

Promoting equal opportunity through educational institutions and authorities

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Introduction

One of the fundamental rights that citizens of any civil society should enjoy is equality of opportunity. Law defines how a citizen is considered to be equal. But it is also important how a society or community someone lives in actually treat him. Equal opportunity cannot be compromised over inequality, discrimination, racism or any other social ill. Citizens irrespective of colour, creed or caste living in the same society or community under the same law cannot come under different sets of rules and regulations. If someone is ill-treated in terms of law or in terms of how he was treated by the community it then affects every aspects of his social, cultural, political and economic life. The consequences of inequality for racial harmony and integration are huge which means disharmony and discord could take place.

In the interest of all in the community it is important that this fundamental right is in place and citizens do not suffer due to error of law, racism, or any other reason that is not covered by the law. There are signs and examples of inequality and racial discrimination in our modern societies while developing countries are leading in this respect other developed societies like the UK and USA are not far behind.

Inequality and discrimination if not tackled effectively can cause cancer in the body parts of society or community which affects everyone in the end. In Scotland today, there is a strong demand for equal opportunities and racial harmony. The recent 'Scotland campaign for one Scotland: no place for racism' is an example of how desperate people of Scotland are to ensure equality, diversity and racial harmony. Although from 6 April 2007, it has become the responsibility of all public authorities in the UK to promote sense of equality and ensure people do not suffer due to inequality and discrimination it is also a responsibility of private, non-governmental organisations, social, community and voluntary sector organisations to observe the general equality duty. This article attempts to justify why it is important for educational institutions in Britain to ensure promotion of equality and how will the gender equality duty recently launched by the government make institutions and authorities more responsible for the elimination of discrimination and harassment. Before going into details of the role and duty of educational institutions

and authorities it is imperative at this stage to know about the key terms within equality practice. Below is an exhaustive list of the key terms and their definitions.

Equal Opportunity and key terms

The concept of equal opportunity is surrounded by a number of key terms which are interrelated to and interdependent upon one another. *Equality practice* is one of the key terms that is on display in every public, private, and community voluntary organisations to ensure promotion of equality for different group identities by dealing with the issues that undermine equality. When equality practice is in place *promoting equality* is the next step. Action is taken when someone's opportunities are blocked and he is treated in a discriminatory way. *Equal opportunity* is one well-known approach to promoting equality (Thompson, 2003, p.9). Following *anti-discriminatory practice* is an attempt to promote any group identity which means positive attitudes and behaviour are to be supported and negative vision and actions are to be challenged. Stereotypes or stereotyping can be used to influence or block someone's opportunities which is why many organisations have *Anti-bias practice or curriculum* by which they avoid stereotypes and promote community integration and cohesion. *Inclusion or social inclusion* is therefore another key term by which an active effort is made to address why a community must exclude somebody or something (Wilmot 1997:28) and includes all the institutions and embraces the diversity of different groups, cultures, and faiths with equal status.

Race might be a primary target for exclusionary practices although race has no real biological or scientific foundation. An ethnic group may be discriminated because of ethnic background which is why *Racial Equality* is important to achieve a dynamic equilibrium in the society. Otherwise, *Racism* can be promoted through the set of attitudes, actions and practice that undermine a particular in terms of their, colour, skin, culture or ethnic background. The outcome is a *Racial Discrimination* through racist behaviour and beliefs that block someone's opportunities and development from or within the particular group.

Ethnic group is defined in terms of common language, cultural heritage, customs and traditions. Such group may have the religion in common. In a host community such group is called *Minority Ethnic Group* who might comprise the majority in a particular area within the host community. In Britain, people of *Black and Minority Ethnic* group have come from Caribbean, Africa and Asia and settled in to this country. *Culture* of ethnic group is different from that of the host population. *Cultural identity, national characteristics, and culture* of minority ethnic group have to be protected and supported. Through integration as an equal opportunity, *cultural diversity* and *multicultural society* can be promoted in which the population can be drawn from many distinctive cultural backgrounds.

Faith / Religion is an important term within equality practice as it refers to tolerance towards the faith of others and those who have no religious beliefs and equal rights to perform religious duties. Equality practice is against *Anti-Semitism* through which religious intolerance and discrimination can be shown to the people of Jewish faith and cultural background. It is against *Sectarianism* through which inequalities and discrimination can be shown to an individual group, and at cultural and institutional level. If there is any fear of sectarianism caused due to religious intolerance or sectarian outlook inequalities can be challenged through an active effort called *Anti-sectarianism*.

