

A REPORT: FOCUS GROUPS INTERVIEWS ON EQUALITY & DIVERSITY

Led by Jackie Hunter and Majid Hawa, Council Members

Introduction

A recent survey commissioned by the college concluded that the College met the core requirements of what is generally considered nationally to be good practice in relation to equality monitoring of staff. However the College Council and the Executive management team would like to see where best to focus efforts to further improve issues of both equality and diversity. This applies across the board including gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. As part of this process, the College agreed that Council should seek input on the current and future desired status in the college with regard to equality and diversity. This will be done through several fora but one relatively quick way of gaining insight is through focus groups representative of both the college as a whole and also subsets of the key minority groups.

Methodology

In Spring this year a series of focus group interviews were conducted by Jackie Hunter and Majid Hawa. Council members conducted a series of focus groups interviews, using these questions to stimulate discussions.

- What has the college done in the past to address equality and diversity issues that has been successful?
- What are the areas for improvement and their priority?
- What are the barriers to addressing these areas?
- Do you have any solutions that you think could be implemented to address these barriers?

The groups were comprised of staff from administration (1-5), Managers (6-10), academics (female), academics (male), professors (female), and professors (male). Group members were randomly selected and sample of 20 altogether out of 100 people invited took part. A focus group interview was conducted with the Disability Forum and another with a black, ethnic minority focus group. It was decided to extend the interviews to students and a request has been sent to the Student Union to help organise student focus groups. Although the focus group participants were a small sample, similar themes emerged from across the groups.

Findings

Positive Comments

People felt diversity was important and the college should be proud of the number of international students it has. In the non-academic functions there was good representation of

strong female leaders and no report of personal experiences of gender discrimination. There were good examples of support for both men and women with families such as time off for child care, good IT policies to support working from home. There appeared to be lots of goodwill across the college. Most people are happy with the working environment and have worked at the college for a significant number of years. An individual had given up an opportunity to work at Oxford, preferring to stay.

The Springboard programme for women was seen as positive. This was mentioned a few times as a positive initiative providing women with the opportunity and space to reflect on their own developments. 'The principles of making time for oneself and one's career a priority as well as being visible, that is 'seen' by senior staff and Deans are important. The Women in Science Group is an example of a forum for women and such meetings should be encouraged. Project Juno, although specific to Physics, was acknowledged as a good scheme to encourage better female representation. There were some good experiences of the Mentoring scheme and people appeared to have positive experiences when participating in the scheme.

The recent introduction of a structured process for academics to apply for promotion was perceived as a good thing to enable, even to nudge people to progress in their career in a fairer and equitable way. Workload models, although variable in its introduction across the various disciplines should help balance the focus on research and teaching.

Areas for Improvement

i) Appraisal and Career Progression

The implementation of the appraisal system is variable. Appraisals and sitting down with managers to have career reviews and discussions about progression are not always carried out and when done are not necessarily future-orientated but focused on the achievements for current goals. It was felt that it was easier to have career progression discussions when at a junior level in comparison to at professorial level, such discussions would usually take place with colleagues outside the organisation. There was a view that managers are not aware of the experience and expertise of long serving staff, not valuing the staff they already have. The different processes are also not connected up, for example the mentoring system is not linked to the appraisal where there may be mutual agreement following an appraisal that somebody would have benefited from mentoring and thus put forward for the scheme by the manager.

There were comments about job evaluations with regards to administrative jobs – a lack of transparency of the recent regarding process and the use of reorganisations to move people into jobs without advertising vacancies or jobs were posted at short notice over holiday periods. The appraisal process for this group of staff was reported as 'hit and miss' with little evidence of consideration of career planning or progression possibilities in other departments. There is not a holistic look across the college with regards to progression in administrative roles.

It was felt that line management support is variable and it would appear that it is not usual practice for line managers to engage staff in discussions around how best to support their

staff with disabilities. Discussions about development and career progression also do not take place consistently.

ii) Flexible Working and Family Friendly Practices

Support for men and women with caring responsibilities is variable and not consistent across departments, and very dependent on one's line manager. The need to schedule meetings for the period before 4.00pm so as not to disadvantage people with child caring responsibilities was raised. For example the first Women in Science seminar was held at 6pm.

It was pointed out that the college was not addressing career progressions for staff going from part time to full time working. However, it would appear that there are inconsistencies across the college because departments are run differently. Inequity between sharing of administrative responsibilities between male and female academics was raised as an issue. Women tended to be more attentive to when given such tasks while men are better at being protective of their research time and will not always do such tasks, causing some of the inequity. It is significant that the male professors did not see the issues that the female senior academics did even though they were in the same departments.

iii) Recruitment and Promotion

There was a perception that there is still lack of transparency in the promotion and recruitment process. An example was provided about two candidates with same credentials where the male staff member was promoted while the female was not. When challenged the reason given was that the female's PhD student has another year before completion of his/her PhD. However, other male colleagues provided evidence that their promotion was not dependant on having PhD students. This helped secure the female staff her subsequent promotion.

Processes for the appointment of people to acting up positions are not transparent and opportunities are not widely known. A failure to monitor what was going on in departments resulting in disparities between them e.g. in the proportion of BME or female. An example of unconscious bias operating, which may have led to the higher number of male appointments to staff in one ASS department about 10 years or so ago, was cited. This has had an impact on what was for a long time an unusually good 50:50 split between female and male. In addition, many of this department's female professors have retired or moved to other institutions over the last decade, and so while the department has a good record in appointing female early career colleagues in recent years, the professorial balance would certainly seem to have shifted in favour of males

For BME staff, promotion in particular appeared to be an issue as there was a perception that goals and criteria kept changing. Feedbacks to BME staff following unsuccessful application for promotion included publications of insufficient impact or publications were in journals that were perceived as not of high enough standing. With regards to equality monitoring, there also appeared to be a circular argument used to justify a lack of 'positive interventions' whenever low number of BME staff at senior numbers were highlighted; this

being that the figures for BME staff is too low and therefore it is statistically insignificant. There is a perception that progression within the organisation depended on whether one's face fit and an ability to 'play the game'. There are informal networks operating that excluded others who are different. A participant felt that he was promoted only after he has made alliances outside the institution and has the support of people external to the college.

