Empowering the student: participation in college life

Exeter College has an excellent record in providing a welcoming and inclusive environment where all learners have equality of opportunity regardless of any physical or learning disability they might have. The high quality of the provision at Exeter College was validated by an Outstanding Ofsted report in March 2014.

Key points from the new legislation

The guiding principles underlying the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice aim to empower the young person and their families and/or carers to make informed decisions. These principles, many of which are a statutory duty of the local authority, apply to all professionals working with young people with SEND. Colleges with SEND provision should therefore:

• Ensure the views, wishes and feelings of the young person and their family are taken into account.
• Provide the young person and their family with the information and support necessary to participate in the decision-making process.
• Collaborate with education, health and social care professionals to provide the support needed.
• Identify the needs of young people and their families.
• Make high-quality provision to meet the needs of young people.
• Focus on inclusive practices and remove barriers to learning.
• Help young people to prepare for adulthood, independent living and employment.

For further information, see Chapter 7 in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 – 25 years.

Planning for the reforms

Exeter College believes that person-centred provision, supported by the appropriate systems and processes, empowers and supports each SEND learner to achieve, succeed and participate in all aspects of college life. The college focuses on working in partnership with the local authority (LA) and local schools, building good relationships with the learners, their parents and carers, and developing person-centred provision supported by effective systems and processes.

1. Ensuring a good transition to college

Student involvement in college needs to be based upon sound transition:

• The college, in partnership with schools, runs 4 – 6 week pre-entry assessment courses for year 11 pupils to assess learners’ suitability, level and support needs. The college tutor first meets the learners in their school with their class teacher, then learners attend college with their class teacher and teaching assistants for six afternoons in the final term and experience a range of activities. They take part in a carousel of assessment games and in a ‘Learning Fair’ to assess English and maths skills. They are also taken to the local city to assess social skills and safety awareness. This range of activities allows the learners to become familiar with the college and the college staff to get to know the learners.
“Lecturers and managers have worked hard with local secondary schools, advice and guidance providers and other specialists to encourage vulnerable young people, adult and community learners, and those who are unemployed, to participate in education and training. Hard work and commitment with these learners have increased the proportion of young people from deprived areas in Exeter enrolling on, and achieving, a qualification.”

Ofsted report, March 2014

2. Ensuring a person centred approach to working with learners across the college

For SEND students to become fully integrated across the college there need to be procedures which support a person centred approach to learning and regular reviews of learner progress:

• In order to capture information about learners, SEND staff attend faculty management meetings to ensure all teachers and support workers across the college are adhering to a person centred approach. Systems and processes are designed to support this approach for each individual learner.
• Staff complete a termly return for each learner. Every learner is different, so staff are capturing intense and detailed data which is used to remove barriers to achievement.
• The college is reviewing the tutoring system. Currently, there are 3-4 reviews a year, and the system is being revised to ensure the reviews meet the new requirements. All staff, including administrators, will be briefed about the changes as part of the college’s on-going professional development programme.

3. Practical ways in which students are empowered to take part in college life:

• Students have highly individualised programmes which involve them in accessing all areas of the college and curriculum. For example, vocational areas such as catering, hairdressing and motor vehicle maintenance. Adjustments and enhancements are made wherever necessary to allow full access and participation, such as enabling learners with mobility issues to access Outdoor Adventure and Sports courses at BTEC level.
• The tutoring system builds close relationships between students with learning difficulties and disabilities and peers in their groups. Learners are encouraged during the first week to build friendship bonds. In the first few weeks there are special zones to assist learners who need extra support and lunch and break times are staffed by support teams in buildings or places where there are students with higher support needs.
• All learners are able to attend any college-wide enrichment activity. Some choose to do this independently while others require additional support. There are also some specific enrichment activities for learners with learning difficulties who are less confident at joining a specialist programme. Activities include choir, history, performing arts, craft and jewellery making, cross-college football, guitar and Ten Tors Expedition.
• SEND learners are included in the cross-college ‘Learner Voice’ and nominate a representative to attend the monthly meetings. Where necessary, SEN learners have support staff to help them communicate their ideas. Outcomes and issues are referred directly to the head of faculty who will address them. In the past, learners with learning difficulties identified problems with reading analogue clocks, with the result that digital clocks have now been installed.

“I am very proud about the passion of the staff who work with our learners with extra needs as they put the student at the heart of what we do!”

Chris Petheram,
Head of Faculty Foundation Studies

Avoiding potential pitfalls

• College staff maintain detailed individual records to ensure a person-centred approach to all provision and meet the head of faculty on a one-to-one basis every month to go through the paperwork.
• Learners needing additional support are identified as early as possible.
• Some learners may arrive in college with no assessment details. To overcome this problem, the college obtains the information from the LA, although there is no guarantee the college will get the funding. The LA has a four-stage assessment framework which the college will use for learners who have no records.
• The college has set up an access panel, headed by an assistant principal and comprising heads of faculty and the safeguarding officer, which meets every four to six weeks to look at complex cases and identify individual requirements to ensure the learner can participate as fully as possible in college life.

“Lecturers and support staff assess the needs of learners very promptly when they start their courses so that they know what help learners need. Lecturers and support staff are highly effective at providing the outstanding personal and academic support learners need to overcome barriers to learning.”

Ofsted report, March 2014

Some next steps

• The college will continue to liaise closely with their LA which is leading on the local offer.
• The college is planning and developing their offer and aims to publicise this as early as possible.
• The college is looking into developing the role of support workers as they are key to increasing student participation.
• The college will continue to look at ways in which individual programmes can be created so as to ensure wider participation in activities across the college.

The impact of the programme

• The Equality and Diversity data shows that the retention and achievement rates for SEND learners are 4% higher than for mainstream learners and they achieve more qualifications.
• SEND learners and their parents celebrate achievement alongside mainstream learners.
• There is a sense of inclusion – the SEND learners are an integral part of the college and are situated in the main campus.