Inequalities and discrimination can occur due to biological differences called *Sex / sex differences*. *Gender* through psychological identity of being male or female and the awareness of what sex differences mean within the social division is described can also be responsible for inequalities and discrimination. Following *Gender Equality* is then the duty to promote equality of opportunities on the basis of sex. *Gender stereotypes* are always resistant to equal opportunities as it produces firm beliefs about characteristics, behaviour and other qualities or weaknesses of an individual on the basis of their sexual identity. *Sexism* through which an outlook of prejudiced attitudes is developed towards individuals on the basis of their sex is also responsible for discriminatory behaviour. Discrimination can also occur due to *Sexual Orientation* that allows the choice about sex of partner made by individuals. *Disability* through which someone suffers from continuing sensory impairment or chronic health condition that affects development or daily life can be another ground for discrimination and inequalities.

It is against these key terms the duty and role of educational institutions and authorities to practice upon equality and ensure promotion of equal opportunities will have to be assessed.

Role and duty of Educational Institutions

From cradle to grave education plays an important role in an individual's life. It is about imparting of knowledge, positive judgement and well-developed wisdom. It helps to achieve specific skills and behaviour. An educational institution usually refers to higher education (college, community college, technological, university and junior college), institutes of technology and polytechnics, university and school. These institutions offer teaching, learning and research. Although we used to get information on all the laws protecting people from race, sex, and disability discrimination from the Commission for Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission, and the Disability Rights Commission educational institutions could also promote equality and help every pupils and students benefit from education. An educational institution is an important place in which someone can learn fundamental aspects of environment, society, culture, history, social structure, economy, technology, and politics. These institutions can demonstrate through teaching and learning that no one can be discriminated because of their sex, nationality, race, colour, or ethnic background, disability, religion, or sexual orientation. According to a Report by the Independent Advisory group:

‘This means that a person should not be refused work, training, or promotion because of their sex, the colour of their skin, their country of origin, their sexuality, religion or because of a disability. The law also says that men and women, who do the same job at work, or work of equal value, should receive equal pay’ (The Independent Advisory Group, 2004, p.111)

As recently as April 6, 2007, the UK government introduced general Gender Equality Duty (GED) making public bodies including educational institutions and authorities responsible for the elimination of discrimination and harassment and promote equality between men and women. Following seven steps is the only way to meet the gender equality as hoped by the government:

a. gather information on how their work affects women and men; b. consult employees, service users, trade unions and other stakeholders; c. assess the different impact of policies and practices on both sexes and use this information to inform their work; d. identify priorities and set gender equality objectives; e. plan and take action to achieve gender equality objectives; f. publish a gender equality scheme, report annually and review progress every three years; g. publish an equal pay policy statement and report on progress every three years (Equal opportunities Commission Scotland, 2006).

Under the new Gender Equality Duty (GED), schools and education authorities will perform two duties, one is tackling discrimination and the other is promoting equality by taking into consideration the full impact of gender on pupils' attitudes to school, to each other and to the opportunities available to them. Schools and education authorities will have to gather gender-disaggregated data to monitor the gender attainment gap as this has been a serious issue at present and to address this issue as part of performance evaluation.

The plan of action for that is to develop school leadership, revise initial teacher education and provide greater choice and opportunity for pupils. The school role in promoting equality will have to be supported by the national education policy makers who ensure all future developments are in line with the agenda set out by the Equality Duty.

With regard to the gender equality duty, educational authorities will now have to focus on the different needs of men and women, boys and girls. Based on the different needs they have to take plan of action for that and implement their policies and programmes.

Educational institutions are also expected to undertake a reform for a unique curriculum to ensure promotion of equality through the choice, breadth and balance of the curriculum.

'An important objective at national level will be to ensure that equality issues are clearly articulated within the programme to support an inclusive curriculum. Teachers and other educators need a confident, clear and shared understanding of the issues and concepts relating to discrimination. Elements such as choice, breadth and balance of the curriculum are areas that could be included in an education authorities' gender Equality scheme' ((Equal Opportunities Commission Scotland, 2006).

