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Equality and diversity: Wakefield College

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Brief description

Wakefield College has an outstanding approach to equality and diversity. Senior managers provide strong leadership in ensuring the college provides an inclusive organisation. An advanced practitioner for equality works with teachers to promote effective learning strategies and manage challenging behaviour.

Overview – the college's message

'Inclusion is truly a part of Wakefield College's raison d'être. Our district encompasses some of the most deprived and affluent wards in the country, which means that we have to think creatively about engaging those for whom further education is not a natural progression or who do not appreciate the opportunities that learning can bring to enhance their life-chances.

For many years, our commitment to equality and diversity has featured in our strategic priorities. But these are only words and it is the implementation, the establishing of mechanisms and the development of an inclusive culture, which has an impact on our students and staff. While the college has always promoted equality and diversity, it could sometimes be seen as a bolt-on, rather than as a foundation on which we build all that we do.'

Sam Wright, College Principal

The good practice in detail

So what were the issues?

The college didn't have any specific large-scale issues which needed to be addressed. What it did want to achieve was a reputation for excellent practice in equality and diversity and to be seen by its communities as an inclusive college where everyone is supported to fulfil their potential.

Was it an easy journey?

The journey to being an outstanding college in terms of equality and diversity practice is never-ending, but for us there were some key steps along the way.

- Establishing a comprehensive equality and diversity monitoring framework and acting swiftly when issues are identified.
- Establishing formal groups involving stakeholders to steer work related to specific equalities strands and ensure involvement in key decisions.
- Investing in the key resource of an Advanced Practitioner for equality and diversity to support the promotion of equality and diversity in teaching and learning.
- Working in partnership with schools and other agencies to effect seamless transition for learners with disabilities.
- Investing in comprehensive assistive technology to enable students to fulfil their potential.
- Ensuring staff understand expectations in terms of equality and diversity practice and how to access support and resources to ensure that they meet the required standard.
- Harnessing the talents and enthusiasm of a vibrant Students' Union to spread the message.

What difference has it made?

'While success rate gaps may fluctuate from zero to a few percentage points, we have achieved a culture in which equality and diversity is embedded – it is never an afterthought', says Sam Wright. 'Attitudes towards equality and diversity have changed – most staff "do" equality and diversity without even thinking about it! For those needing more support, we have the expertise and resources to provide this.'

The college's six steps to success

- Know what your vision is for equality and diversity in your organisation.
- Set out and agree at the highest level a plan for how this will be achieved.
- Ensure that staff and students understand the organisation's expectations with regard to equality and diversity from the outset.
- Provide regular, formal opportunities to engage with stakeholder groups internally and externally to inform practice and strategy.
- Decide what you want to measure and ensure that you have the resources to collect and analyse relevant data.
- Act on what the data tell you and tell stakeholders what you've done.

The Advanced Practitioner's role

The Advanced Practitioner's remit is to embed best practice in equality and diversity. Key activities include:

- developing a comprehensive report on equality and diversity data. This enables the Advanced Practitioner to have an overview of key trends across the college. She can therefore play a significant role in identifying targets and developing strategies which are not addressed elsewhere. An example of this is an investigation at Wakefield College into low disclosure of disability and take-up of additional support by learners from minority ethnic groups
- delivering staff development covering all aspects of equality and diversity to teaching and non-teaching staff. This includes targeted training at programme areas and support for staff with specific development needs
- supporting tutorial groups, particularly in relation to concepts such as prejudice and discrimination.

Collecting and using equalities data to monitor the performance of different groups

Some outcomes are measurable. For example, data collection and analysis demonstrated an improved take-up of additional support from Asian learners in 2009/10.

Other benefits are often less easy to measure. Staff evaluations demonstrate positive impact on teaching practice. Tutors have reported:

- increased confidence in challenging homophobic language
- interest and awareness of festivals and human rights days which they have incorporated into their teaching
- improved learner understanding of discrimination and prejudice
- increased confidence in delivering tutorial sessions on cultural awareness.

The impact on learners and staff

Disability-specific breakout rooms have been created to facilitate engagement of learners on the autistic spectrum and those with ADHD, behavioural or mental health difficulties. While the college has always been committed to high standards for the support of learners with disabilities, it recognised that high success rates for learners with ADHD and those with mental health difficulties were more problematic to secure, and often the experience of college for learners with Asperger's Syndrome was troubled by anxiety. In response, two pilot projects were developed: the HUB room, a resource for learners in the first category; and an autism-specific resource room.

Don't be selfish!

Sitting on the floor or on the stairs is a health and safety hazard.
Let others pass.

The HUB is designed as a fast reaction to heightening anxieties. Learners with a behavioural or emotional need are identified (in agreement with their tutor), and given permission to leave the classroom to use the HUB. This is not a punishment but an alternative learning environment away from a busy classroom. It is permanently staffed by a specialist Achievement Mentor who works with learners to alleviate anxieties, encourage open dialogue with tutors and ensure early re-entry to the classroom following a discussion with all concerned. The impact of this service has been an increase in retention for these learners, and has promoted greater understanding for tutors and individual learners of these complex conditions.

The autism-specific resource offers learners a retreat for unstructured time and has proved successful in creating both a workspace and a social space (with a Wii and a film club). It also allows people to 'be autistic' in a safe environment. The room is deliberately out of the way of heavy foot traffic, with an anonymous name, so no stigma is attached. It is a low stimulation environment with an enclosed space within it for retreat if a learner needs to relax. A specialist support tutor for autism staffs this space and has a college mobile telephone to enable quick contact. The impact has been very good, with learners able to relax enough to manage all day in college.

The college's learner engagement and enrichment strategy is to embed learner involvement throughout all strategic decision-making and operational management processes. The aim is to create a culture of strong learner representation and involvement, and ensure that all learners have the opportunity to have a significant, positive impact on the college's provision. Learners' needs and wants are valued and their views listened to and acted on. Students are involved in planning and decision-making in staff/student committees such as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Group and the Disability Equality Advisory Group.

The annual student conference had a particular focus in 2011 – Respect. The conference was created and led by students at an external venue. Workshops were delivered by professionals from local and national organisations that worked on breaking down the barriers and stereotypes that young people face and in turn created more respectful people. The professional workshops were delivered by West Yorkshire Police, Turning Point and the NUS, among others.

The college's background

Wakefield College serves the Wakefield Metropolitan District and adjacent communities. The college has three large campuses: two in Wakefield and one at Glasshoughton in Castleford. They all cater for 16-to-18 year olds and adult learners, both full and part time. Higher education programmes are also delivered at all three campuses. There are sixth-form centres at the two Wakefield campuses specialising in GCE AS and A levels and other professional programmes for school leavers.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch here.

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