

## **Equal opportunities in employment idea and deciding about occupation – ESEIG’s case**

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### **Abstract**

This paper concerns the presentation of the results of a research conducted by the author in June 2010. The presentation is preceded by a short introduction concerning the importance of equal opportunities in employment issues in the European Union. The research was conducted within the author’s doctorate research; and as a pilot for a future basic study. The research was conducted among students of Escola Superior de Estudos Industriais e de Gestão (ESEIG) in Vila do Conde, Portugal. The research was conducted by means of the questionnaire technique. The aim of the research was to explore the students’ attitudes towards equal opportunities in employment principle. Three detailed aims of the research were as follows: 1) describing students’ general views on equal opportunities in employment idea; 2) describing the role of a company’s equal-opportunity in employment policy as a factor in making decision about taking a job position; 3) describing the role of a school in shaping students’ attitudes towards the equal opportunities in employment idea. The results show that generally surveyed students accept the European Union’s actions aiming to prevent discrimination in employment. What is more, in a situation of choice of the employer, students would be ready to perceive the company’s equal-opportunity in employment policy as an important factor influencing their decision. Moreover, despite the fact that students do not consider their knowledge on discussed issues as vast, generally they are interested in it, and perceive school as an appropriate place for promoting this idea.

**Keywords:** equal opportunities in employment, students’ attitudes, deciding about occupation, role of a school

### **Introduction**

The equal opportunities in employment idea was clearly expressed by the European Union in the year 2000 in directives 2000/78/EC and 2000/43/EC. By means of these directives the European Union declared to promote and support actions aiming to carry out the equal opportunities in employment idea; as well as prevent and oppose discrimination on grounds of gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion and other beliefs, racial and ethnic origin. The European Union implements this idea not only by means of law, but also by means of initiatives like the ‘2007 European Year of Equal Opportunities for All’ (Decision No 771/2006/EC) or Community Programs like EQUAL or PROGRESS, which aim to help putting ideas underwritten in directives 2000/78/EC and 2000/43/EC into practice. The idea of equal opportunities concerns not only employment but also other areas of life like education, healthcare, social security etc.

Janowska (2002: 32-36) shows that the legislation determines the organization’s success and its working. The European Union’s directives should be adapted to the national law in order to motivate companies to comply with the equal opportunities in employment principle.

In the enterprises' actions the idea of equal opportunities in employment often becomes an element of corporate social responsibility policy. In short, the idea of corporate social responsibility refers to a principle according to which 'businesses should take account of all the groups affected by what they do' (Parkes and Harris, 2008: 296), including employees. This means that employees should be treated with regard to their needs and rights.

The difficult economic situation and high unemployment rate may discourage companies to implement the idea of equal opportunities in employment. In times of crisis, the excess of employees on the labour market leads to the enterprises not having to care about their image or about their employees. However, this kind of policy gives short-term benefits. It is difficult to change a poor company's image, whereas a strong brand, which includes a strong employer brand, is built for years. Therefore, even in times of crisis it is worth taking care of employees and building organizational culture based on ethical values. Moreover, as mentioned above, respecting the employees' rights according to the equal opportunities principle is also one of the European Union's priorities; and membership in the European Union obligates member states to respect and implement its directives.

The aim of this paper is to present part of the results of the author's research, devoted to equal opportunities in employment issues. The aim of the research was to investigate students' attitudes towards the discussed issues. The research was conducted in June 2010 among students of Escola Superior de Estudos Industriais e de Gestão (ESEIG) in Vila do Conde, Portugal. The research sample consisted of students from Human Resources, and Accountancy and Management faculties. The research was aimed at first-year and third-year students. The research was conducted by means of the questionnaire technique. The data was collected during classes, therefore the sample is not representative as only those students who were present during the classes participated in the research. The results and conclusions refer only to the surveyed sample. The figures and percentages relate to the entire surveyed sample, unless they are accompanied by an appropriate commentary. As the sample is not random, and does not include all students of Human Resources and Accountancy and Management, the elaboration on the data only concerns basic measures of descriptive statistics.

