the benefits of men as carers in the family and offered similar rights as women but the feedback from this research indicated men were not keen to take advantage of this provision.

Views on the relationship between policy and provision in practice

There was a definite difference of opinion as to whether disabled people were successfully integrated into college. A higher proportion of female students and male staff agreed compared to male students and female staff and it was the male students who considered disability isolated individuals. However, an overwhelming majority of all groups felt that their college offered practical support to disabled students and employees. Morris (1991) challenged non-disabled people's perceptions of disabled people and their particular needs but her views were not research-based and this investigation filled that gap to a certain extent. According to the evidence from the questionnaires staff were almost equally divided in their

opinions about disability isolating individuals. It was the students, however, who had clearly differing opinions with the majority of female students considering disability did not isolate individuals and yet the majority of male students held a contrary view.

Clement and Spinks (1996) claimed discrimination against minority groups was an every day occurrence and eliminating this unfairness was what equality was about. Whilst there was no evidence from this research into further education that discrimination was happening on a daily basis it was clear from the questionnaires and interviews that discrimination still existed.

Stott and Lawson's (1997) research revealed women Principals considered everyone should have access to education. This was in keeping with the view of Tomlinson (1996) in his report *Inclusive Learning*. However, this would seem to be the ideal world as the reality, according to this research into further education, highlighted many barriers to accessing education such as inflexible timetables, lack of suitably timed crèche facilities and one of the main reasons being lack of finance.

All of the interviews started on a positive note with interviewees painting a positive picture of equality in practice within their own organisation. Examples were given of special interest groups being trialled, although interest was mainly from staff. Other examples of good practice were advertisements that actively encouraged under-represented groups or targeted women and job descriptions being written to encompass all. Unfortunately there has been little success in changing the gender bias in courses or occupations. Other colleges made enthusiastic noises and introduced training sessions for staff with promises of further activities that were never followed through.

As noted earlier crèche facilities for women members of staff were not always appropriate. No provision was made for female lecturers or students who attended evening classes and did not have access to

childcare at that time of day. Timetables that did not allow for taking children to school, collecting them at the end of the day and caring for them in the school holidays were also problems that were not recognised.

Pringle's (1989) view was that women were considered less favourably in the job market because they had chosen marriage and parenthood instead of career progression. Whilst the interviewees supported this opinion and the respondents to the questionnaires reinforced this to some degree there was also evidence in the comments from these respondents that ageism was now seen as a barrier to progression. Pringle (1989) also considered there was an assumption that women who took a career break returned to more menial work. However that was not a notion supported by the majority of those responding to the questionnaire.

Stott and Lawson (1997) claimed women were at a disadvantage in further education as the sector was still considered to be a male dominated environment with few women in senior management. This was also the belief of those interviewed and from comments made on the questionnaires. Again these comments indicated women were more likely to accept lower paid jobs and roles as they tended to fit in with domestic responsibilities.

A report for HMSO (1994), *The Rising Tide*, found that women who trained for traditional male dominated occupations were not successful in the employment stakes. Colleges have been actively promoting non-gendered courses and employment according to the evidence from the interviews but without any measurable success. The reason for this could have been in the responses from the questionnaires where most staff and an overwhelming number of students would not even consider applying for such courses that would lead to this type of employment.

The interviews revealed incidences of personal discrimination that were not resolved satisfactorily; highlighting the fact that support at an informal level was not generally available. Although one college was trialling special

interest groups this was not the norm and the usual channels for staff were through Personnel whilst for students this was dependent on the specific help needed.

Monitoring mechanisms in place

More staff than students were interested in being involved in monitoring their policy although the number of those who were keen was only just over half. Evidence indicated that it was the male members of staff and female students who were most interested but comments suggested staff were already overloaded with work and saw this as an additional burden.

Monitoring was regarded as having limited or even no use and where there was criticism of procedures little appeared to be happening to change the situation. Data was collected as part of the monitoring process but there was minimal evidence that it was analysed and acted upon. The only colleges that indicate any monitoring or action were those who included equal opportunities as a fixed item agenda, although once again criticism was levelled at those whose action plans and targets were underdeveloped.

Effectiveness of mechanisms

Feedback from staff suggested students should take some responsibility for commenting on the effectiveness of their policy although this was not a view shared by the students. Interestingly though there were more male staff and male students compared to females who express any interest in being involved in the structuring and monitoring of the policy.

