

Banff and Buchan College

SFC Consultation Response – Equality and diversity support in colleges and universities

9th October, 2009

Introduction

Banff and Buchan College welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) consultation exercise. It appreciates the SFC's positioning statement and recognises that the Scottish Funding Council does indeed have a key role to play in eliminating discrimination and promoting equality and diversity across Scotland's further and higher education establishments.

In order that the College can contribute to the 'refining' of the SFC vision it has forwarded the following consultation response which represents the views of its management, staff and learners. These views, whilst not exhaustive, aim to identify the thoughts, concerns and ideas of the College community in relation to the future of the equality and diversity agenda. The response looks to address the key questions posed in the SFC's consultation paper, published on 3 July 2009.

What do you see as the opportunities and challenges in the implementation of Level 1 – Advice and Information?

Compliance –Compliance remains an issue despite the views of SFC officials during the consultation exercise. There remains a case for the continuation of interim support to assist FE colleges to attain the minimum standard required

in terms of equality and diversity. HMIe review evidence generated from four of the first five reviews conducted under the newest framework indicates there are some significant issues still to be addressed in terms of embedding equality and diversity.

SFC feedback during this consultation exercise would suggest that there is an expectation that all Colleges should be compliant. This is aspirational and not the reality. However, equalities compliance and embedding remains an issue which SFC would be foolish to ignore. At least until all colleges are compliant there remains the need for 'safety net' support.

Resources – Banff and Buchan College would encourage the SFC to take a lead role in developing a central resource base for all information required for equalities compliance and development. There is little doubt that there has been significant progress made in recent years with the advice and information available to FE and HE institutions. Both Equality Forward and the Equality Challenge Unit respectively have been instrumental in supporting such institutions. However, the former agency no longer exists and the latter supports HEIs only. Evidence suggests that there remains a need for colleges to be supported with an equalities 'one-stop shop' which will assist equalities practitioners to develop their college's equalities capacity and ensure their legislative compliance.

What do you see as the opportunities and challenges in the implementation of Level 2 – Targeted development and capacity building?

Core attitudes and standards –The College understand the SFC's determination to develop core attitudes and standards. However, it has reservations that a drive may create a layer of unnecessary bureaucracy in terms of monitoring institutional progress against such goals.

The development of core equality attitudes and standards should be aligned to organisational planning mechanisms, as well as the identification and promotion of agreed college values and aims. Such values and aims should be developed, promoted, embedded and monitored as part of the college's own strategic, operational and equality planning processes as well as within its self evaluation mechanisms. Equality and diversity is far from embedded in many College committees, structures, practices, cultures and organisational philosophies. To truly effect positive change core values, standards, attitudes, aims and behaviours need to be planned for and promoted strategically and operationally. They need to be agreed, recognised and sustained at all levels of the organisation and include board members, senior managers, staff and learners.

Learner and staff engagement – Key to any targeted development and capacity building would be the creation of a consistent approach to learner engagement in equality and diversity matters. Colleges listen to learners and will act on their feedback. If learners become more aware of, and further involved in, equality matters at both national and local levels then the capacity of any college to develop and embed a meaningful and truly inclusive equality culture will become easier and more pervasive. Fundamentally, by ensuring that equality and diversity is embedded within strategic planning and learner engagement methodologies then positive change will happen.

Awareness raising, training and support - Organisational culture does not change quickly. Considering the length of time it took to establish a quality culture within the FE sector, it is no surprise that progress in terms of the equality and diversity agenda is not as rapid as some would like. However, if cultural change is to occur positively then colleges will need to support this change through targeted awareness raising and training opportunities for learners, staff and board members. Presently, there is now no external, expert support available for colleges. If capacity is to be built within the sector, colleges will need additional financial assistance from the SFC to build appropriate ways in which to support, develop and embed equality at all levels and with all stakeholders. Banff and Buchan College would strongly

recommend that such assistance be funded by from the £500,000 saved from the discontinuation of Equality Forward.