The results presented in the following elaboration are divided into four sections: respondents' characterization, students' general views on equal opportunities in employment idea, equal opportunities idea and deciding about occupation, the role of a school in shaping students' attitudes towards the equal opportunities in employment idea. The elaboration also contains the summary of main conclusions.

### **Respondents' characterization**

101 students in the research participated. There were 78 female and 18 male respondents.

The youngest respondent was 18 years old and the oldest was 40. The average age for described population was almost 23 (22,64). Most respondents were in the age of 18-26 (87,2% of respondents who answered the question).

There were 53 respondents studying Human Resources and 46 respondents studying Accountancy and Management. There were 32 respondents studying in first year and 66 respondents studying in third year. 32 students of Human Resources studied in first year, and 21 students of this course studied in third year. All students of Accountancy and Management studied in third year.

58 respondents admitted that they had been taking employment. 40 respondents had not been employed.

4 respondents described themselves as being a member of a minority in terms of disability, 1 person described herself as being a member of an ethnic minority, 7 respondents considered themselves as belonging to a religious minority, and 2 respondents described themselves as homosexual. In total, 14 respondents belonged to one of the above minorities.

Almost half of surveyed population (49 respondents) had friends or acquaintances who were disabled. One third of respondents (30 people) knew someone who is homosexual. As much as 60,4% of all respondents (61 people) were in contact with people of another religion beliefs; and 46,5% of all investigated students (47 people) knew someone of another ethnic origin. In total, 78 respondents knew someone who belonged to one of the above minorities.

There were 15 respondents who had heard of their family members or friends being discriminated while applying for a job. All these respondents were female. The described cases of discrimination considered age (3 indications), disability, ethnic and race affiliation, sexual orientation, gender, being pregnant (2 indications for each type of discrimination), religion beliefs, being over-qualified for a job position and favoritism (1 indication for each type of discrimination).

Only 4 respondents admitted that they had been discriminated while applying for a job. 2 of these respondents were female and 1 was male. Described cases of discrimination concerned appearance, gender and attitude towards someone's health problems.

### **Students' general views on equal opportunities in employment idea**

In this section the author is presenting the following issues: views on equal opportunities in employment idea as a field of corporate social responsibility, preventing discrimination in

employment, working with different social groups, working in a diverse work environment, the European Union's actions.

In one of the questions the respondents were asked to indicate how important individual areas of responsibility for companies' managers should be, using the following Likert scale: 1-completely not important; 2-not important; 3-neither important nor unimportant; 4-important; 5-very important. Table 1 presents frequency of answers. Answers *very important* and *important*, and *completely not important* and *not important* were aggregated.

**Table 1**  
**Equal opportunities in employment and other fields of corporate social responsibility**

	Field of CSR:								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
important	82	80	72	91	80	69	<b>72</b>	80	89
not important	1	0	1	0	2	6	<b>4</b>	2	1
neither important nor unimportant	16	19	25	8	17	24	<b>22</b>	16	9
Total	99	99	98	99	99	99	98	98	99

1. comply with all laws and regulations
2. create value for the local community, in which it operates
3. enhance environmental conditions
4. ensure confidentiality and control the use or transfer of information
5. invest in the growth and well-being of employees
6. maximize value for shareholders
- 7. offer equal-opportunity employment**
8. produce useful and high-quality goods/service
9. satisfy customers needs

Source: own elaboration (2010)

The aim of this question was to verify, how respondents estimate offering equal-opportunity employment in comparison to other fields of corporate social responsibility; whether it is as important as other areas of corporate social responsibility, whether more or less. Fields of responsibility were derived from another study (Lamsa, Vehkaperä, Puttonen, Pesonen, 2008: 53), and arranged in an alphabetical order.

The data above indicate that offering equal-opportunity employment should not be, in the respondents' opinion, the most important worry for company's managers. What is more, respondents indicated, that it is almost the least important field of corporate social responsibility and placed it only on seventh place. It is interesting however, that generally students are very well disposed towards anti-discrimination actions conducted by the European Union (see Table 2, p. 5); and it would seem that the students who declared positive attitude towards the European Union's actions should estimate offering equal-opportunity

employment as an important field of corporate social responsibility for managers. Yet, the discussed field was pointed out as unimportant even 4 times more, than other fields of corporate social responsibility (excluding maximize value for shareholders field), and nearly one fourth of respondents classified offering equal opportunity employment as neither important nor unimportant, what it suggests is that they do not perceive it as a crucial issue in companies.

