

# Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Is At The Heart Of Everything We do

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For a UK based university faculty that delivers a bespoke Work Based suite of under and postgraduate programmes to a major South African client, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) agenda is important (Wall, 2013, 2017; Ferrández-Berruenco, Kekale, and Devins, 2016). Pre pandemic, EDI was about access to professionally relevant education that resulted in having an internationally recognised qualification where it previously had not existed, and a possible route to promotion. Early into the COVID pandemic, EDI became about continuity and contingency of the whole suite of programmes (Adnan and Anwar, 2020; Rapanata et al, 2020) when suddenly access to computer equipment and Wifi were impacted on by the global message 'STAY AT HOME'.

Our students were not in the workplace to access their work IT kit nor the online or resources part of their education and the lecturers could neither travel to South Africa or within it.

Immediately, the Programme Teams reached out to the continuing students to ascertain the significance and implications of their personal IT challenges. We had a group of students who were on their final module and we knew that we would be able to provide them with additional time to complete their studies but we were less certain on the impact of working from home on students who were on the 3rd module of a 6 module sequence. What we did know was in a Certificate (SCQF7) Level group of 100 students, no one in class (the face to

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face or contact sessions) had a laptop (neither personal or work owned); in a Diploma Level (SCQF8) class of 80 students perhaps 2 or 3 students had laptops in class and in a similarly sized Degree level class perhaps 10 students had laptops with them. By contrast all the honours and masters students have company issue laptops because of the nature of their role.

The response rates and the results of an immediate and quick survey of our certificate, diploma & degree students confirmed only a 1/3rd of the students had access to IT kit and a decision to press pause on their programme was made (losing in effect a trimester of learning) for our continuing students but also delaying our next intake. This pause to permit us to work on solutions that addressed EDI.

Our next intake were students who had already been selected (for May 2020 start) but whose acceptance onto the course was based on them having access to a computer or laptop, but we now had evidence to show for many, probably most, their access was to a communal workplace computer/laptop that could not simply be taken home to permit work & study to continue. EDI had taken on an additional meaning and we had to act quickly to address.

Our action was to develop resources to guide our students on how to use their personal mobile devices to best advantage. To try and keep up the momentum of study & learning (The initial and draft version of article was been written on my mobile phone! Right thumb only!).

These resources are now incorporated into our induction programme which we completely redesigned and delivered in a phased approach over a number of months to slowly and surely ensure our delayed 'new' intake could engage with the Programme materials & gain IT literacy. This also helped the team gain a greater insight into the EDI challenges of a new intake.

Our third measure to address EDI was to adopt a model affectionately referred to as the W(right) & Johnstone (the programme leader at the time) model whereby we purchased two laptops, made arrangements to have mobile Wi-Fi devices & in room facilitators in

country at the normal venue, with the UK based programme team streamed in live to deliver the classes. Travel within South Africa in September 2020 was permitted but we had to account for social distancing, use of masks and a range of other restrictions including limitations on class size which meant double teaching and a start time of 06:00 because of the time difference. All in the name of equality and inclusivity of access and sustainability during adversity.

Finally having emerged from a third wave of the global pandemic, a South African winter, renewed home working measures (1st June - 31st August 2021), followed by a cyberattack on the Company which resulted in Desktops and laptops being wiped clean amidst a continuing need and desire to continue our programme delivery as well as start our September 2021 intake it we repeated our survey to establish equity of IT access.

Our students responded to the following three questions.

### **Question 1**

During any period of third wave restrictions will you have access to a PC, laptop or similar device that will enable you to remain connected with GCULearn AND allow you to submit work including assignments? (Please provide a very short clear statement on this which should simply include "YES" or "NO")

Answer: yes/no

### **Question 2**

If any new and future restrictions resulted in us being unable to deliver via the traditional 2-day Esselenpark contact sessions, would you be able to join a remote on-line 2-day event from your home?

Answer: yes/no

### Question 3

If any new and future restrictions resulted in us being unable to deliver via the traditional 2-day Esselenpark contact sessions, would you be able to join a remote on-line 2-day event from your work?

Answer: yes/no

The response rate as much as the responses have both been surprisingly favourable, this is partially because the Company have embraced a realisation that their IT resources and infrastructure needed some attention and that business continuity is partially reliant on IT kit and systems such as VPN to permit home working and if WFH were required to be reintroduced or retained on a large-scale action is required. The findings of the most recent survey have steered and will continue to steer our next actions. We are now looking at the cost and logistics to install camera systems that will facilitate Hybrid learning from a range of venues in South Africa simultaneously taking care that IT does not take precedence over the pedagogy of work based learning and the interactions between the students which are key to learning are not lost and that gatherings of students remains a key aspect of the programme. We continue to drive our next phase of a heart felt desire to address E, D and I for our South African students and sustain our delivery of true work-based education programmes.

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