Evidence from the interviews and evaluation of the policies indicated a variety of people had responsibility for implementing and monitoring their policy. In the majority of cases the responsibility was shared, often through a committee with a Senior Manager having overall accountability. Unfortunately the efficiency of these committees was criticised with

complaints ranging from information not being disseminated to a complete unawareness of the existence of a committee.

The Equal Opportunities Commission's Code of Practice (1987, p8) and Cockburn (1989, p223) both recommended working in partnership with trade unions to take the equal opportunities agenda beyond the needs of management. The Equal Opportunities Commission (1987) stressed further the importance of this involvement in order to ensure genuine equality of opportunity was implemented and that organisations complied with current legislation. Cockburn (1989) suggested this was a way of facilitating the role of the Equal Opportunities Officer and yet this role appeared to be non-existent. One college indicated they did have an Equal Opportunities Officer but no-one had that responsibility at the time of the interview and it was not seen as being a particularly significant loss. Only one person in the interviews attached any great importance to including Union representatives in developing and monitoring policies.

The main research questioned the claims made by Colleges of Further Education that they were committed to equal opportunities, in particular, with reference to women and disability and how equality and opportunity were perceived within those organisations.

I arrived at this question primarily as a result of personal experiences that often led me to reflect on the concept of equal opportunities and whether my views and opinions were representative of the majority. My inherent desire not to conform left me to consider the wider implications and issues surrounding equal opportunities. The basic question that I start with was refined and developed as a result of the literature review and my observations from working as a lecturer. According to Schostak (2002, p231):

“A project develops around the curiosities, needs and interests of the individual. It is unique to the extent that it derives from the

existential uniqueness of the individual. It transcends uniqueness and enters dialogue to the extent that it seeks out the viewpoint of others”.

My Research Journey

I had been looking for perfection when crafting this piece of work but realised perfection was not what research was all about, thanks to Schostak (2002). I was convinced the methodology I chose at the time of starting this research was appropriate and I knew that it had provided me with the breadth of information that would not have been forthcoming had I chosen a different route. I became deeply engrossed and involved with the interview situations and these did reveal more personal accounts of equal opportunities and enable a richer seam of information to be uncovered. Some information was too sensitive to be revealed and could not be included in the evaluation to protect the anonymity of the interviewee. Interviewing could be an approach to be considered as the main source of information in further research.

A lesson learned when writing up the interviews was to key in the pseudonym at the time of writing to ensure anonymity was preserved. I found it very time consuming to edit the document afterwards and, despite using red lettering and the ‘search and replace’ facility there were still some original names overlooked. I experienced a great deal of resistance on the part of college managers and those with power to grant access to research sites within their organisation. Reflecting on my research journey I considered the difficulties I had encountered and the reluctance of individuals to participate. If I had stumbled on Walford (2001) much earlier in my research I would probably have heeded the advice given and revisited my approach by considering how I could “sell myself and my research more effectively”. Walford (2001, p35/36) argued that:

“researchers have much to learn from salespeople and that obtaining access to research sites is much like selling a product or service”.

He suggested taking advice from the numerous sales and marketing books that were available in order to “think about the access process”. He emphasised the importance of this crucial stage in the research process claiming

“we have to be clear how our research can be sold to those who can grant us access and clarify what the potential benefits are to them ...people don’t buy products, they buy benefits ...we need to be clear about what benefits researchers, the process of research and the research findings themselves can offer”.

Funding implications

Colleges may have had detailed policies in place and strategies to widen participation and be more socially inclusive but these could not be implemented without sufficient funding. All the work that has been done over the years in further education colleges to improve and extend provision could be eradicated as a result of cutbacks in funding from the Learning and Skills Council. Colleges were addressing this issue by cutting back on adult education classes and those that did not contribute to the local and national economy.

The fact that I have had to justify and explain the focus of my research possibly provided an explanation as to why I had been receiving some replies singly. Initially I thought that I had only received one reply from a particular college but, when tracking the coded numbers, it transpired that there had been several replies from the same college but the respondents seemed to prefer to mail their own replies direct and avoid the gatekeeper.

A telephone call from a college in the West Country highlighted one of the reasons for a lack of response from some colleges. Sarah explained that budgeting was in progress and they could not complete the questionnaires by the stated deadline date. That was not to say they were not interested and she asked if the return date could be extended to the beginning of the next Academic Year.

