

# QMUL Positive Action Conversation Guide

Practical guidance for supporting equitable development and progression

## 1. What is Positive Action?

Positive Action refers to proportionate, lawful measures that help remove barriers, improve participation, and enable the development of people from groups that are underrepresented or disadvantaged.

It does not give automatic or guaranteed advantage to any individual, nor does it mean selecting someone because of a protected characteristic. Instead, Positive Action is about creating fairer conditions and ensuring equal access to opportunities — supporting QMUL’s Strategy 2030 vision to open the doors of opportunity and become the most inclusive university of its kind anywhere. This aligns with our institutional KPI 3 ambition to increase representation and progression by gender and ethnicity across all levels of staff as part of developing a truly diverse, engaged and equitable workforce.

## 2. Legal and Ethical Context (Equality Act 2010)

Under the Equality Act 2010:

- Employers may take steps to help people who share a protected characteristic overcome disadvantage, meet different needs, or participate more fully where underrepresented.
- These steps must be proportionate, evidence-based, and voluntary.
- Positive Action is distinct from Positive Discrimination, which is generally unlawful.

Examples of Positive Action and Positive Discrimination:	
Positive Action (lawful)	Positive Discrimination (unlawful)
Offering a skills workshop specifically to women because they are underrepresented at senior levels in the organisation.	Promoting a woman over a more qualified candidate simply because the organisation wants more women at senior level.

At QMUL, Positive Action is a proportionate, evidence-based approach that supports fairness, inclusion, and equality of opportunity across the employee lifecycle.

## 3. Positive Action at QMUL: Real Examples

Positive Action often refers to use in recruitment; however, at QMUL it happens across the whole staff lifecycle. Examples include:

- [Aurora Programme](#) – Leadership development for women in higher education, which supports 20 women from QMUL a year in their leadership journey.

- [B-MEntor](#) – Targeted mentoring for staff from minority ethnic backgrounds, helping address progression gaps and build networks and visibility.

[SEAL Programme](#) – A facilitated action-learning space for women in leadership roles, enabling shared problem-solving, peer support, and leadership confidence.

- Skills Workshops for the Academic Promotion Cycle – Demystifying promotions and supporting underrepresented groups, improving access, preparedness, and quality of applications.

- Equal Merit Toolkit – Guidance for lawful, proportionate tie-break decisions on recruitment panels, supporting fair, consistent decision-making where candidates are of equal merit.

Positive Action at QMUL involves targeted development, mentoring and fair recruitment practices to address underrepresentation and support equitable progression.

## 4. When is it Appropriate to Have a Positive Action Conversation?

Positive Action conversations are appropriate in a range of situations across staff lifecycle, including:

- One-to-one meetings focused on development or progression
- Appraisal, PDR, or probation discussions
- Career development or promotion planning conversations
- After staff feedback indicating barriers or lack of confidence
- When signposting relevant development programmes
- As part of inclusive leadership and talent development

These conversations should not be limited to recruitment or used reactively only.

## 5. Preparing for a Positive Action Conversation

Before the conversation, consider:

- Evidence – What inequalities or barriers exist?
- Purpose – Is the focus development, progression, confidence-building, or signposting support?
- Opportunities – Which programmes or actions are appropriate?
- Language – Use clear, neutral, encouraging, non-assumptive language.
- Environment – Ensure confidentiality and adequate time.

## 6. Useful conversation starters:

- “I’d like to talk about your development goals and what support might help you achieve them.”
- “QMUL offers some targeted development programmes designed to address underrepresentation. Would you like to hear more?”
- “Some colleagues find these opportunities helpful for building confidence and visibility.”

## 7. Do’s and Don’ts

### Do:

- Treat Positive Action as standard practice.
- Be transparent and supportive.
- Focus on individual aspirations, informed by evidence of structural barriers, rather than assumptions about one’s identity.
- Proactively share information about opportunities.
- Encourage reflection and self-agency.
- Follow up and revisit development plans.

### Don’t:

- Imply someone was chosen because of a characteristic.
- Make assumptions about identity or needs.
- Pressure participation.

## 7. Where to Get Support

[EDI Team](#) – Provides advice on the legal and policy context of Positive Action, supports managers to apply it lawfully, and looks after a range of development programmes.

[Organisational and Professional Development Team](#) – Supports access to learning, additional training courses, and coaching.

Contact your relevant Faculty Strategic HR Partner, who can be found listed as part of the [Human Resources Lead Team](#)