

# SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES

## EQUALITY COMMITTEE

Thursday 13 May 2004

### MINUTES

**Members:** Professor Elisabeth Croll (Chair)  
Mrs Jan Airey  
Dr Fareda Banda\*  
Dr Stephanie Blankenburg  
Ms Antonia Bright  
Mr Omar El-Kheiry\*  
Ms Nazima Joomun\*  
Mr Awad Joumaa\*  
Mr Ravi Nadarajah\*  
Dr Akin Oyetade  
Dr Timon Screech\*

**In attendance:** Mrs Karen Clarke (Executive Secretary)  
Ms Zoe Davis  
Ms Jo Halliday  
Mr Terry Harvey  
Mr Rory Howie\*  
Miss Emily Crofts\*\*  
Miss Rachel Leigh Carter (Minute Secretary)

*\* those marked with an asterisk were not able to attend the meeting.*

*\*\* attended in place of Mr Rory Howie.*

#### 14 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2004 were **APPROVED**.

#### 15 Matters Arising

i. *Staff grievances*

The Chair noted that this is a rolling report that should be put on the next meeting's agenda. It was **AGREED** that Karen Clarke would ask Rory Howie to include applications to Employment Tribunals in the report.

ii. *Terms of reference*

The Diversity Advisor reported that the revised terms of reference had been agreed by Executive Board (EB).

iii. *Equality & Diversity policy*

It was reported that EB had **APPROVED** the Equality & Diversity policy and agreed that it should be forwarded to the next meeting of Finance & General Purposes Committee (F&GPC) for approval.

- iv. *Harassment policies*  
The staff policy had been approved by EB. However, as the student policy had not yet been drafted, the Diversity Advisor thought it best to wait until both policies could go to Staffing Committee together. The student policy would be ready for the next EC meeting.
- v. *Nursery Provision*  
The Diversity Advisor reported that she would be meeting with a colleague from Birkbeck College on Friday 21 May, to discuss the possible use of their nursery. It was **AGREED** that the Diversity Advisor should email committee members before the next meeting with an update on the situation.
- vi. *Student Grievances*  
The Committee considered a report from the Deputy Secretary, noting that the report gave a summary of formal student grievances between September 2002 and August 2003. The Deputy Secretary pointed out that a formal report would in future be presented to the Governing Body each year in the autumn. In response to a query from the Chair, Jo Halliday explained that none of the grievances listed in the paper had been made on the basis of gender or race. She was asked to amend the form to clarify this and to point out that the figures in brackets represented HESA category codes. The Deputy Secretary pointed out that the range of informal grievances was wide, from an initial query to the completion of informal methods of resolution. The Committee asked for the chart once amended to be forwarded to the Learning & Teaching Policy Committee.

## **16 Mechanisms for consultation**

The Diversity Advisor expressed concern over the apparent lack of consultation between committee members and the groups they represented. As those in this category were absent, it was **AGREED** that the Diversity Advisor would speak separately with members and report back to the next meeting. It was noted that non-academic representatives did not represent specific departments.

## **17 Religion and Belief Policy**

The Committee considered the draft policy on Religion and Belief from the Diversity Advisor. She explained that it was based on a template from the Equality Challenge Unit that had been modified for SOAS. This draft policy was for staff only as a separate policy was required to take account of student needs. It was **AGREED** that the following amendments should be made to the policy:

- i. Under point 1, ‘belief system’ should be changed to ‘beliefs’.
- ii. At point 2, *Dress*, the sentence beginning ‘SOAS imposes no dress code...’ should read, ‘SOAS imposes no dress code which prohibits the wearing of items such as hijab, kippah or mangal sutra’. The sentence beginning, ‘the only

limitations..' should be deleted and the indentations on the remaining paragraphs be removed.

- iii. At point 3, *Religious Observance*, the words 'make reasonable efforts to ...' and the two sentences which follow should be deleted. The Chair said it was important that policies did not commit the School to practices it could not do or services not possible to provide and that some decisions were outside the Committee's remit. The Diversity Advisor pointed out that the HR Director had commented on the draft policy and had assured her that it was in line with School policies. It was considered that the policy should include a reference to the Student Services web site where there is information on places of worship.

In the second paragraph, the sentence beginning 'There is likely to be some flexibility ....', should be removed. The next sentence should begin, 'However, line managers will make every attempt, where possible, to ensure ...'. It was noted that there were plans for the HR Department to review policies relating to leave and career breaks and that these would have implications for the policy on Religion or Belief.

