

Inclusivity in the Classroom: VLE – Equality for You

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Abstract

As a consequence of equality audits, it was identified that some staff were not always sure where to find relevant information with regard to equalities. In an attempt to make information readily accessible it was decided that as part of the remit of the Equality and Diversity strategy group, to develop a resource on the VLE – “Equality for You”. On the recommendation of the student representative on the group it was decided to make this resource available to both staff and learners. The resources consist of information specific to Motherwell College, including notes of meetings, general information on equality, equality impact assessments and each of the 9 protected characteristics is listed with web-links, power points and videos clips that can be used either in class, placement or during individual study. Various links were incorporated to college policies to show how they link with the equality agenda. To assist with the dissemination of the new development, the e-learning technologist included pop-up announcements for staff and learners. Presentations were made at the Head and Support Managers’ meeting and Learning and Teaching committee. To maintain currency, updates are undertaken weekly and in the first two months since launch the resource had been accessed by more than 240 individuals.

Keywords: Equality and diversity, Further Education, VLE

Introduction

Located throughout the diverse community of North and South Lanarkshire, Motherwell College, meets the education and training needs of a widespread population of 637,250 (North Lanarkshire: 326,320, South Lanarkshire: 310,930) across a geographical area of 2,246 Km² (GROS 2010). At the beginning of academic session 2011/12, Motherwell College introduced its own dedicated managed learning environment, which is

externally hosted. As part of this package it adopted the Moodle software package, which was easy to customise as well as enhancing flexibility of all staff and learners. The Moodle – Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) was available to staff and learners both on and off campus, to assist them with their learning as well as providing additionality to their programmes.

As a Further Education College we are making more use of the VLE, which increases availability of materials for all learners, who may not be able to fully participate due to health, cultural or care responsibilities. Previously the VLE was primarily used to disseminate subject specific teaching and learning materials, however the decision to develop – “Equality for You” was to increase knowledge and understanding of the broad range of equality issues that have direct relevance to the different curricular programmes and how the needs of the various equality groups should be taken into consideration as part of the wider community.

What was the impetus?

Motherwell College has an Equality and Diversity Strategy group that is led by the Director for Staff, Learner and Business Services. This group in meeting its corporate and legal responsibilities will promote equality of opportunity and continues to work towards the elimination of discrimination, supporting an inclusive strategy via the Single Equality Scheme 2012. The Chair of this group is part of the Senior Executive Team and reports to the Human Resources Committee of the Board of Management.

Equality and Diversity features regularly on the Learning and Teaching Committee agenda, chaired by the Associate Director – Curriculum and Academic Planning, who is also a member of the Equality and Diversity group. Information from the Equality and Diversity group is then cascaded down to Academic Departments. During equality and diversity audits, within the Academic Departments, some teaching and learning materials were reviewed using the QELTM Curriculum Audit Tool: Checklist (SFC 2006). Within each department, Curriculum Leaders are responsible for conducting audits of their programmes and reporting back on progress. In turn every member of the teaching team was allocated responsibility to assist with the audits. Given the range of staff involved during the follow-up discussions and feedback it was apparent that

some staff had a knowledge/skills gap in relation to equality and diversity. While small sections of the teaching staff had shared good practice and information on equality issues and the protected characteristics, this was not widespread. There are many reasons for this, however as Motherwell College wished to continue to be successful in closing the opportunity gap by removing barriers to participation and exclusion; it was important to embed this information into teaching and learning as well as providing the resources for learners to understand that they were part of an inclusive learning environment. The College had demonstrated a commitment to support individuals to achieve their potential through the ethos of equality, and then felt it necessary to conduct a consultation with various groups including the Equality and Diversity strategy group and Learning and Teaching committee, which also included learner representation, as to how to best address this gap.

How did we proceed?

Prior to this review staff had received information on equality and diversity issues mainly via e mail, however this approach was sporadic and relied on people to store and use the information when relevant. Learners did receive information at the start of their course as part of the induction process and some material was included in the Learner Diaries, but this was limited. Despite the best of intentions, it was not a systematic way of sharing of new resources, minutes of meetings or media clips that could assist understanding of equality and diversity.

Many curricular programmes did incorporate the use of the VLE with specific subject matter and therefore it seemed a logical progression to extend this to equality and diversity issues. It was decided to utilise the VLE that had recently been introduced as it was relatively easy to share information via a computer based process between learners and staff. Many factors can inhibit the adoption of technology in education, the most important of which being inadequate infrastructure for access support and training and lack of planning within the organisation (Newton 2002), however as many of these issues had already been addressed, extending the use of the VLE to support the understanding of equality and diversity seemed the logical step. By doing so it had the potential to enhance communication between the organisation, staff and learners. The

advantage of a VLE was it facilitated the management of online learning, providing a delivery mechanism, student tracking, assessment and access to resources (JISC 2012). A section of the VLE was specifically allocated with the aim of promoting awareness of equality issues among staff and learners of Motherwell College, as well as providing resources that may be used during the teaching and learning process. The challenge that faced the team was the drawing together of materials and designing the layout which would make the resource easy to use and attractive to both staff and learners who would not usually use the VLE as part of their job role or programmes.