Another telephone call from an Assistant Principal at a small college in Yorkshire had a similar message. He explained that the questionnaires had not been distributed as his staff were busy at that time of year but he had taken on board my comments. He had, however, taken the questionnaires from his Personnel Officer and used the questions and categories as the focal point of his working group on Equal Opportunities that he chaired. He said that he found the points raised particularly useful and wanted to “pick my brains”. A discussion followed about implementing and monitoring policies. It emerged that they, like us, were part of the Small Colleges Association Forum and at this point we considered how we could draw comparisons in relation to Equal Opportunities. Positive discrimination was singled out in terms of ageism and ethnicity and the problems of wording advertising correctly were discussed. Their college’s working group had considered equal opportunities from the point of the curriculum and widening opportunities and decided to separate the Personnel role from the curriculum. However, their Personnel Officer sat on the working group and it was only as a result of an impending meeting that she realised she had not distributed the questionnaires for this research. They were taken to the meeting and subsequently used, but not in the way I had intended.

Their approach to equal opportunities was to look at standards and targets. They had used the FEDA model, as cited in this research, and favoured this approach where the policy statement had target indicators and a column indicating ‘by when’. The conversation concluded with an observation that as we both belonged to the Small Colleges Association

networking should be encouraged and it would be valuable if teams could be set up to share policies and best practice.

And so what

Colleges surveyed were generally following accepted guidelines when formulating policies and they had made steps forward with access but in reality there was limited evidence that they were live working documents. The problem, I concluded, was in the monitoring process, or lack of one in the majority of cases, as there was no clear link between the stated intent and the practical aspects of their policies. Monitoring was the key to providing equal opportunities in line with policy intentions and I suggest this was the weak link that was creating the difference in perceptions between those who created the policies and those at the receiving end. Monitoring was an ideal opportunity to canvass opinion and communicate with both staff and students. There was evidence of finely crafted policies that adhered to government legislation but little evidence that the views and opinions of the majority had been canvassed. On the other hand, were staff and students in general concerned about the policies? No, certainly not the majority, according to this research. I suggest the only time that many would want to become involved was when there was a perceived infringement of their rights.

I would suggest that we are all different and that is the only thing we have in common. Equality suggests sameness and yet, by definition, we are individuals with individual characteristics and belonging to a combination of multiple different sets. Equal Opportunities policies talked about these different sets rather than individuals within the sets but it was provision that was in place and monitoring of that provision that determined whether the needs of individuals within each organisation were being met. Colleges could identify whether needs were being met if they consulted with staff and students, particularly when devising policies initially. Equality did not necessarily mean the same provision for everyone but I believe that everyone can enjoy success if they have access to learning materials and

a learning environment appropriate to their individual needs. The challenge for colleges working within the confines of finite budgets is how far they can provide for equality of outcomes in terms of individuals aspiring to achieve their potential.

And so what if there is no evidence of a policy or evidence of good practice?

It was likely that all colleges would now have some sort of policy document in response to the requirements of the current OFSTED system. The value of that policy could become even more important as justification that they were an Equal Opportunities College from September 2005 when OFSTED scales down its rigorous approach. The policy would have to be robust in its demonstration of commitment with SMART objectives to be convincing: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed. The onus and responsibility for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of colleges would lie with the individual organisation. The current inspection process will usually last for two days compared to a minimum of a week with only two or three inspectors compared to a whole force of intimidating individuals. The focus will be on colleges' documentation and policies and the onus will be on the colleges' Principals and Senior Management teams to prove their policies were working in practice.

I would argue that documentation was important as it sets down the framework for the agenda of the organisation. Policies do matter but it is impossible to write a policy that caters for the needs of every individual. Actions are more important and I would suggest that it is the responsibility of every individual to ensure equal opportunities is practised in their organisation. It is the perceptions of these actions that will be reflected in people's judgements of whether their individual needs are being met. The problem for colleges is whether they can afford to meet the needs of everyone in the community. In reality funding issues have led to radical cut backs in adult education and only courses that contribute to the economy are being included in the curriculum. The Learning and Skills Council

assured colleges that there would be sufficient funding to implement *Success for All* and meet government priorities but allocations for the coming academic year are well below the five per cent increase that is promised. The recommendation is that colleges cut all “non-essential learning” but some are resorting to even further, tougher action and being forced to implement redundancies.

It is not only funding issues that are denying individuals access to learning. Almost fifty colleges are still blatantly flouting the law relating to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 according to a NATFHE spokesperson (TES 2005), ten years after this legislation was introduced. It remains to be seen how many will comply with the further requirements of the Act that came into force in 2006 when colleges were expected to include the views and opinions of disabled students into any developments and improvements in their organisation. Lack of funding will not be a plausible excuse this time as Government funding will be available. However, the results of these latest aspects are not to be included in this research, as there has to be a line drawn under the process at some point. That does not infer that the findings discussed here are final. I prefer to agree with Schostak’s (2002, p231) view that:

“The project, being framed by epistemologies, methodologies, politics, ethics and all other ics, ists, isms, and ologies leaves a trail of writings, like the tracks and droppings of hunted creatures. Of course, there is no final answer”.