- iv. Point 4 should read '*Leave for Religious Festivals & Occasions*'. The sentence beginning, 'In the interests of equality, ...' should be deleted. It was noted that part-time hourly paid teachers did not have leave that could be taken. The Diversity Advisor was asked to explore the implications for this group of staff.
- v. At point 5, *Extended Leave*, the words 'for example' should be included in the first sentence to read, 'If a member of staff ....for the purpose of, for example, going on pilgrimage,....' and the second paragraph should be removed. The Committee pointed out that requests for a variety of different types of leave are already dealt with sympathetically and that leave for religious purposes should be taken out of an individual's annual leave quota.
- vi. Point 6, *Food Requirements*, should be changed to 'SOAS undertakes to provide a variety of food which takes into account the various faith groups in the School'.
- vii. The word 'propaganda' under point 7, *Offensive Actions or Behaviour*, should be replaced with 'information'.
- viii. The first paragraph under point 8, *Implementation and Responsibilities*, should read 'All line managers are responsible for familiarising themselves with this policy

and should take all factors into consideration when making decisions'. The third paragraph should be amended to take account of cases where the head of department is the line manager. The Diversity Advisor was asked to make the amendment.

It was generally considered there should be wider consultation on the policy. The Diversity Advisor was asked to make amendments based on the comments made and send the policy to the Staffing Committee for their consideration. The policy would then come back to the Committee before going to EB.

## **18 Sexual Orientation Policy**

The Committee considered the draft policy on Sexual Orientation from the Diversity Advisor. The policy was based on a template from the Equality Challenge Unit and had been modified for SOAS. The Diversity Advisor said that transgender issues are separate from those about sexual orientation and that although there was no legislation for transgender issues, a bill was going through parliament and was likely to become law by the end of 2005. After much discussion it was decided that references to gender assignment should be taken out of the policy and that a separate policy be drawn up to cover these issues. It was **AGREED** that the following amendments should be made:

- i. It should be made clear in points a) and b) that this refers to staff and students.
- ii. Point h) should be deleted.
- iii. Point g) should be changed to 'LGB issues will be included in all equality training and monitored along with other equality issues'. The Committee discussed the need to look at how harassment based on sexual orientation is monitored. The sensitive nature of this area would have to be considered when including this in monitoring procedures.

The Diversity Advisor was also asked to clarify point f) to ensure that the School did not commit itself to something it could not do. It was **AGREED** that the policy should go to Staffing Committee before going to EB.

## **19 Disability Policy**

The Committee considered the draft Disability policy from Zoe Davis, the Student Disability Officer, who pointed out that the policy included many practices that were already done within the School. She said that the policy complied with part 4 of the DDA (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act [*SENDA*]), and the QAA's Code of Practice. Because of the implications the policy had for learning, it would need to go to the Faculty Learning & Teaching Committees and the Learning & Teaching Policy Committee as well as Staffing Committee and EB. Because of the length of the policy it was suggested that only the sections that were relevant to a particular committee be sent. It was **AGREED** that the following amendments should be made:

- i. 'Mobility' should be added to the list of medical conditions in section 2.
- ii. Point c) in section 3 should read 'SOAS becomes as accessible as possible both.....'
- iii. The last sentence in section 4 should read, 'The Equality Committee with the advice of the Disability Officer will encourage the creation of policy and guidance to ensure successful implementation and monitoring of this policy'.

The Diversity Advisor asked whether the Disability Liaison Group could operate as a sub-committee of EC. The Disability Officer explained that it had been set up to inform her of what was happening on disability issues throughout the School. The Chair pointed out that if it had formal committee status, it would have to have members from EC at its meetings and produce formal minutes and agendas for meetings. The Disability Officer said it was a user group and an informal report once a year to EC would be more practical.

## **20 Student Retention Rates**

A report on student retention was received from the Widening Participation Officer. The Academic Registrar felt considered the way the data had been analysed led to misleading conclusions and that it was necessary for the data to be presented on a faculty basis in order to give a more realistic picture of retention rates. It was **AGREED** that the paper should be re-submitted at the next EC meeting and that the Academic Registrar and the Diversity Advisor should communicate with the Widening Participation Officer about the kind of analysis required by the Committee.

The Chair noted that reports of this kind were very important and formed part of the EC's monitoring duty to the School.

## **21 Progression of Students**

A report on the student progression was received from the Academic Registrar, who said there was nothing surprising about the figures. He pointed out that some numbers were small and, in percentage terms, appeared to be more significant than they actually were.

## **22 Update on Equality Training and Impact Assessment Exercise**

The Diversity Advisor thanked Committee members for participating in the equality workshop. The outcomes had been circulated by email and would be revisited at a later date. She said that the Staff Development Manager and herself were considering proposals from equality trainers, to provide training for all staff. A decision on which company to use would be made shortly.

Tenders had also been received from consultants to carry out the impact assessment exercise. The Diversity Advisor and the HR Director would be making a decision on this in the near future. The recruitment and selection procedure for academic staff, the promotions procedure for academic staff

and the grievance procedure for students would be assessed in this exercise.

**23 Any other business**

The Chair thanked Committee members for the work done over the past year and acknowledged Stephanie Blankenburg who would not continue as a member for the coming year due to study leave. Special mention was made of the Diversity Advisor who had not only ensured the efficient running of the committee, but was also an asset to the School.

**24 Date of next meeting**

The date had not yet been confirmed.