As a college we were keen that resources, knowledge and expertise would be readily available for all in a simply user-friendly format. The underlying philosophy was to assist staff and learners to access information when it was specifically relevant to them, thus moving from an institutional led approach towards empowering staff and learners to be at the centre of the learning process. All materials selected for inclusion on the VLE would be of potential relevance to both staff and learners as well as inclusion of key documents used within Motherwell College. The aim of this development was to improve the service to staff and learners utilising resources currently available. Likewise the goal was to promote awareness about the specific needs of equality groups and the protected characteristics and where appropriate provide signposting to external agencies who could provide support or additional guidance. Prior to the launch of the VLE the resources were presented at the Equality and Diversity strategy group, Learning and Teaching Committee and Heads and Support Managers meeting for feedback. Following consideration by the Senior Executive Team, Equality for You went "live" in April 2012.

Given the diversity of staff and learner population, considering what was relevant and should be included was broad ranging. Staff using the resources would have to consider if they met the context of their teaching and if not possibly source an alternative. Some of the materials included within the VLE were subject specific, however this was viewed as a positive aspect as it was hoped that other curricular areas may be able to identify materials they would like included. Ideally they would then forward this onto the group responsible for maintaining the VLE who would then upload the material, so that others may utilise it, if appropriate to them. Likewise if a learner had any material that they felt could be included in the VLE, they were also given the opportunity to forward it for inclusion.

The title initially given to VLE, when launched was “Equality for You”. It was sub-divided into various sections: section 1 related to information specific to Motherwell College and included minutes of the Equality and Diversity strategy group meetings as well as relevant books and DVDs that could be accessed within the learning resource centre, section 2 was general information and included information on the Equality Practitioners Network, other public or third sector organisations, videos clips on the Equality Act, Scotland’s Colleges newsletters and HMIE – Equality and Diversity Report 2010, and section 3 covered equality impact assessments. The remaining areas for the 9 protected characteristics consisted of, PowerPoint presentations, interactive quizzes and media clips.

This resource was not static and announcements were used to highlight any new materials added or to promote relevant training and additional study opportunities. New materials or information was uploaded on a weekly basis by one member of the team; however on occasions small group discussions took place to confirm the suitability of the materials. As all members of staff and learners were enrolled on this course, everyone then received this information. If any individual using the VLE had any questions regarding Equality and Diversity, members of staff were advised to contact a member of the HR team, and learners could contact the Learner Services team in the first instance. The relevant team would then forward the question onto the most appropriate person to respond.

It was hoped that as the learners were able to explore this new material at their own pace they were more likely to participate in the learning process and take on board the importance of equality and diversity. No matter which curricular programme learners had embarked upon, it was considered crucial to galvanize them with the capacity to work and live successfully within a diverse society. As the subject matter could be perceived to be out with the central function of the curriculum, by introducing the VLE for all, it goes some way towards mainstreaming the equality duty into the life and work of Motherwell College, in that equality is considered routinely, without the promoting of others (EHRC 2012).

The numbers of learners and staff accessing this resource was 240 individuals in the first 3 months. This number may appear limited; however this could be a consequence of the time of year it was launched. One distinct feature of the review was that learners and staff from an extended number of curriculum programmes, such as photography, ICT, hospitality, engineering, social sciences and care had accessed the materials. In addition, if the resources had been used by staff in class, there may actually have been wider dissemination than can be measured. This method of analysis of the VLE usage is a simplistic way to measure its effectiveness; nevertheless it does appear to suggest that this process of making resources available to a diverse group of learners and staff has been positive.

The next step?

During the summer vacation a review of the VLE took place. Even within a relatively short space of time, some links required updating and new materials were added prior to the commencement of the new academic year. Given that the learner induction was changing from paper-based to on-line it was decided to incorporate the VLE – Equality for You” into this and rebrand it “My Equality” as part of “My College”: Student Induction 2012/13. Pop-up messages and announcements will continue to be used to highlight new material or training opportunities.

A team approach will continue to be maintained as the mainstreaming of equality is not the concern of one person, but of the whole college community. Commitment to ensure currency of materials can be a challenge. Materials can go out of date easily in this sector; however six monthly reviews by two members of the Equality and Diversity group with input from others if required should reduce the potential for this. As a group we remain keen to monitor how frequently the materials are being accessed and by whom. In the first six weeks of the new session the VLE has been accessed by 750 individuals, significantly more than the previous session. Even though the number of individuals using the VLE has been recorded, it did not quantify the quality of the individual’s experience. This will be the challenge for the forth coming session during which we intend to devise a checklist to appraise the contents of the VLE as well as formally considering in conjunction with a self-evaluation framework how this VLE and its contents might enhance the progression of equality of opportunity.

References

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