In another question the respondents were asked about their opinion about the European Union's actions aiming to prevent discrimination in employment on grounds of six dimensions: age, disability, ethnicity, gender, religion and homosexuality. Respondents were asked to refer to every dimension of discrimination using the following scale: 1-I totally disagree; 2-I disagree; 3-neither agree nor disagree; 4-I agree; 5-I totally agree. Table 2 presents the frequency of answers. Answers *I totally agree* and *I agree*, and *I totally disagree* and *I disagree* were aggregated.

**Table 2**  
**Opinion about preventing discrimination by European Union**

	Preventing discrimination on grounds of:					
	age	disability	ethnicity	gender	religion	homosexuality
agree	88	94	86	88	87	85
disagree	5	2	1	2	4	2
neither agree nor disagree	8	5	14	10	9	13
Total	101	101	101	100	100	100

Source: own elaboration (2010)

The data above indicate that there is strong support for the European Union's actions aiming to prevent discrimination in employment, among investigated students. Students are well disposed mostly towards disabled, and less – towards homosexuals; but the number of respondents who support action preventing discrimination in employment is still large. This means that young people are very open and understand the need for eliminating the barriers in employment.

One of the indicators of openness and supporting equal opportunities in employment is the preference of working with different social groups. During the study, respondents were asked to declare, with whom they would not mind working. The question concerned seven different social groups, and respondents were asked to define their willingness to work with each of them using the five-point scale (see p. 5). Table 3 presents frequency of answers. Answers *I totally agree* and *I agree*, and *I totally disagree* and *I disagree* were aggregated.

**Table 3**  
**Willingness to work with different social groups**

	I would not mind working with:						
	Elderly person	Disabled person	Homosexual person	Man being my boss	Person of other ethnic origin	Person of other religion beliefs	Woman being my boss
agree	81	82	84	81	86	85	82
disagree	3	2	2	3	2	3	3
neither agree nor disagree	17	17	15	17	13	13	15
Total	101	101	101	101	101	101	100

Source: own elaboration (2010)

The data clearly shows strong openness towards the mentioned social groups. The results are very similar to the results obtained from another question aiming to check, how supportive students are for actions preventing discrimination in employment (see Table 2, p. 5). However, it can be observed, that respondents are a little less willing to work with different social groups than supporting anti-discrimination actions. Some answers which expressed support for the anti-discrimination action, in the question about working with persons from different social groups came to *neither agree nor disagree* answer. This may mean that some respondents support the idea of equal opportunities in employment and are well disposed towards anti-discrimination action, but they are not really convinced about it, and/or that it is hard for them to imagine working with persons from different social groups, and/or that they are not prepared to face such situation in reality. Nevertheless, the investigated students show a high level of openness towards different social groups, which can derive from a large amount of social experience with these groups (see section Respondents' characterization, p. 3).

Some sources argue that diverse work environment helps companies achieve better work results and influence better atmosphere at work (International Society for Diversity Management, 2007: 10). The respondents were asked to indicate how far they agree or disagree with this opinion. The respondents could express their opinion using the five-point scale, from *I totally disagree* to *I totally agree* (see p. 5).

Most of the respondents (73 students) agree or totally agree with the statement that diverse work environment affects better atmosphere at work, which means that students would accept a diverse workplace. What is more, neither gender, year of study, nor employment was

a dividing factor between the respondents. Only the course of study differed respondents' opinions in that matter. 78,8% of Human Resources students answered *I agree* or *I totally agree* to discussed statement, and 67,4% of Accountancy and Management students answered in the same way. Detailed data is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
**Opinion about diverse work environment affecting better atmosphere at work according to Course of study**

