Equality of opportunity

What?
- framework for equality and diversity
- equality of opportunity in the learning process
- equal opportunities and employers
- supporting equality and diversity
- positive action.

Why?
The fundamental reason for promoting equality and diversity in work-based learning is contained in the phrase in the common inspection framework about ‘meeting the needs of learners’. Individuals are at the heart of the system, and meeting their needs requires providers to take an active approach to equality of opportunity – not just when recruiting learners but throughout all stages of their programme.

Equality of opportunity is the absence or removal of barriers to economic, social and political participation on the grounds of difference – for example, due to a person’s gender, race or disability. It is an organisational process and culture that stems from:
- an explicit commitment to the inclusion of all social groups
- valuing diversity.

Diversity refers to the full range of individual values, attitudes, cultural perspectives, beliefs, ethnic background, sexual orientation, skills, knowledge and life experience in any given group of people. Taking diversity seriously means recognizing that:
- individuals have a right to their own personal value system – and no-one has a right to impose their value system on others
- the organisation must make clear what its value system is, define what is unacceptable and champion behaviour that supports its values.

Good equal opportunities practices ensure that all learners:
- benefit from good opportunities to learn
- work in an environment that supports their learning and development
- become increasingly aware of equality and inclusion issues – an important aspect of their development as employees.

Most employers and providers recognize the importance of equal opportunities. But as the comments from inspection reports below show, too few convert their awareness into effective action.

Key facts
- Arrangements to promote equality of opportunity are unsatisfactory in almost forty percent of providers.
- Around a third of providers take effective action to promote social inclusion, but others are still not doing enough to increase the participation of people from under-represented groups.
- Very few providers monitor the effectiveness of their equal opportunities policies. Data are rarely analysed in order to set targets for improving performance relating to equality and diversity.
How?

Framework for equality and diversity

Under the Learning and Skills Act 2000, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity between:

- people from different racial groups
- men and women
- people with a disability and people without.

"The Council’s vision is to create a learning society which is free from discrimination and prejudice and which encourages and helps all learners reach their full potential."


The LSC’s strategy to achieve this is to embed equality and diversity into all of its policies, programmes and actions. Local LSCs all have their own strategies for achieving equality in their local areas. They look to employers and providers to help them promote equality of opportunity, widen participation and improve performance.

Both the LSC and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) use the common inspection framework as a basis for assessing equal opportunities. It contains both explicit and implicit references to equality and diversity.

Explicit references

- Programmes should be socially inclusive, ensuring equality of access and opportunities for learners.
- There should be explicit aims, values and strategies promoting equality for all that are reflected in the provider’s work.
- Equality of opportunity should be promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve their potential.
- Trainers should use materials and teaching methods that promote equality of opportunity.
- Guidance and support should be sensitive to equality of opportunity.
- The provider should have effective measures to eliminate oppressive behaviour, including all forms of harassment.

Implicit references

- Programmes should be responsive to local circumstances.
- The provider’s values should be fully understood by staff, including subcontractors and work placement providers.
- Providers should promote good working relationships that foster learning.
- Learning resources and accommodation should allow all learners to participate fully.
- The performance of different groups of learners should be used to guide programme and course development.
- Learners should have access to relevant, effective support on personal issues.
- Learners should understand their rights and responsibilities.

Employers and providers should assess their provision against each of these points and report on them in their annual self-assessment report. Annual development plans should contain specific actions to improve the provision.
Equality of opportunity in the learning process

The actions employers and providers take to promote a culture and practice of equality should be ‘mainstreamed’ at every stage of the learning process.

Positive action can be taken in the recruitment process, e.g. by:

- targeting particular groups in advertising – a lawful form of positive action is to place advertisements in sections of the press which are read by members of a particular sex or racial group
- encouraging applications from groups that are under-represented in the workforce.

The initial assessment process must be clear and as objective as possible, and applied consistently to all learners. Procedures should include assessments of literacy, numeracy and language, in order to build up a good understanding of the individual learner’s needs.

All learners are entitled to a comprehensive and worthwhile induction, regardless of when they start the training programme. It is the final major activity before learners start on their programme. Induction should be thorough and it is particularly important to ensure that the experience is broadly the same for all learners. The process should include an introduction to equal opportunities, covering as a minimum:

- the employer’s or provider’s values in relation to equality and diversity
- the main legislation and its impact on work and training
- policies and procedures for equal opportunities, harassment and grievance.

Learners should receive reinforcement of equal opportunities throughout their training programme. This may include specific training. Reviews provide a good opportunity to reinforce messages about equality of opportunity, and to check that:

- learners are not suffering from any form of discrimination or harassment
- their support needs are being adequately met.

Equal opportunities in employment

Employers must take full account of equality and diversity issues. The basic requirement is to ensure that basic equal opportunities standards are satisfied and maintained, in relation to harassment, bullying and respecting the rights of others. If possible, employers should produce guidance summarising responsibilities with regard to equal opportunities in the workplace.

When carrying out an initial check or pre-placement vetting of workplaces, employers and providers should assess the extent to which:

- people in the workplace have a good awareness of equality of opportunity and values diversity in their workforce
- staff and supervisors have a sufficient understanding of equal opportunities issues
- equality of opportunity is actively promoted at work.

