

Tactics for constant discomfort: mainstreaming EO

A contribution to the Panel theme: 'How to Achieve Mainstreaming'

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There is to be no equivocating. The theme has been set: 'How to Achieve Mainstreaming'. So I will avoid any ambivalence about whether or not mainstreaming is a good idea...and cut straight to the chase.

'How to,' of course, requires a set of bullet points; I'll get to them. But I need first briefly to indicate my interpretation of 'mainstreaming' and therefore what the bullet points might contain.

We know we have **not** got mainstreaming when we consider student pass rates but not pedagogy; or when we worry about diverse managers but not diverse management practices. We know we are not in a mainstreaming situation when we hear the words: 'we must make sure we have an EO section in this report' or 'we really need indigenous input on this' stated during a meeting. That's equity garnish; it's not what mainstreaming is.

Now some might consider this view a bit harsh. They would say that if the promotion meeting does get to think about gender balance, or ethnicity questions *at all*, EO is pretty much mainstreamed. When there is *any* consideration of the ethnicity or gender or work and family balance by, say, the management team, EO is practically there in the mainstream.

For some others my negative definition entirely misses the point. For these people, real mainstreaming has occurred not simply when EO questions arise at the genesis of initiatives rather than added on later, but when equity questions *no longer need to arise*.

On this view, mainstreaming will be with us when gender and race etc are no longer an issue. If all people are treated the same, regardless of gender, ethnicity, disability, age and so on, we will have achieved genuine mainstreaming, because equity will have been well and truly integrated. This neo-liberal view of equity is popular amongst many, and asserts that mainstreaming-as-normalising is the ultimate aim of equity programmes. When we no longer have to think about it; when everyone is equally regarded, then 'bingo!' we are there: mainstreamed or integrated in the core business of the truly equitable institution.

This is not a view I hold. Such neo-liberal views of equity are based on a simplistic fantasy, a fantasy of sameness – a view which ultimately annihilates difference. In my opinion, the *maintenance of difference* is the basis of equity, mainstreamed or not. I will return to this in one minute.

Others do not see mainstreaming as neo-liberal integration, but as a particular institutional arrangement or structural formation. For instance, as Margaret James puts it: mainstreaming is ‘the incorporation of equity functions into the major mainstream area they best fit with – human resources and student services – rather than maintaining a separate unit with direct access to senior management’ (James, 1999)¹.

Again, I have to quibble. I would argue that there is no one institutional arrangement which is necessarily better for mainstreaming; there are several possible structural possibilities. Separate units or incorporated services – either might be elements of mainstreaming. For instance, employment and educational gains by Maori or Pacific staff or students may rely on separate units from which policy and initiatives are developed.

The maintenance of difference

To return to the question of equity as requiring ‘the maintenance of difference’ rather than ‘the achievement of sameness’ ...

My view is that mainstreaming occurs when ‘difference’ is not annihilated through integration, but rather is welded into consciousness – when, say, the senior management people *automatically* see ‘very few women’ when they look at the list of proposed honorary doctorates, or speakers for graduation, or ‘no Maori applicants’ when they look at a list of short listed candidates for a job; when managers and leaders say to their units: ‘this looks thin on support for Pacific Islands initiatives’ and people are not taken by surprise. Or when the head of the Budget Committee notices that the Social Sciences Faculty, for instance, has no well-argued application for equity funds in its Budget Plan Case.

In other words, mainstreaming requires that difference is part of the way we all inevitably ‘see’ our environment.

This ‘seeing’ of course does not occur spontaneously in most people – and I would go so far as to say that it is extremely rare in people from dominant groups. Because it is my job, scanning to room or the discussion for diversity is an automatic reflex. I notice that the people at a meeting (or conference) for instance are all white, and mostly male (or female). When someone with little or no equity consciousness walks into that meeting they do not see ‘men’ or ‘Pakeha’, they see their colleagues – Jim for whom they have respect, Bob who is a pain in the neck, Mary who is well-organised, and so on. The fact that they are all white, or mainly men, doesn’t register; and, if one was of a neo-liberal frame of mind, one would say ‘nor should it!’.

Discomfort as a mainstreaming strategy

If mainstreaming might be about maintaining awareness of difference and its effects, how might an institution assist in the development of such ‘seeing’ – or equity consciousness, and its twin, equity culture?

¹ Margaret James, ‘I want to be remembered when I am not in the room,’ Reflections on delegation, devolution, mainstreaming and integration.’ Paper to Conference of Equal Opportunity Practitioners in Higher Education in Australia and New Zealand, Massey University, 1999, page 7.