Education is future-oriented; it is about development and growth. Through different ages and stages of learning all educational institutions raise ambitions and create better life chances and opportunities for our children and young generation. At first stage, schooling occurs when society or a group of an individual sets up a curriculum to educate people usually young. Primary or elementary education consists of the first year of formal, structured education that occurs during childhood. Secondary education consists of the second years of formal education that occur during adolescence. Higher education also called tertiary, third stage or post secondary education, often known as academia, is the non-compulsory educational level following the completion of a school providing a secondary education, such as a high school secondary school or gymnasium.

Young children begin to develop their attitude during early years of their life. School authorities are therefore expected to be active to promote equal opportunities to the best of their ability for all children who attend schools. They can work for equality of opportunity to make sure no child because of his situation or group identity is discriminated. They can show how to accept each other and develop genuine respect for each others' beliefs, understanding and social mores. In practice, school service providers and practitioners can extend their knowledge and understanding of equality issues on sex, race, religion, ethnicity, disability and cultural background. What is on constantly display is good practice for equality (Lindon, 2006, p.3).

When young children grow up, move from school to college and later to a university they develop attitudes about other people and the groups to which they belong to. Attitudes are developed partly because of feelings and partly because there is an intellectual stimulation they receive from their educational institutions. Through this stimulation they are able to form their belief, expectations and assumptions. Therefore, the role of educational institutions in promoting equality starts right from when they enter a college or a university for higher education. The higher educational institutions and authorities are expected to be active in the following ways:

- Creating a forum for the exchange of ideas, facts, experiences on equality among student-teachers and other staff
- Promoting discussion forums for everybody in the institutions to raise issues of concern on inequality, discrimination and racial disharmony
- Providing more information on equal opportunities for the government through intellectual stimulation
- Making accessible appropriate resources and materials on equal opportunity to students and teachers carry out their research
- Sharing research findings and information on discrimination on sex, nationality, race, colour, or ethnic background, disability, religion, or sexual orientation between students and other professionals
- Promoting academic research projects on race, sex and disability discrimination by using a knowledge base explicitly and commitment to developing that knowledge base
- Working in partnership with the government, private, voluntary and community organisations to ensure promotion of equal opportunities.

Educational institutions have to adopt such organisational culture that do not undermine the contribution that disable people can make. There is ample evidence to suggest that racial discrimination in employment practices is well established and documented (Brown, 1992; Phizacklea and Miles, 1992; and Skellington, 1996). Education authorities as employee can adopt a fair practice in relation to their employees by making sure that no one is treated unfairly in terms of allocation of workload, access to training, promotion opportunities; and working conditions. Anti-racist practice is also to be followed in all higher education institutions so that black workers do not have to take more than their fair share of responsibility to fight against racism (Dominelli, 1989).

As a result of the merger of Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), after October 2007 the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) will have formal powers to ensure the practice of equality. The inspection bodies such as HMIE will have some audit and inspection powers. The education authorities will have to work in partnership with the CEHR and HMIE in order to allow them 'to review inspection and auditing methods and performance indicators and support education authorities on developing effective gender equality schemes, action plans and monitoring arrangements' (Equal opportunities Commission Scotland, 2006).

Conclusion

By organising workshops, seminars and conferences, and social and cultural events, members, professionals, scholars, specialists and advanced research students from educational institutions and authorities can talk about equal opportunities. What they learn about equal opportunities through such events and intellectual stimulation can then be applied to both the majority and the minority groups to make sure members of both groups now know what it means to have equal opportunities.

Although the government introduced the Gender Equality Duty and public authorities including educational institutions are expected to be active in promoting equal opportunities no one can hide from this responsibility. Parental involvement is crucial on which a child's educational development is greatly depended. It is also parents who can help their children understand interpersonal communication skills, diverse cultures and the community around them. The responsibility can best be carried out through the involvement of teachers, education authorities, parents, students' extended family, and others in the community. Parents need to be asked about how their child learns to be socialised. Education institutions and authorities need to be asked about how they deliver their knowledge and understanding for effective good practice for equality. The government needs to be checked about how much financial support it gives to education authorities to achieve equality and whether or not all future developments under GED are designed to promote gender equality.

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