Promoting equality of opportunity in workplaces may require making a ‘business case’ for equality, putting forward convincing arguments in favour of equal opportunities. These include:

- providing the best possible service to everyone in the community
- a way of enriching the workforce and making the best use of the pool of available talent.

Supporting equality and diversity

Employers and providers can take many active steps to promote equality and diversity in everything they do. The box below gives some practical suggestions.
**Marketing and recruitment**
- Make equal opportunities policy explicit in marketing and recruitment materials and practice, and in early discussions with learners.
- Take action to widen participation, e.g. by targeting under-represented groups in marketing.
- Make specific arrangements to contact potential recruits from these groups, and the parents or guardians of young people.

**Policies, procedures and information**
- Review policies and procedures regularly.
- Check that staff, learners and sub-contractors understand and act on them.
- Check that learners remain aware of policies and procedures.
- Distribute information to subcontractors as well as learners and staff.

**In the workplace**
- Make sure people know about the organisation's policies and support them actively.
- Provide advice and guidance on how to improve practice.
- Consider withdrawing learners from workplaces where the commitment to good equal opportunities practices is seriously in question.

**Staff**
- Secure staff with expertise in assessing learners’ needs, e.g. in dyslexia – either through internal appointments or sub-contracting.
- Provide special training and/or qualifications on equal opportunities for staff.

**Resources**
- Make arrangements to meet cultural or faith needs, e.g. prayer rooms.
- Secure special resources for learners who need them, e.g. those with disabilities.
- Provide translated materials.

**Management information**
- Review information on the participation, retention and achievement of learners from different groups.
- Monitor actions taken to meet the needs of learners in these groups.
- Benchmark performance against local and national statistics.
- Set targets for teams and the organization as a whole.

**Positive action**
This describes measures targeted at a particular group that are intended to:
- redress past discrimination
- offset the disadvantages arising from existing attitudes, behaviours and structures.

Employers and providers may legally:
- provide training and special encouragement for people of a particular racial group, or either sex, who have been under-represented in certain occupations or grades during the previous twelve months
- take measures to address any special educational, training or welfare needs identified for a specific racial group
- provide training and special encouragement for returners to the labour market after a period of time discharging domestic or family responsibilities
- target advertising and recruitment literature, reserving places for one sex on training courses or providing taster courses in non-traditional areas.

Positive action should not be confused with positive discrimination, i.e. choosing people solely on grounds of their gender or racial origin, regardless of capabilities. This is illegal in the UK.
Where and when?

The key point about equality and diversity is that an organisation’s values, policies and procedures should inform their actions with learners, sub-contractors and others at all stages of the learning cycle. That’s what ‘mainstreaming’ means. Success at implementing equality of opportunity rests largely on the extent to which people take account of it in everything they do.

Case studies and examples

Equal opportunities and induction

One employer, with around 50 modern apprentices in retail and customer service, has devised a comprehensive equal opportunities questionnaire for learners to complete in the workplace after their induction. It takes learners several weeks to get all the information together. Learners find that completing the questionnaire:

- raises their awareness of important equal opportunities issues
- helps to identify any gaps in their knowledge
- gives them a good understanding of what equal opportunities really means at work.

The training manager explains:

“We found that learners didn’t fully understand how equal opportunities relates to the workplace and decided to look at this in more depth as part of induction. We set up a ten-page questionnaire called ‘Getting Equal’ that looks at all aspects of equal opportunities, from policies and procedures to delivering products and services at work. Learners go through each section of the questionnaire with their supervisors and write down the evidence available.

It’s a really useful way to reinforce all aspects of equal opportunities with learners. They often refer back to it throughout the training programme.”

Learner hotline

Another employer is very keen to widen access for all its learners. To ensure that it gets feedback from learners about how well their needs are being met, the company has set up a special equal opportunities hotline that learners can use at any time. It’s particularly useful for learners who wish to make a complaint but do not wish to speak to their assessor or supervisor at work.
Here's how it works:

- Learners telephone the hotline and hear a recorded message. They are also given the company’s email address.
- Callers can choose from the following menu: 1 = equal opportunities statement, 2 = health and safety statement, 3 = how to complain, 4 = information on special equipment learners may need.
- On the complaints menu, learners are told in simple language what they need to do and who will look into the complaint. They are also given a name and address to write to if they wish.
- Learners are given a wide range of telephone numbers to call if they feel they have been discriminated against.

A computerised call system shows what time calls were made and the telephone number of the caller, and records details of any missed or unreturned calls.

**Resources**


**Stay in touch**

- www.eoc.org.uk  
- www.cre.gov.uk  
- www.drc-gb.org  
- www.lsc.gov.uk

**Checklist**

- How well does your organisation meet the requirements for equality and diversity contained in the common inspection framework?
- What references are there to equality and diversity in your current self-assessment report and annual development plan?
- What actions are taken to mainstream equal opportunities in marketing, recruitment, initial assessment and induction?
- How is learners’ understanding of equal opportunities reinforced throughout the learning cycle?
- What does your organisation require of workplaces, in relation to their equal opportunities practices?
- How effectively are these practices monitored?
- What practical steps are being taken to support equality and diversity?
- What examples are there of the organisation taking positive action to promote equality and diversity?