I think developing equity culture is about generating and maintaining constant *discomfort*.

I say this because comfort and complacency are the enemy of equity. Equity *cannot be* a natural or comfortable state in the mainstream of an organisation, such as the university, characterised by competition, status, hierarchy, and western cultural assumptions and tradition. Equity is not something that will slip easily into such an institution, making it ‘whole’, or ‘better’ than it is.

Rather, equity is an interminably uncomfortable ideal that must of necessity be struggled for, constantly.

One of the paradoxes of mainstreaming is that although in practice it entails struggle and constant movement, the term ‘mainstreaming’ has an aura of comfort and complacency. It sounds cosy, contained, inclusive – ‘in the flow of things...’ There is something deliciously *comfortable* about being in the mainstream. Mainstreaming does not sound like constant difficulty, debate, unease, discomfort.

Mainstreaming sounds like an achievement, a success, a point of arrival.

Mainstreaming has to be quite the opposite of cosy and sorted – it has to be a state of constant mindfulness; of alertness, intelligence, data gathering, strategy, humour, movement, and anxiety, and lack of peace.

While I suggest that moves to mainstreaming are ideally *tactics towards a state of constant discomfort*², I am not suggesting that mainstreaming equity should be *irritating*. Being irritating is *always* a bad idea; it is counter-productive to create discomfort by whining and bleating, moaning and being outraged. Aside from anything else, moaning and anger are easily dismissed. Others can ignore it, or ‘hear’ it and say they are ‘sorry’ you feel that way.

They can’t so easily dismiss clear arguments, consistently made. The tactics for constant discomfort need to be carefully considered, and need to be the product of good policy, quality data and sound argument.

Compulsion and discomfort

Let’s get to the ‘how to...’ . You may have guessed that I think that the tactics for constant discomfort also require a dose of discipline. And on this point I take a rather unfashionable line.

A necessary strategy for mainstreaming is the tactic of inducing ongoing self-surveillance.

² I need to thank my colleague Professor Erica McWilliam of Queensland University of Technology for the idea of a ‘tactic for constant discomfort’.

Remember Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon – a tricky architectural plan for a prison where the inmates behave well because they do not know when they are being watched; as a result they constantly 'watch' themselves.

Foucault, the famous social philosopher, used the Panopticon as a metaphor for explaining how social control works in modern societies. Societies these days, he argued, do not need overt punishment to keep control of the population – they do not need police or working video cameras on every street corner, or to nail people to crosses, or hang or torture them in public places as they used to. All that is required is the recruitment of people in their own surveillance so that they discipline themselves, constantly. They internalise the jailer.

Now I do not want to suggest that jail metaphors are really useful for us in equity. Obviously, the last thing we need is for people to associate EO with compulsion and threat – although a bit of compulsion and threat might go a long way in some cases!

I do think, however, that we need to assist everyone, and particularly those in high places in the university to internalise an **uncomfortable alertness to, knowledge of, and a desire for EO**, if we are serious about it.

Tactics for constant discomfort

My bullet points, then are about how might we get maximum discomfort value and maximum self-disciplinary effects in our institutions of higher education. First,

- equity must have high visibility and real status within the institution. The person responsible for equity must be a Pro Vice-Chancellor³ or equivalent. She or he must be a professor, and have an excellent research profile and reputation in the institution. She must report directly to the Vice Chancellor or the CEO. Her committee must report directly and regularly to the Senate and the Council [governing body] of the University, so that equity matters are on the agendas and minutes of the top committees and in front of the most powerful people. This can be a source of constant discomfort at this level, and questions about equity cannot be fobbed off to the 'lower orders'.

What are downsides to making EO an important plank of the Centre/Registry? According to Margaret James (1999) 'the EO agenda might be taken over and used to enforce more control from the top'⁴. She and others are concerned that EO's place at the top table will mean it will become an additional stick in the hands of an

³ There is another point which must be made: at the University of Auckland we have a PVC Maori as well as a PVC EO. This position is predicated on the Treaty of Waitangi, and assures a place in strategic planning for the indigenous people. This is not an equity position, because at root, Maori are not an 'equity' group. They are included as an equity target group for EO, but in national, historical, cultural and political terms, they are not an equity group in the sense that they are not one of several minority groups whose rights of access and success in New Zealand institutions need to be assured. They are the signatories of an agreement which assured their primary status as sovereign people with rights and resources.

