Written response to the recommendations from Elmwood College

1. General View of the Report

This is an extensive and in depth report which highlights many barriers with which Elmwood College can clearly identify. We welcome the recommendations in many of the areas, however, we feel that the report only reflects the generality of the situation in Scotland’s Colleges and we believe that some of Scotland’s Colleges are further ahead in actions than some of the report feedback would indicate. We have raised some of these issues in our response.

Many of the recommendations are already being actioned. However, where appropriate, we have indicated how we intend to implement other relevant recommendations.

2. Staffing and HR Related Issues

The College already includes the promotion of equalities in the Staff Charter. Staff in breach of these arrangements are subject to disciplinary action. In addition, we agree that the promotion of equalities should be an integral part of the job description of every member of staff. In order to commence this process, consultation will be required with union representatives to ensure that support for this is achieved.

- The College will continue to work with disability agencies to promote vacancies and encourage recruitment of people with disabilities. This will include continuing to promote disability equality with College managers and others who are responsible for the recruitment of staff.

- The College will continue to review recruitment procedures to ensure that they fully meet Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) requirements and do not indirectly discriminate against disabled applicants. The College routinely involves the Joint Consultative Committee on these issues. The review assesses the following areas:
  - the procedure for designing job descriptions and person specifications
  - the design of application forms
  - information sent to applicants
  - the availability of alternative formats
  - the procedure for shortlisting
  - the procedure for interviewing and selection including a review of reasonable adjustments
  - reviewing the effectiveness of recruitment training for managers
  - reviewing occupational health procedures in relation to recruitment

- Disability recruitment statistics will be monitored closely and action taken to reduce and, where possible, eradicate barriers to people with a
disability from entering employment and to review any barriers faced by particular groups.

- Monitoring amongst current staff with a disability will be reviewed to:
  - re-establish the numbers of disabled staff working for the College
  - establish whether there has been any change in staff identified as people with a disability
  - Investigate whether there is any under representation of disabled people, for example, for promotion or for staff development activities
  - Catalogue the experience of disabled staff working for the College and the barriers they have faced

The College will deliver appropriate in-house seminars and staff development sessions to ensure that staff continue to be fully aware of their responsibilities under the DDA and to ensure that disability equality is effectively promoted in the curriculum. The process of designing appropriate staff development opportunities is overseen and monitored by the Staff Development Team which draws from both senior and middle managers from all areas of the college.


The College would welcome the opportunity to be more involved with the implementation of “More Choices, More Chances” and are in agreement that it should have a national focus. New guidelines for ELS sums have widened the categories that fall under the term disability and now disability through social and emotional issues are also funded through this system. Colleges throughout Scotland have large numbers of individuals who would come under the category of having a disability and who would benefit from being involved in this initiative.

4. Mainstreaming Equality in Further and Higher Education

We feel that one of the comments made by an agency in this area did not reflect practice in the majority of FE Colleges and specifically not in Elmwood. Policies and action planning for equality issues, particularly disabilities, have been in place since 2001. The production of Disability Equality Schemes has highlighted this but has also brought to light that there is still further work to be done in this area. Most colleges recognise that the planning process now has to be mainstreamed throughout the college planning process, while to date; it has been the remit of specific groups throughout colleges. Debate at a recent Equality Forward group (which represents both FE and HE) highlighted that this has been recognised and is now being actioned. One of the main obstacles that both HE and FE institutions have to overcome is the timing of the various action plans that are now required to comply with legislation – these need to be brought into line with the institutions own evaluation and planning systems to avoid duplication. For session 2009-10 Elmwood hopes
to have pulled the current deadlines for updating of legally required action plans into line with its own evaluation and planning cycle, with work beginning in this for next session. This would include –

- Reviewing statistics on retention and achievement of ethnic minority and disabled students by implementing standing agenda items on Curricular Unit meetings
- Implementation of equalities items on agenda items in non-teaching teams
- Annual questionnaire sent out to curricular teams
- A mechanism to ensure inclusion of equalities issues in team/unit operational planning
- Overseeing progress in all areas through the equalities and diversity group

Elmwood produces statistics on a yearly basis relating to disability and has refined the process over the years. We currently track retention and achievement of disabled students across the college. The individual teaching units discuss these statistics at Team Meetings and responses made to senior management teams. Cross college support forum also responds to these statistics through the current Equalities and Diversity group and its related action plan. Plans for capturing this more formally in curriculum areas are now in place for the coming evaluation and planning cycle.

