

# Promoting Equal Opportunities on the Web

## *A guide for Departmental Web Officers and web authors*

Promoting equal opportunities on the website means using language and images that recognize and embrace the University's diversity.

This is a good-practice guide for anyone who writes or checks any content for the University website. You need to be aware of the way University policy and equal opportunities legislation affects this part of your work.

### *General good practice*

- Get to know your audience, what they want from your web pages and what level of language works best for them.
- Ensure the content includes information relevant to all groups. Describe alternative arrangements, such as for users with mobility issues on a field trip, or translation facilities for key information.
- Test the equality impact of publicity material by getting feedback from equality-seeking groups. This will help ensure their needs are considered.
- Include links to the University's equal opportunities and disability policies in your department's information for students, staff and prospective students.
- Give users a clear contact point for queries or complaints. A procedure should be in place for dealing with complaints promptly and fairly and in accordance with the University's Complaints Procedure.
- Include a named contact for prospective students with a disability to approach to discuss their personal requirements.

When in doubt, consult the Equal Opportunities Office or Disability Services for clarification.

For ease of use, this document is divided into six sections:

1. Good practice: language
2. Why use inclusive language?
3. Good practice: Tone
4. Good practice: Pictures
5. Good practice: Format
6. Checklist for publicity material on the web

## **1** *Good practice: language*

If you want a general audience to understand you, write in a style that is straightforward, direct and clear. Use plain English for general publications such as prospectuses, leaflets and maps and directions. Only use more complex language in publications where you know the target audience will understand it, such as teaching material.

If it is essential for text to be understood quickly (for example, in an emergency), or skim-read, it should be written in plain English, regardless of the intellectual level of the audience.

- Use an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words
- Use the active rather than the passive tense
- Use everyday English instead of jargon and explain acronyms
- Use words that refer directly to the reader like 'we' and 'you' instead of 'the University' or 'the applicant'
- Avoid making assumptions about what people know. Staff and students may not be familiar with the way the University is organised and managed
- Be concise

You can find more information at [http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free\\_guides.html](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free_guides.html)

Microsoft Word can generate Readability statistics. These give a general guide to how easy it is for others to understand what you have written.

Contact the Web Office to find out about the *Writing for the Web* course that covers this subject in more detail.

## 2 Why use inclusive language?

Inclusive language is written at a level that is suitable for the people who will read it, which does not reinforce stereotypes or negative attitudes, and which does not make assumptions about your readers.

**To reflect our diversity:** We have over 2500 international students. Around 500 home students are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, over 350 have a disability and nearly 2000 are mature students. The gender split is 56% female, 44% male across the institution, but this varies greatly between departments. There are at least eight different religions and faiths represented at York. Many member of the University community identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex. Staff are equally diverse, so it is important that our publications show this.

**To be more welcoming:** Many users of the University's website use English as a second, third or fourth language. Eight of the top ten countries accessing our website speak languages other than English. Prospective and current students may have a good grasp of English language and culture, but their family and advisors may not.

**To reinforce our own priorities:** The University's Corporate Plan stresses the importance of internationalisation and inclusivity. Keep in mind that the University's aim is to promote equality and diversity amongst staff and students and in particular to admit more students from non-traditional backgrounds. We all need to work towards this goal.

Recent legislation introduced a 'positive duty' to promote equal opportunities. This means the University needs to promote equality proactively as well as to ensure that unlawful discrimination does not happen.

Equal Opportunities legislation covers race, gender, disability, religion, belief and non-belief, sexual orientation, age and gender identity. The University's equality policies also cover HIV status, socio-economic background and class. The basic principle is that nobody should be treated less favourably because of these factors. We should all aim to promote positive attitudes to equality and diversity, so that everyone working, living, and studying at the University is treated with dignity and respect.

### **3**     *Good practice: tone*

The way you put your message across can make a big difference to its impact. You are expected to use good judgement to ensure that what you say or write is appropriate for a diverse audience.