Collaboration and communication - Positive and meaningful progress towards true equality and diversity within the FE sector will only materialise by developing effective partnership working; partnership working which has been long overdue. To college equality practitioners it seems as if the equalities arena has many stakeholders, all with the same aims, but who cannot seem to communicate clearly nor collaborate effectively with one another. Some colleges are unclear and unhappy about the role of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and remain somewhat puzzled by its remoteness and lack of direction. Similarly, there has been ambiguity about the role of HMle in reviewing college progress in terms of equality and diversity. Although an equalities aspect report is timetabled for next year's HMle activity there has been little or no developmental advice given to assist colleges in pushing past compliance towards a quality enhanced equality role.

A greater clarity and consistency in collaboration is needed, particularly when all stakeholders should share the same aims. In line with Scotland's Colleges response to this consultation exercise, Banff and Buchan College recommends that the SFC's strategy to address equality and diversity issues should be 'kept simple'. Greater clarity and better communication is needed from key equalities stakeholders and the SFC has positioned itself to facilitate it. The SFC is also well placed to eliminate duplication of effort by bringing together of many stakeholders who could contribute to the creation of a purposeful and inclusive community of practice.

What do you see as the opportunities and challenges in the implementation of Level 3 – Equalities Leadership?

Equalities leadership can function in different ways and at different levels but without appropriate leadership 'buy-in' and direction the equalities agenda will not thrive.

SFC – Firstly, there is clearly a role for the SFC which, having stepped up to the mark, needs to lead this process by example. There are, however, key challenges ahead, particularly when the SFC itself recognises that as an equalities authority it is only at the compliance stage. However, if it was able to facilitate the much-needed collaboration highlighted earlier in this response then it too would become a beneficiary of better partnership working.

College governance – At an organisational level there is clearly a role for College leaders to understand their responsibilities in promoting and embedding an equality culture at all levels of the organisation. This can be done in several different ways. Boards of Management members need to be better aware of their ‘equalities’ responsibilities and in order for this to happen need to receive targeted, mandatory training in order to gain an understanding of their legal responsibilities and organisational opportunities. Beyond such training, Boards of Management will be able to set themselves and senior managers equality-based challenge questions which, along with feedback from other college mechanisms e.g. equality annual reports, self evaluation vehicles and learner feedback mechanisms, will assist in placing equality and diversity at the core of its vision, plans, processes, culture and curriculum.

College Principals – Scotland’s Colleges clearly has a role to play in developing the skills and knowledge needed to lead the FE sector. Accordingly, the Principal’s Leadership Programme needs to reflect the changing equalities landscape in order that Principals themselves can effect and influence positive change within their own organisations.

College Staff – Leadership is also provided within staff compliments at different levels within colleges. Senior managers, middle managers, course tutors and lecturers all have some degree of leadership built into their roles. Accordingly, resources and training provision need be targeted to reflect this position. However, colleges need additional financial support to meet this need.

Learners – The SFC may also want to consider how leadership within Colleges' student representative bodies can effect positive change and bring about a truly meaningful and inclusive approach to equality and diversity within FE organisations. There is a role for colleges, SPARQS and NUS to develop leadership for equalities in all student associations. Little has been mentioned of learners during this consultation process, yet it is through them that so much positive change could happen. As with other awareness raising and training requirements colleges will need additional SFC financial support if it is to engage its learners more effectively in it equalities activities.

What do you see as the opportunities and challenges in the implementation of Level 4 – Systemic change/Integration?

Systemic change/ integration is aspirational and dependant on effective and meaningful leadership and collaboration. We remain along way from achieving this as an outcome. However, if stakeholders - including the SFC - get their responses to the consultation questions 1, 2 and 3 right then what we all want from question 4 will follow.

What other mechanisms or level of support should be considered by SFC with regards to equality and diversity?

In conclusion, it is hard to believe that a simple and coherent equalities strategy cannot be gained from the likes of the following, non-exhaustive list of stakeholders:

- 43 further education colleges
- Scottish Funding Council
- Equalities and Human Rights Commission
- HMIE
- Scotland's Colleges

- NUS
- SPARQS
- Former Equality Forward Forums

The expertise, the resources and the willingness is all there. What is not is appropriate college funding and meaningful leadership, direction and collaboration. Unless funds are made available locally, communication is improved between stakeholders and effective and cohesive partnership is sustained we are unlikely to witness any significant improvement in approaches aimed at meeting the needs our educational equality agenda.