			Diversed work environment affects better atmosphere at work				Total
			I disagree	neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I totally agree	
Course of study	Human Resources	Count % within Course of study	2 3,8%	9 17,3%	28 53,8%	13 25,0%	52 100,0%
	Accountancy and Management	Count % within Course of study	3 6,5%	12 26,1%	16 34,8%	15 32,6%	46 100,0%
Total		Count % within Course of study	5 5,1%	21 21,4%	44 44,9%	28 28,6%	98 100,0%

Source: own elaboration (2010)

Students were also asked how far they agree with the statement that diverse work environment creates better work results. The respondents answered similarly as in the previous question – 72 students agreed or totally agreed with discussed statement. Similarly as in the previous question, course of study differed respondents a little. 80,8% of Human Resources students agreed or totally agreed with the statement that diverse work environment affects better work results, and only 63,1% of Accountancy and Management students answered in the same way.

The respondents were also asked about their general views on equal opportunities in employment idea and the European Union's actions concerning the above issues. The respondents could express their opinion using the five-point scale, from *I totally disagree* to *I totally agree* (see p. 5).

In one of the questions students were asked about how far they agree with the statement that equal opportunities in employment issues are very urgent and important. As much as 81 respondents agreed or totally agreed with the above statement, and there was no respondent who would disagree or totally disagree with that statement. This result shows that students are aware of the importance of discussed problems and that these issues need solving. Other individuals who answered this question chose third answer – *neither agree nor disagree*.

The aim of the next question was to verify whether the European Union's actions regarding equal opportunities in employment are perceived as needed or not. Distribution of answers is similar to the distribution of answers of the previous question. 81 respondents agreed or totally agreed with discussed statement; 18 respondents did not answer unequivocally; and 2 respondents did not answer this question. This result shows that most of the students are convinced that the European Union should take action against discrimination in employment and propagate the idea of equal opportunities in employment.

### Equal opportunities idea and deciding about occupation

In one of the questions respondents were asked to indicate importance of several factors, which could influence their decision about getting a job. Every factor was rated separately. The question was asked in a following way: *Imagine that when you finish education on current level, you will be **making decision about getting a job** in one of the companies, which offered you employment. How important will the following factors be in making the decision?* The respondents had a five-point scale at their disposal, from *completely not important* to *very important* (see p. 4), to indicate importance of every factor. Table 5 presents frequency of answers. Answers *very important* and *important*, and *completely not important* and *not important* were aggregated.

**Table 5**  
**Equal-opportunity personal policy and other factors influencing decision about employment**

	Factors influencing decision about employment:													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
important	88	78	79	85	88	78	78	<b>79</b>	72	90	87	92	77	76
not important	0	0	1	1	0	4	1	<b>1</b>	1	0	0	1	1	1
neither important nor important	12	21	19	13	11	19	21	<b>19</b>	27	10	13	7	22	23
total	100	99	99	99	99	100	100	99	100	100	100	100	100	100

1. additional benefits (e.g. subsidizing accommodation, food, sport activities, training)
2. company's prestige
3. company's reputation
4. compatibility of values espoused by you with the company's values
5. development opportunities
6. diversified workmates
7. flexible working hours
- 8. personal policy conducted according to principal of equal opportunities in employment**
9. programs of Corporate Social Responsibility run in company
10. promotion opportunities
11. real interest in the job offered
12. salary
13. the way you were treated during the recruitment process
14. quality of services/goods provided by a company

Source: own elaboration (2010)



The data above indicates that equal-opportunity personal policy would be considered as important or even very important by most of the respondents, when making a decision about employment. This means that most of the students, who participated in the study, are not only salary-oriented but also look for non-material aspects of work, and would like to work in an environment, where the equal-opportunity principle is respected. This result corresponds with the distribution of answers to other questions, which clearly indicate that students support the idea of equal opportunities in employment. Of course, in the research there was no question about the students' decisions concerning occupation in times of crisis and lack of job positions. Probably students would accept job position in any company. Nevertheless, there is proof that in an ideal situation students would choose a company conducting its policy according to equal opportunities in employment idea. This is a clear announcement that present students, as future employees, will accept and support companies' actions aiming to implement this kind of policy.