⁴ James, op cit., page 5.

increasingly audit- and accountability-driven centre, and used to beat and control those in the periphery – something which will be resented and resisted. This *is* a danger; and the skill of the PVC EO is to be seen as genuinely assisting the Deans etc rather than merely policing them.

On the other hand (and you may have gathered this already), I am not averse to a bit of policing and control which generates self-discipline. But in my view, that will only work if it is tagged to funding. Hence my second bullet point:

- equity initiatives need to be openly linked to central funding and budgetary mechanisms, and these must be linked to **outcomes**. It is the case that units often spend money on equity initiatives and not properly evaluate them. It is considered that if the ‘equity box’ can be ticked, and that ‘we have an equity programme for x’, this is enough. It is only when funding is attached to equity *outcomes* that units will start taking a more considered and sustained look at their programmes.

At the University of Auckland all units are required to include in their annual applications for funding, projects under the heading ‘EO’ – that is, EO is listed along with research and teaching as an expected budget item. This has sometimes meant that heads of units have tended to make the ‘garnish gesture’, and throw in an equity initiative as an afterthought, or because they ‘have to’. However, when such initiatives are evaluated and ongoing funding is contingent on that evaluation, the garnish approach will quickly disappear. (A downside is that the garnish approach is a safe one, and anything that forces Deans and managers away from the garnish approach runs the danger of creating major resentment. A Maori colleague, in response to my anxiety about low numbers of Maori enrolling at the University said: “ Just make university education free for all Maori students who are eligible and there will no longer be an access problem”. She is partly right – it would make a major difference overnight. But imagine the dominant community reaction! Not even a liberal government like ours could withstand it).

Of course, higher educational institutional funding still comes to some extent from Government, and individual institutions are unlikely to make finance a lever for EO unless they are forced to. My third bullet point towards mainstreaming of EO concerns central and state Government. To ensure mainstreaming,

- Governments need to require institutional performance with regard to equity targets. In New Zealand, the university’s annual reports to government, which supposedly assure ongoing funding, must detail equal opportunity targets and successes. When governments stop merely noting these, and start making aspects of ongoing funding contingent on equity successes as an aspect of universities’ core business, then the garnish approach will become less popular.

There are some very obvious difficulties with this – government relationships with universities are fraught enough in terms of sovereignty issues, and the strings-attached approach could be easily abused to control and manipulate higher education institutions. However, if the state is serious about equal opportunities, such ‘external’ pressure will be a short cut to mainstreaming.

Other bullet points in the ‘how-to mainstream’ or ‘how to generate constant discomfort’ list must refer to a suite of high quality institutional policy statements, and resulting practices, including:

- Multi-level institutional **strategic plans** for EO practices and policies which are agreed to and formally reported on at the highest level.
- Institutional **mission statements** that assert EO as a priority
- Faculties required to include EO in Academic and Resource Plans, and in annual **Budget** requests
- EO included in university’s triennial **Academic Plan, and Research Plan** – under its own heading, as well as integrated throughout the documents
- EO outcomes to be a **mandatory part of performance appraisals** at all levels including Deans and heads of units
- EO reporting included in **all departmental reviews**
- EO representatives or observers (otherwise known as ‘spies’) on all significant University **committees**
- Regular high quality centralised, widely available **reports** on staff and student numbers by equity categories, and up-to-date reputable demographic data against which to measure equity successes
- The production of **public annual EO reports** by all Departments and Units
- The integration and encouragement of a sophisticated **research** and **theory** culture in EO - one which goes beyond number crunching and bottom-line monitoring but also addresses some intellectually and conceptually difficult questions which aim to change the ways we all think and can think about EO

There are many other important issues relevant to mainstreaming, most notably the relationship between target ethnic groups and EO, which have not been able to be discussed here due to time constraints. (Or maybe it I have not made that the focus of my talk because it is a Difficult One, but it is also a Crucial One).

Nevertheless, these practices listed here are some of many which are implemented within the University of Auckland. Each of them allow a garnish approach (eg; there might be an EO section in the Academic Plan, but it could be comfortably nestled at the back or under its own discrete heading, and not bleeding all over the document) – but with the ‘strategies for discomfort’ applied from senior levels and through the finances of the units, the pressure is on to ‘mainstream’.

In short, the question about how to mainstream is a question about how to refuse closure, to keep movement, to encourage self-imposed discomfort, alertness and knowledge in every meeting, every committee, every practice and every document.