Introduction

In this chapter we explore a number of different responses to issues of inequality within higher education (HE) and go on to argue, with reference to an extended case study, that a ‘mainstreaming’ approach provides an effective and progressive way of addressing these inequalities within the context of learning, teaching and assessment in HE, and moreover transcends some of the limitations of other approaches. Our geographic focus is mainly on the UK but we draw on a number of international studies and examples to develop our argument, with particular emphasis on attempts in the USA to embed ‘multiculturalism’ within the curriculum.

We have argued previously (Shaw et al., 2007) that a ‘diversity’ rather than ‘equal opportunities’ approach is required to deal with the complexities of identity among students, and to address the patterns of privilege and disadvantage that have been embedded in the HE system for centuries. Our argument, which built upon the model devised by Wilson and Iles (1996) contrasted the externally driven, peripheral, group-focused and operational ‘equal opportunities’ model with the internalised, central, individualised and strategic ‘diversity’ model. We have continued to explore the implications for this approach within the HE sector (May and Bridger, 2010; Shaw, 2008; Shaw, 2009; Shaw et al., 2008), drawing on a ‘business case’ approach that demonstrates the benefits to individual institutions and – crucially – to all students. Throughout our research we were consistently struck by the importance placed on social justice issues by HE institutions (HEIs), and the way in which staff, especially senior staff, were at pains to draw on the history and culture of the institution to present it in a favourable light in
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terms of its social justice credentials. This led us to an understanding of the importance of drawing on this drive for social justice in addressing inequality at the most fundamental level – the inequalities that are still, after many decades of equality legislation, embedded within the structures, strategies, policies and practices of HEIs.

The notion of social justice is a defining factor in an increasingly popular approach to equality and diversity, namely the ‘mainstreaming’ approach. ‘Mainstreaming equality’ in its current form has been linked in part to the Fourth United Nations World Conference on the Status of Women in 1995 (see Rees, 1997) though it undoubtedly has much deeper roots in feminist theory and for this reason is often still linked to gender equality alone. The approach explicitly seeks to build a more just society as well as to improve individual outcomes and is characterised by attempts to challenge current patterns of power and privileges within social and organisational structures, rather than simply helping specific groups to negotiate a path through these structures (see Goodman, 2001). The approach has received sustained attention within the European Union (Hinds, 2006; see also Equinet, 2007 and Shaw, 2004), although its adoption across the different member states has been uneven. It is also a strong feature of policy in the USA, though under different names such as ‘multiculturalism’, where it builds in particular on the civil rights movement and the resulting focus on race equality. As we will go on to discuss later, practice in US institutions drawing on a ‘multiculturalism’ approach has many parallels with the more European ‘mainstreaming’ approach and there is strong potential for mutual learning, particularly in relation to diversity practice in the HE sector, which is the main focus of this chapter.

Within the UK HE sector, which has been our primary area of focus, the dominant debate relating to equality and diversity has been around the ability of students to access the limited resource of a higher level education, in other words the ‘widening participation’ or ‘widening access’ debate. The emphasis has been for many years, and still is, on the point of access for students, and therefore on increasing the actual diversity of the student body without necessarily changing any of the policies, systems or structures within institutions or the national HE systems. A challenge to this was posed by the Universities UK/Standing College of Principals publication From the Margins to the Mainstream (Thomas et al., 2005), which argued for the need to ‘embed’ an approach to widening participation in HE and this ran alongside an increasing programme of incentives to retain rather than simply recruit students from lower socio-economic groups and those with disabilities. However, there was little