### **The role of a school in shaping students' attitudes towards the equal opportunities in employment idea**

The last matter worth considering is the role of a school in shaping students' attitudes towards equal opportunities in employment principle, and their views on it. This section describes the following concerns: participating in classes on equal opportunities in employment issues provided by the school; interest in equal opportunities in employment issues; knowledge of these issues; using measures of law to enforce rights; and promoting the equal opportunities in employment idea by schools.

A view of how a school contributes to disseminate the knowledge of equal opportunities in employment issues may be given to us by analyzing the answers to the question about participating in such classes. 63,4% of respondents (64 people) declared participating in classes during which equal opportunities in employment issues were discussed. What is interesting, students studying Human Resources participated in these classes more frequently than students studying Accountancy and Management. As much as 83% of Human Resources students participated in classes on equal opportunities in employment issues, while only 43,5% of Accountancy and Management students participated in such classes. These differences may be caused by a specific character of Human Resources studies which concentrate more on issues regarding employment in general.

In one of the questions respondents were asked to describe their interest in equal opportunities in employment issues. They could choose within five possibilities of answers, from none

interest to very big interest. Most respondents stated that their interest in equal opportunities in employment issues is vast and very vast – right up to 78,4% of respondents who answered the question. What is more, none of the students indicated a complete lack of interest in the discussed matter. This means that most of the surveyed students is aware of the discrimination problems and is willing to broaden their knowledge in the field of ensuring equal opportunities in employment. Moreover, cross-tabulation analysis reveals that women were more interested in equal opportunities issues (85,3% women who answered the question) than men (58,8% men who answered the question). Detailed data is presented in Table 6. Other respondents' features did not differentiate them.

**Table 6**

**Interest in equal opportunities in employment issues according to Gender**

			Interest in EO				Total
			narrow	neither narrow nor vast	vast	very vast	
Gender	female	Count	1	10	42	22	75
		% within Gender	1,3%	13,3%	56,0%	29,3%	100,0%
	male	Count	2	5	7	3	17
		% within Gender	11,8%	29,4%	41,2%	17,6%	100,0%
Total		Count	3	15	49	25	92
		% within Gender	3,3%	16,3%	53,3%	27,2%	100,0%

Source: own elaboration (2010)

One of the questions was dedicated to estimate the students' knowledge of equal opportunities in employment issues. Respondents were asked to describe their knowledge using five-point scale, from no knowledge to very vast knowledge. While interest in equal opportunities in employment issues is vast, the knowledge of these matters is not. Only a half of respondents who answered the question indicated that their knowledge of equal opportunities in employment issues is vast (44 respondents) or very vast (6 respondents), which means that the students may face obstacles while learning about the discussed issues or that they are interested in these issues but do not attempt to broaden their knowledge. 5 students described their knowledge as narrow, and 45 – as neither narrow nor vast. As one could predict, those respondents who declared vast interest in equal opportunities in employment issues, declared also larger knowledge of these issues than respondents who described themselves as not being interested in equal opportunities issues.

The respondents were also asked how far they agree with a statement that they know their rights regarding equal opportunities in employment issues. The respondents could express their opinion using the five-point scale, from *I totally disagree* to *I totally agree* (see p. 5).

Only 43 students agreed or totally agreed with a statement that they know their rights regarding equal opportunities in employment; 46 students did not answer unequivocally; and 10 students disagreed. This result corresponds with results obtained from the question about students' knowledge of equal opportunities in employment issues.

Two statements in this section were dedicated to the issues related to the use of measures of law concerning equal opportunities in employment in a situation of discrimination. The respondents could express their opinion using the five-point scale, from *I totally disagree* to *I totally agree* (see p. 5).

As much as 74 respondents agreed or totally agreed with the statement that they would use available measures of law to enforce their rights in a situation of discrimination in a recruitment process. Only 1 respondent disagreed with this statement; 24 respondents did not answer unequivocally.

What is more, there were even more respondents declaring using available measures of law to enforce their rights in a situation of discrimination during the promotion or training process. As much as 82 respondents agreed or totally agreed with this statement; and 17 respondents did not answer unequivocally. None of respondents disagreed with this statement.

The above results show that investigated students want to see the principle of equal opportunities in employment being preserved and are determined to enforce it in their future work.