We should aim to use language that is neutral and value-free to avoid reinforcing prejudice. Certain words or phrases are associated with negative attitudes and using them may cause offence. This is a complex area, but these are some basic guidelines to assist you:

- Mention gender, ethnicity, disability or sexuality only if it is relevant in the context.
- Use language that refers to diversity in a positive way. Avoid loaded terms such as 'crippled', either by using a different, neutral word or re-wording the sentence.
- Use people's chosen way of describing themselves, including their preferred titles.
- Use gender-neutral language. For example, use the term 'staffed' rather than 'manned'. Unless you know the person's preferences, use 'partner' rather than husband/wife or boyfriend/girlfriend: some people may have same sex partners.
- Some terms are no longer acceptable and may cause offence. Use 'Black' or 'Asian' rather than 'coloured', 'has a disability' rather than 'handicapped'.
- Use adjectives rather than nouns to describe a person's qualities. For example, instead of 'she is a diabetic' use 'she is diabetic'. Avoid referring to someone as if one feature defines the whole person.
- Use the term 'ethnic' for all ethnic groups not just non-white or minority ethnic groups. Everyone has an ethnicity.

If you need further information on the use of appropriate equality-related language, please contact the Equal Opportunities Office or Disability Services.

### **4**     *Good practice: pictures*

One of the purposes of using a variety of images in publications is to illustrate that the University is a diverse community and has a welcoming environment.

- Use images taken in natural rather than posed settings.
- Invite members of equality groups to participate, ensuring that their contribution is voluntary, without necessarily drawing attention to their particular qualities.
- Some characteristics (such as class, sexuality or hidden disabilities like dyslexia) may not be obvious from a photograph and so diversity needs to be emphasised in other ways, for example where relevant within the text.
- Avoid stereotyping by showing images of women, people of all racial backgrounds and disabled people in a variety of non-stereotypical roles.

Show the University as it really is. Take a positive approach without misleading users. For example, if the gender balance of a department is currently weighted to one sex, make it clear the minority group is welcome and (where possible) that they have a good experience.

Contact the Publications Office to see the library of images available for general use.

## **5 Good practice: format**

Pages that are well-designed, with accurately-formatted content, are easier to understand. Where possible, use the University's web template or Web Content Management System.

It is harder to read from a screen than from a printed page, so people use web pages differently from books. Most people scan to get the gist of a page first, then read it if the content looks relevant to them.

Formatting text correctly is an important way to make your content clearer and easier to follow. It should be easy for a user to tell by a brief scan of a page which parts of the page are headings, body text, tables and navigation.

- Use clear and consistent headings that stand out from the body text.
- Ensure you use meaningful text in headings, captions and call-outs. This allows people to scan the page easily.
- Use a reasonably short average line length. Web pages are harder to read than print.
- Set up forms so the questions flow logically and give plenty of answer space.

### **5.1 Formatting for web users with disabilities**

Web authors must ensure that their pages are accessible to users with disabilities.

- If possible, use the University's Web Content Management System or template.
- Take Web Office advice on creating colourschemes. Users with colour vision impairment or dyslexia find some combinations of colour, background, type style and type size very hard to read;
- Provide an alternative: use ALT attributes for images, create a transcript or captions for video and audio.
- Present links to any alternative formats that are available in appropriate ways. Avoid putting a link to large-text versions in a tiny text size.
- Check that original files are properly formatted before creating pdf files of them.
- Consult users with disabilities when possible, or ask Disability Services for advice.

The Web Office can provide help and advice to staff on making web pages more accessible.

For further information, please contact the Web Office, Disability Services or the Equal Opportunities Office.

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## Checklist for publicity material on the web

- Is information available in alternative formats (e.g. Braille, large print, or on CD)? Are there clear instructions on how to obtain them?
- Do photographs or other graphic images reflect the University's diversity? Can users put this in context to get a representative picture of the University or department?
- Are there links or references to support or facilities available, eg accessible accommodation for disabled users, the availability of alternative diets?
- Is the text written in plain English? Are acronyms and jargon defined where the target audience might not know what they mean? Is it possible to use shorter words, sentences and paragraphs?
- Is text formatted using headings, paragraphs, and tables appropriately for the content?
- Do generalisations about the University reflect a diversity of experience?
- Does the content show awareness of issues facing users from equality-seeking groups?
- If case studies are used, do they include names from different cultures?
- Are names spelt/pronounced correctly?
- Does the language refer to diversity in a positive way, avoiding words that perpetuate stereotypes?
- Have the pages been spell-checked and validated?
- Is reference made to the DDA, the Race Relations Amendment Act, and other equality legislation, with links in appropriate places?
- Are EO policies made available to all staff and students on the relevant web pages?
- Are people who need this information likely to understand or be able to read English? Do the pages need to be translated?