Learning and Skills Council
EQUAL project

1. Purpose of the project

The LSC has accessed EQUAL funding to lead project activity during the period of October 2005 and December 2007, to test ways of accrediting and/or endorsing equality and diversity practitioners training provision, to test products against the national equality and diversity standards and to explore the potential development of a professional association for Equality and Diversity practitioners.

Background work, at the start of the project, carried out by a partner organisation, Shapiro Consultancy (click on link to view findings/conclusions of the background research and consultations report), laid down the groundwork for an initiative to professionalise diversity practice. The broad outcomes of the background research and conclusions showed that there is definite interest from diversity partitions and policy makers for establishing a professional association however, there are potential risks etc that need to be addressed through a formal study within the project.

The main scope of the project will be to:

- develop a set of competences for work in equality and diversity and national consultation on these to achieve a nationally agreed set of standards for equality and diversity work.

- Identify existing equality and diversity training courses and other resources/products and compile this information into a directory.

- To examine the fit between nationally agreed competences for equality and diversity and the range of E&D products and service which are currently available.

- Research the feasibility/benefits/potential role of a professional association for people whose work wholly or partly focuses on equality and diversity.

The project is being managed through a cross sectoral advisory group including equality commissions.

2. The EQUAL programme

EQUAL (a European Commission programme) provides funding for research and development projects which test out new ways of addressing inequalities in the labour market. The programme is ESF funded and projects need to comply with ESF rules and meet key EQUAL principles. These include:

- Revenue funding only is available;
Funding covers up to 50% of project costs. The remaining 50% needs to be secured by the project partners;

- Projects must be developed and delivered by a partnership of two or more agencies;
- Projects must be innovative; developing or testing out new ideas, products or approaches;
- Projects must include an element of transnational partnership work with EQUAL projects in at least one other member state.

3. Why is this piece of work important to the LSC?

This piece of work has great potential to enhance the reputation of the LSC and to really prove commitment to leadership around Equality and Diversity, which is a core strand of the equality and diversity strategy (2004 -2007). There will be much dissemination of the project and the eventual product will receive considerable publicity with the LSC’s partners at the heart of this. Further there will be greater clarity around the expectations for equality and diversity practice. This will assist us all in discharging many of our statutory responsibilities, but more importantly to achieving real outcomes For those people we are most concerned about.

It is clear that the outcomes from this project relate to the LSC’s equality and diversity remit, within the Learning and Skills Act (2000), where we have a duty to promote equality of opportunity and as part of this responsibility we must set out our plans to develop our workforce to do so. If from this project there were a set of core competencies developed for this area, it would mean that those with a direct remit for equality and diversity would have a shared common understanding of the ways in which we need to discharge our responsibilities.

The LSC believes that helping to establish a professional association will aid the achievement of it’s equalities objectives, and will help to drive the value and effectiveness of equalities work throughout the learning and skills sector. However, the need for and potential impact of such a body extends far wider than the learning and skills sector.

4. Purpose/Role of a Professional Association

The LSC Equality & Diversity team will use EQUAL funding to support the development of a professional association for E&D practitioners. The working title for this association is the Equality and Diversity Professional Association (EDPA). The EDPA would be a membership body for E&D practitioners working in the public, private and voluntary sectors. The exact number of practitioners is not known but many thousands of jobs are focused wholly or partly on E&D, including:

- E&D officers in public sector agencies (LSCs, police forces, local authorities, voluntary and community, colleges, health authorities and many others);
- E&D specialists (in consultancies, universities, regeneration agencies, research companies, etc);
- Human Resource staff in all sectors;
- Leaders and managers of agencies/companies committed to E&D.

There are currently no agreed standards or qualifications for ensuring the quality or competence of E&D work. We recognise that a great deal of very useful work is already taking place in this field and believe that the effectiveness and impact of E&D work would be greatly strengthened by measures to professionalise the sector. The key outcomes and benefits of an EDPA would include:

- Development of the E&D workforce into a professional sector working to nationally agreed quality standards;
- An increase in the status and value of E&D work within individual organisations and across the UK workforce;
- Improvement in the effectiveness and impact of E&D work in achieving equalities objectives within individual organisations and across the UK workforce.

The aim of the EDPA would be to develop and promote professional standards for E&D practitioners through a range of measures, including:

- Defining, establishing and promoting the professional standards and competencies required for individuals and institutions to carry out effective E&D work;
- Developing an accreditation process for individual E&D staff who have achieved the required competencies and professional standards;
- Promoting and supporting continuing professional development
- Establishing and developing an accreditation process for E&D external training courses;
- Providing and developing new E&D training courses and qualifications where necessary;
- Developing an endorsement or branding process for E&D products;
- Pushing up standards in E&D work through measures such as validation of continuing professional development, professional awards, promotion and network exchange of best practice etc.

An independent body for E&D practitioners could be modelled on other professional associations such as the Royal Town Planning Institute, or the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. It is envisaged that the association would become self-financing through membership fees. The association would focus on driving up the quality and effectiveness of E&D work by supporting the professional development of those who work in this field.

5. **Action to be taken by the LSC**
For this development to succeed, the LSC will need to work in partnership with a range of other organisations (the Equal Opportunities Commission, Disability Rights Commission and Commission for Racial Equality, government departments, local government associations, employer organisations, trade unions and others) which are similarly committed to developing this initiative within the available period.

The LSC sees its role, and the role of this partnership, as a catalytic one which will help to bring a professional association into establishment. The LSC would have no role in owning, managing or directing the activities of this body once it becomes established.

The LSC are planning to carry out the following development activities during the project period:

- Explore the feasibility and most appropriate structure for a professional association of this kind. Focus consultancy are currently undertaking this element of research work after contracting with the LSC following a successful tender application process.

- Promote the development of this association throughout the public, private and voluntary sectors, to gain widespread recognition and endorsement of this initiative;

- Undertake national consultation on the competencies and quality standards for E&D work, resulting in a set of professional standards for work in this field;

- Undertake a review of existing E&D training provision, resulting in a directory of provision; begin to test ways of accrediting E&D training provision against the professional standards;

- Develop a package of membership services (on-line information, newsletters, training directory, regional and national conferences etc); develop a pricing structure for membership;

- Marketing and promotion activity, including a launch event;

- Identify and undertake a programme of trans-national activities which meet the objectives of the EQUAL programme and add value to the development of this initiative.