There was a suggestion that the CVs of staff with an ethnic minority background be sent out for independent reviews. However, there is also a view that there is already an over scrutiny and downplaying the importance of the work of BME academics although there is a perceived resistance amongst people to discuss these issues.

It was noted that from the statistics made available from the monitoring report that there is a relatively low proportion of staff with disability working in Royal Holloway, most appeared to be in the lower paid jobs.

iv) Holding People to Account

People felt that they were not generally badly treated or suffered too much adverse experiences but some of the women reported that they still experienced being patronised. An example was when a male member of the executive team assumed someone was a secretary rather than a senior academic. However, examples were given where senior academic staff can get away with behaving badly e.g. rude to people; appalling chairing of meetings and are allowed to get away with, although such behaviour would not be allowed in business nor in service functions within the college. There is a need to have a code of conduct which people are held accountable. There was a perception that some female academics had left because the atmosphere was too macho and that the college was to some extent paying lip service to diversity.

v) Communication

There was poor communication across departments, with departments not always working together. There do not appear to be any forums or informal meetings for women in the college to share their experiences. There appeared to be little interactions or consultations across departments for both academic and administrative staff, often it is only at Heads of Department level that there are opportunities for interacting with other departments. The professorial banding document was cited as an example of being exposed to less consultation across departments, however, it was pointed out that there was an open meeting for all professors to attend, plus all were asked to send comments on the process.

vi) Representation of Black Minority Ethnic Groups

There is a noticeable lack of representation of African Caribbean staff in the academic and technical staff group. There have been African Caribbean applicants interviewed in

Biological Sciences department; however they have not matched the person specification enough to be appointed. There are also no Asian (includes Indians, Chinese) amongst staff in some departments. There were concerns expressed about ethnic minority colleagues being in 'difficult places'. There was a view that 'ethnicity equate to overseas' therefore in people's mind that applicants from ethnic background would require visas. It was reported that ethnic minority colleagues do not bother applying for promotions or key positions because they felt they would not be considered. It seems that many more Ethnic Minorities entered academia at Teaching focused level (than 'Whites') where they are trapped for the rest of their career with no clear progression with respect to 'teaching plus research' for these academics. Research and conference training budget also seem to be denied to ethnic minorities, so some do not want to even apply for any CPD or conferences money. The lack of visibility of BME staff at senior management which is predominantly of a white, male background and the culture of the institution generally create a lack of trust, confidence and support amongst BME staff.

There was agreement that black ethnic minority (BME) students are increasingly represented in the student population and they need role models from BME background. White students also needed to be exposed to BME lecturers as it would be educational and they can learn to respect them. Assessment of staff performance is also influenced by student surveys. A question was raised with respect to student surveys - is the possibility of student feedback being influenced by racism being considered?

It would appear that BME staff were very disgruntled overall and fearful to stick their neck out just in case they were then made to move on. A case was cited where a well-established BME researcher/academic with a good track record of attracting research funds was recruited just before the last research assessment exercise process, despite prior knowledge that the individual's verbal English was not good. The individual concerned was asked to leave after complaints from students about difficulty in understanding lectures delivered. It appeared like this individual, although recruited despite an awareness of his/her lack of language skills, having served a purpose was rejected instead of being supported to continue his/her career in the college.

There have been staff from BME background who have left the college because it had been difficult to progress their careers in the college.

vii) LGBT

There was a mention that the appointment of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) staff at a department has provided a positive working experience of working with this group of staff. However, LGBT staff appeared to maintain a low profile within the college and appeared reluctant to have a more active formalised LGBT network role.

viii) Disabled Staff

Although it is noticeable that we have an increasing number of students with disabilities, there is very few staff with disabilities, including academic roles. Physical disabilities present a problem with the Founders buildings and more generally too e.g. many meeting rooms are not fitted with induction loops.

Staff with mental health issues found it rather challenging and feel isolated as they are not able to talk openly or seek support from other staff about their conditions. There was a feeling that having a mental health condition is still a stigma. Staff with dyslexia would also welcome more support for example in writing papers for major pieces of work. In comparison, students appeared to have a wide range of support services.

There was also a discussion about the appropriate use of languages and it was suggested that a list of appropriate words/phrases be made available to staff and managers.

Recommendations

- 1) To continue with positive initiatives like Springboard, the implementation of the promotion and professorial banding processes. Consider sponsorship as well as mentoring programmes, including a specially tailored Mentoring and Development programme one for BME staff.
- 2) A Review of the Staff Appraisal Scheme and process, including how it linked into related schemes e.g. the Mentoring Scheme. The reviewed scheme to be launched with a clear framework for consistent implementation across the college.
- 3) Managers will have clear objectives in relation to conducting and reviewing appraisals and held accountable for performance on this objective.
- 4) To highlight and monitor the consistent application of Flexible Working and other family friendly policies and practices. More targeted awareness sessions to be considered for senior male staff.
- 5) Review the recruitment and promotion process and the advertising of opportunities like 'acting up' positions
- 6) To explore different ways to encourage more interdepartmental forums and communication across the college. To include a Communication Plan as part of the Equality Strategy/Scheme.
- 7) To continue with exploring initiatives to improve the representation staff from a Black Ethnic Minority (BME), LGBT and People with Disability background in the college

Susan Lee
Equality & Diversity Officer