Stakeholder feedback was an integral part of the College’s DES and is something that Elmwood will now continue to seek on an annual basis from both internal and external stakeholders. The College will also be clarifying the mechanisms for ensuring that all disabled groups are formally and systematically engaged with the College.

A Disability Rep has been part of the Student Association Council at Elmwood for 3 years, and this post holder is a member of the College’s Equalities and Diversity Group. Through working with the student president, any views of disabled learners are brought forward to the SMT.

5. Legislative Awareness

Elmwood currently has a disability statement that it provides to all students at induction as part of a comprehensive portfolio of relevant policies. Tours of all support areas, with short talks by each of the managers of these areas are also part of the induction process and these highlight the students’ rights in terms of support.

However, Elmwood will now include more legislative related information into its induction materials and highlight this in posters and leaflets. The guidance team also provide a series of tutorials on equality issues but this will be reviewed to ensure that all relevant legislation regarding students’ rights with respect to disability is covered.
Whilst we see some value in providing a copy of the DDA for each student, we believe that we should continue to clarify legislation and how it impacts on students through distribution and explanation of the College’s Inclusiveness and Equal Opportunities Policies.

Over the last 7 years, the College has provided extensive training on the DDA to staff including an annual update. We also include DDA Training as part of the staff induction process for both support and academic staff. The challenge we face is offering the training in new and innovative ways to those staff who feel that they ‘heard it all before’ and then switch off to updates or let some vital information slide from their practices. Ideas or sharing of good practice in how to keep staff training in this area fresh would be welcomed across the sector. Elmwood recently used case studies where fictitious students from all curricular areas of the college, and with a range of support needs, were used to provide a training session for all staff. Careful planning went into the session to ensure that all participants, from cleaners to Heads of Unit would have a role to play in each scenario. This was mentioned as an innovative approach by HMie inspector at our recent inspection. A push to share techniques across the sector would be useful in this area.

The Toolkits that have been developed in relation to Disabilities by the Funding Council have been very useful and simple to use. They can immediately provide college staff with areas that need to be addressed.

6. Partnership Working

In practice, the College has one principal partner – the Council. The Council is however a complex organisation and the issue of partnership working can be as important an issue to address between Departments of the Council as it is with inter-agency scenarios. The two Departments that impact significantly on arrangements are the Education Department and the Social Work Department: both of whom have their own particular responsibilities and priorities. This can be a particular strength, e.g. working with a single administration, or it can be a problem, e.g. when the Council is driving hard for efficiencies. It is important in this situation for Colleges to have a strong and objective voice as well as a degree of independence in the assessment of need.

As a college we would welcome the regular review and monitoring of Partnership Matters to ensure a true partnership approach. Although the document is extensive, it is ambiguous in places and therefore open to interpretation which can mitigate attempts for genuine partnership work. Ensuring that inter-agency partnerships work in practice is vital as, in reality, this can become difficult where clients/students require input from many agencies, including colleges, and where one partner holds the key to funding that input. This may be a difficult issue to resolve but the whole ethos of working in partnership with outside agencies, which colleges have been doing for many years, is put in jeopardy if one partner (in particular the one holding potential funding) is not responsive to the assessed needs of people that are
being offered services from several partners. We will continue to work with partners from several sectors and hope that a national strategy can be developed to make partnership working more workable!

Another problem is the variation in information that comes from secondary schools to colleges. This can vary, within staff in the same school and it can vary greatly between different schools in a region. Joint training between college support staff and school staff who are involved in supported pupils with disabilities would be away forward in this area. Although sharing information is highlighted in Lifelong partnership document there is still a long way to go with this in practice. Further comments on partnership working can be found in Section 9 below.

7. Information

Views on information supplied by colleges, in particular from Kate Mc Closkey on prospectuses were interesting and Elmwood has recognised that its prospectus should be cleared however, about the activities that are core to a subject or qualification. To this end we are redesigning our procedures on admissions and ensuring that each course will have competence standard which will highlight practical skill levels required to successfully undertake a course alongside the academic levels that are required.

However comments from DisabledGo regarding college prospectuses may now under the DDA seem like overkill. Many college prospectuses, including Elmwood’s could do more to let students know about all the facilities that they can use while in college. Information of accessibility of the canteen etc may indeed be useful to students but as colleges under the DDA must ensure that these things are accessible, there comes a point when to mention that they are seems unnecessary and perhaps condescending to potential students who have disabilities. It should now be taken as read that all facilities are accessible as if they are not – it should be addressed. However we acknowledge that some additional information may be required in our prospectus and will address when designing our new version for 2009-10.

