

Equality and diversity for academics

Promoting good relations

For many students, higher education provides an environment far richer in diversity than any they have encountered before. Studying with people whose life experiences, values and opinions may be radically different gives students the chance to explore ideas, develop identity and connect with others, but there is also a risk of disharmony, polarisation or conflict.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have a legal duty to foster good relations between different groups, ensuring that students are encouraged to express, encounter, negotiate and enjoy difference in a climate of respect and safety. Academic staff have a critical role to play in promoting good relations in the design and delivery of courses, and in the relationships they build with students.

Academic freedom and good relations

HEIs have a special role in promoting and encouraging vigorous debate, free speech and freedom of enquiry within the law. Protection of academic freedom recognises that academic staff have the right to explore unpopular or controversial subjects and opinions in their teaching even though students may find them challenging or unpalatable. Academic staff must, however, ensure that their teaching delivery does not discriminate against or cause harassment of any student on the grounds of their age, disability, ethnicity, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity status, religion and belief, sex, or sexual orientation.

In a lecture on political propaganda a lecturer uses images produced by the Third Reich to illustrate the discussion. Subsequently in tutorial groups students are asked to list all the stereotypes of Jewish people that they can think of and discuss how visible they are in the media. Afterwards a Jewish student complains about both the use of the images and the tutorial discussion which she says made her, as the only Jewish person in the group, feel isolated and vulnerable.

The use of Nazi propaganda to illustrate the lecture, although uncomfortable for some students, is appropriate. The lecturer might choose in future to introduce the subject by recognising that the content might be problematic and by discussing her reasons for using it. By focusing the tutorial discussion only on stereotypes of Jewish people the lecturer has created a situation where one student has a different (and negative) experience from the others based on her ethnicity and religion. Widening the discussion to look at stereotypes of other groups, perhaps including some that everyone can connect with (students for example) would make it less likely that any one student would feel harassed.

ECU's revised guidance provides further examples of effective practice in managing good relations issues.

ECU (2013) *Promoting good relations on campus: a guide for higher and further education*.

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/promoting-good-relations-he-and-fe

Checklist

Get to know your students

Most incidents that destabilise good relations can be easily dealt with if addressed in the early stages. Taking the time to develop individual relationships with your students will enable you to identify potential problems at the outset and will also increase the likelihood of students coming to you for assistance early on.

Understand institutional processes

Most institutions will have developed procedures for dealing with incidents of harassment and bullying, and welfare services to support students affected. Make sure that you are aware of these so that you can point students in the right direction should they need to make use of them.

Make your expectations about behaviour clear

When you are getting to know a new cohort of students take the opportunity to discuss the standards of behaviour that will ensure freedom of expression within a respectful, inclusive and collaborative environment. Students are more likely to feel confident to express their views and challenge inappropriate behaviour if they have had the chance to contribute towards an agreed standard.

Encourage working across difference

Students can be reluctant to work with people who are different from themselves, particularly across perceived language or cultural barriers. Use group work to encourage students out of their comfort zones. Consider allocating groups rather than allowing self-selection, including the collection of diverse viewpoints in group activity, asking students to reflect on how they work with difference in their personal learning journals, or making reflections on the impact diversity has on the group process part of the assessment requirements.

Challenge stereotypes and assumptions

Be alert for language and ideas that may make particular individuals feel isolated or pigeon-holed and actively challenge them. Encourage students to consider the impact of their opinions on other people and develop the skills to combine freedom of expression with respect.

Identify opportunities within your course to reflect diversity

This could be in the external speakers you invite, the field trips you organise, the study materials you use or the assignments you set.

Further information on various aspects of good relations can be found at:

- = www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/FreedomOfSpeechOnCampusRightsAndResponsibilitiesInUKUniversities.pdf
- = www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/promoting-good-campus-relations-dealing-with-hate

This is part of a series of factsheets for academics
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/e-and-d-for-academics-factsheets



Equality Challenge Unit

© **Equality Challenge Unit 2013**

ECU's publications are produced free of charge to the UK HE sector and also for colleges in Scotland. Information can be reproduced as long as it is accurate, the source is identified and it will not be used for profit. Alternative formats are available: E pubs@ecu.ac.uk

Company limited by guarantee. Registered in England and Wales, No. 05689975.
Charity no. 1114417 (England and Wales) and SC043601 (Scotland).