In the following study, four questions were dedicated to explore students' opinions about the role of schools in promoting the equal opportunities in employment idea. The respondents could express their opinion using five-point scale, from *I totally disagree* to *I totally agree* (see p. 5).

In one of the questions respondents were asked how far they agree with a statement that they would like their school to cooperate with companies which act according to equal opportunities in employment principle. As much as 81 respondents agreed or totally agreed with discussed statement; and 18 respondents were not sure the answer. What is more, there was no student who would disagree with this statement.

In the next question students were asked how far they would agree with a statement that their school should provide to students information about equal opportunities in employment issues. Up to 89 respondents agreed or totally agreed with above statement, and 10 respondents did not answer unequivocally. Similarly to the previous question, there was no answer expressing disagreement.

The aim of the next question was to find out how far students agree with a statement that their school should provide to students information about equal opportunities in employment issues within classes. As much as 85 respondents agreed or totally agreed with discussed statement; 13 respondents did not answer unequivocally; and only 1 respondent did not agreed with this statement.

In the last question in this section, students were asked how far they agree with a statement that their school should be involved in propagating the idea of equal opportunities in employment. As much as 85 respondents agreed or totally agreed with discussed statement; and 14 respondents were not sure the answer. Similarly to the first two questions, there was no respondent who would disagree with discussed statement.

The above results show that students perceive school as an appropriate place for education in the field of equality issues. These results also indicate the students' need for such education.

### **Summary**

Most data indicate that surveyed students show strong support for the European Union actions aiming to put equal opportunity in employment principle into practice – from 85 to 94 students support anti-discrimination in employment action (see Table 2, p. 5); from 81 to 86 respondents are willing to work with different social groups (see Table 3, p. 6); 73 respondents agree that diverse work environment introduces better atmosphere at work; 72 students agree that diverse work environment produces better work results; 81 students agree that equal opportunities in employment issues are very urgent and important; and 81 respondents agree that the European Union's actions regarding equal opportunities in employment are needed. What is more, 79 students considered a company's equal-opportunity personal policy as an important or even very important factor influencing their decision about employment.

The data also indicates that school can be an important factor affecting positive attitude towards equality issues. 63,4% of surveyed students declared participating in classes during which equal opportunities in employment issues were discussed. What is more, most of surveyed students would like their school to be involved in promoting this idea. 81 respondents would like their school to cooperate with companies which act according to equal opportunities in employment principle; 89 respondents agree that their school should provide the students with information on equal opportunities in employment issues; 85 respondents agree that their school should provide the students with information on equal

opportunities in employment issues within classes; and 85 respondents agree with a statement that their school should be involved in propagating the discussed idea.

The collected data indicates also that students do not estimate their knowledge of equal opportunities in employment issues as vast – only 50 respondents declare vast or very vast knowledge of equal opportunities in employment issues. What is more, only 43 respondents declare knowledge of their rights regarding discussed issues. However, the surveyed students are interested in these issues (76 respondents), and determined to enforce their rights in a situation of discrimination. As much as 74 respondents agreed or totally agreed with the statement that they would use available measures of law to enforce their rights in a situation of discrimination in a recruitment process. Moreover, there were even more respondents declaring using available measures of law to enforce their rights in a situation of discrimination during the promotion or training process. As much as 82 respondents agreed or totally agreed with this statement.

Reassuring, the collected data indicates that in general the respondents are very open towards different social groups, and that they support the European Union actions aiming to prevent discrimination in employment and implementing the equal-opportunity in employment principle. The investigated students are interested in the discussed issues and would like to broaden their knowledge also by means of classes and the school's other actions. What is more, respondents are willing to choose employers who act according to equal-opportunity principle and are determined to enforce their rights in a situation of discrimination. However, the surveyed students do not estimate their knowledge on a high level. In addition, respondents do not perceive offering equal-opportunity employment as important as other fields of the companies' corporate social responsibility. However, it can be stated that students could be perceived as a group who could support equal-opportunity principle in their future work, both as managers and as regular employees, if only they would receive appropriate knowledge and training.

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### **Legal acts**

Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin

Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation

Decision No 771/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 May 2006 establishing the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All (2007) – towards a just society