Most colleges provide excellent contact information in their prospectuses and encourage people, whether disabled or not, to contact appropriate people to answer any queries that potential students may have or to be invited in for a visit and a face-to-face chat.

8. Careers Advice

Several years ago the Careers Service provided Specialists Careers Advisers who main aim was to provide advice for those people with disabilities. This service has been badly missed at Elmwood College and across the FE sector. Mainstreaming advice for those with disabilities has lead to a poorer service for them and less representation in careers capacity at many planning and transition type meetings. Specialist Careers adviser knew their client group well and provided vital input and advice during their time at school and college and more importantly, the transition period in between the two areas.
We agree with the view of the NUS concerning Careers Advisers with a limited knowledge of the issues surrounding people with disabilities. Within FE colleges, time allocated to careers adviser through Careers Scotland is limited and only amounts in Elmwood case to one day per week. This makes it impossible for them to become involved in many of the meetings that are necessary to ensure that the needs of some disabled students are meet.

Career advice given in schools can be ad hoc with the level of knowledge varying from individual to individual and this can lead to potential students coming to college with very unrealistic expectations. School pupils are sometimes advised to apply for courses which academically they have no realistic chance of achieving fully. Although we at Elmwood are very good at setting people up to fail but we have found that the recommendations re choice of course from some schools would result in this outcome. We would welcome changes brought about by recommendation 45 and 46 and are currently seeking to work collaboratively with local schools to improve information of transition information.

9. Transition Support

Within FE Colleges, the funding system for drawing monies into the college is currently under review (ELS weighted Sums). If the systems that individual colleges use to provide the support through this funding mechanism are well staffed and well publicised, then accessibility to the students should not be problematic. However the variation in funding for students between FE and HE can be very problematic. SAAS funding is only available to students studying at HN level courses and the assessment process for this can still be a lengthy process depending upon the needs of the individual student. Funding for equipment and personal support at NC level is where most problems lie, with the College’s bursary pot often being over stretched with high numbers of FE level students, which leaves little for providing additional equipment and staff for personal care issues.

Although in recent years the Colleges have received ‘Beattie’ money (from the report commissioned by the Funding Council from Sir Robert Beattie), this was additional money to ensure that colleges work towards becoming inclusive and is not guaranteed to continue. Elmwood has eased this problem by working in partnerships with several Social Work Departments through out Scotland to meet the personal care needs of the students. However, ultimately, the local authorities are the purse holders and cut backs in local authority budgets have meant knock-on effects for the college and an inability to plan for the future.

As highlighted in the document, transition is often a very difficult time for these partnership arrangements. Often plans for an individual cannot be made concrete until the outcome of the transition period is evaluated and discussed. Who funds certain support measures for this interim period then becomes a topic of sometimes heated discussion between agencies and educational providers. It is a mine field with students/ clients often missing out because of
lack of clarification on who is responsible for providing funding. This time often coincides with young people changing between Children's and Adult's services in Social Work Departments which again makes funding for specific areas of care unclear for many potential students.

Although the Education Act Scotland 2004 sets out to ensure the systems for support is people centred and provides a continuum of support to all young people on leaving school it does not provide a continuum of funding for this support. New support depends on assessment and who does this and when it is done can be difficult to manage for colleges as far as funding is concerned. Recommendation 49 is therefore vital for success in positive educational transition for young disabled people.

Funding mechanisms means that support that was with a young person in school does not necessarily travel with the student from school to college. Although through accessing a new curriculum, that a young person may not require the same level of support at college, there would have to be a transition period again where full support could be available from the beginning of course and continuity of support between college and school is difficult to establish at the moment.

Recommendation 52 is something that Elmwood College welcomes as we have been running to achieve for pre-course transitional taster sessions for several years. Currently the Student Development Department (special education team) provide courses at access 1 to intermediate 1 level for specific groups of students with learning difficulties and have run an assessment week when potential students come into college and are assessed in an educational environment that they hope to access. Funding for the additional support and care needs of these groups have been problematic and have often resulted in students being unable to attend at the last minute. Similarly as mentioned earlier in our response, introductory sessions for mainstream disabled students have no permanent sources of funding that allow annual planning for these events to be embedded into core activity.

Elmwood College
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