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

Office use only

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN FURTHER EDUCATION

This questionnaire has been devised as part of a research project into the impact that Equal Opportunities policies have had on Colleges of Further Education, particularly in relation to gender and disability but also with respect to specific groups.

I know that you are all busy, however, it should take no longer than 10 minutes of your time. I am keen to be able to give a platform for the views of staff and students actually working in Further Education. Any additional comments you wish to make would be gratefully received.

Please be assured that all responses are anonymised and will be treated in the strictest confidence.

Please note that this questionnaire is for research purposes only. However, if you feel that you need help on any issues that have been raised then please contact me.

Thank you for sparing your valuable time to complete this questionnaire. If you would like to be kept in touch with the research as it progresses and/or receive a copy of the research report please let me know.

I would be very grateful if you could return your responses to your tutor before the end of the lesson. Thank you.

If you wish to discuss your responses, in confidence, in greater detail please feel free to contact me on email suesorrell@grantham.ac.uk; telephone 01476 400280; or fax: 01476 400291. THANK YOU

d) Marital status (Please indicate):

e) Do you consider yourself to have a disability? Yes No

Any additional comments:

f) Do you consider yourself to have a learning difficulty? Yes No

Any additional comments:

2 RECRUITMENT AND PROGRESSION

Please tick the box that most closely represents your own view.

AGREE STRONGLY	TEND TO AGREE	TEND TO DISAGREE	DISAGREE STRONGLY
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a) I was given fair advice to help me choose the right course/career.

b) I am satisfied with the way I was enrolled/interviewed.

c) The induction programme helped me to settle into work quickly

d) The induction programme enabled me to understand my rights and responsibilities.

e) I have been given advice to help me be aware of the opportunities open to me in the future.

Any additional comments:

3 *Please circle all that apply:*

a) Do you consider it has ever been difficult for you to enrol on to a course because of the following reasons;

age, class, colour, culture, dietary needs, disability, ethnicity, finance, gender, learning needs, linguistic background, marital status, personal needs, race, religion, sexual orientation?

b) If relevant, do you consider it has ever been difficult for you to take promotion at work for any of the following reasons;

age, class, colour, culture, dietary needs, disability, ethnicity, gender, learning needs, linguistic background, marital status, personal needs, race, religion, sexual orientation?

Any additional comments

4 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES POLICIES

AGREE STRONGLY	TEND TO AGREE	TEND TO DISAGREE	DISAGREE STRONGLY
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a) I know my College has an Equal Opportunities policy.

b) I understand what the policy says.

c) I think I should have a say in what the policy states.

d) I consider it important to be involved regularly in checking the usefulness of the policy.

e) I am aware of other groups or individuals in College who can give me support and advice if I need it.

Any additional comments

5 GENDER

AGREE STRONGLY	TEND TO AGREE	TEND TO DISAGREE	DISAGREE STRONGLY
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a) The course description suggested the class was suitable for males or females

b) This college has some classes advertised as being only for women, or only for men

c) I expected my class tutor would be the same gender as me.

d) I would prefer my class tutor to be the same gender as me

e) I consider students on my course are enrolled by gender

f) I would consider applying for a course traditionally attracting the opposite gender

g) The college offers a flexible working timetable if and when I need it.

h) I have access to childcare provision within college which meets my needs.

i) Women can only gain employment in low status jobs after a career break.

j) Men can only gain employment in low status jobs after a career break.

k) Women are considered less favourably in the job market if they have placed family life before career progression.

l) Men are keen to take advantage of paternity leave.

m) Colleges tend to make it easy to return to education and training.

Any additional comments

6 DISABILITY

AGREE STRONGLY	TEND TO AGREE	TEND TO DISAGREE	DISAGREE STRONGLY
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a) Disabled people in college are always integrated into other social groups

b) Disability isolates individuals

c) Disabled people lack self confidence.

d) Non-disabled people in College react negatively to those with a disability

e) The college is able to offer practical support to any student or employee who is disabled.

f) The college is suitably planned and equipped to accommodate disabled staff and students.

g) I know which support agencies and personnel I can contact if I have an issue or question related to disability.

Any additional comments

THANK YOU

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