

A preliminary assessment of Cambridge Regional College's progress towards fulfilling the You're Welcome criteria

This research was requested by staff at Cambridge Regional College (CRC), a further education college for people over the age of sixteen, to be used as evidence in their efforts in obtaining the You're Welcome (YW) kitemark, which forms part of a government scheme to promote youth-tailored health and welfare facilities. After examining the criteria and discussing how best to serve the needs of all involved, it was decided that it would be sufficient to focus on the students' perceptions of 'Student Services' (SS, the department responsible for co-ordinating and delivering health and welfare provisions); the YW criteria would be used as the baseline for this assessment, which would then be employed by CRC as a means of highlighting areas in which they might modify their procedures or better apprise the students. In this way, they might bring their practice more into line with the kitemark's demands.

Methods

Information about student knowledge and opinions was gathered via a questionnaire which was divided into four sections: how well SS informs students about its services, services students might consider using, any direct experience students may have had with SS, and demographic information. A representative from Cambridge Regional College contacted all academy staff and asked for tutorial groups to participate in the distribution of the questionnaire. Although academies from all subject areas agreed to take part, there was most interest from the child, health and social care subjects.

Once permission from the Cambridge Psychology Research Ethics Committee had been granted, a total of 600 questionnaires were distributed to students via their tutorial groups. Students returned questionnaires to their tutors or to a 'drop box' in the Student Services office. 247 questionnaires were handed in, giving a response rate of 41%. 247 students over the age of 16 years responded to the questionnaire. 139 of respondents were male, 76 were female. The remaining 32 participants did not state their gender.

Results

How much do students at CRC know about the services on offer to them?

Most of the students who responded showed some awareness of the services offered by Student Services, although only 5% of the participants reported that they knew about all that is available, and 57% reported familiarity with fewer than half of the services on the list. The most widely-known services were Chlamydia Testing, careers advice, free condoms and information about drugs, whilst the lowest levels of awareness clustered around those services that involved referral beyond CRC itself. Similar levels of awareness were found throughout CRC, regardless of the academy to which the students belonged.

On the whole, students' understanding of the general running of SS is impressive. There were a small number of misunderstandings regarding the confidentiality policy, but this could relate to the fact that it is only fully explained in consultations; it is not easily accessible to those who are not already in contact with the department. In the open questions, four students' answers indicated that

they had not heard of SS (e.g. *“Never been. What is it?”*; *“Is there such a place?”*). This is not to say that their unfamiliarity is representative of the college, but the fact that it is possible is revealing. It is also useful to note that while 43% of those surveyed agreed that students were told about new services, 27% disagreed. CRC does appear to have good mechanisms for obtaining feedback, which seems to allow a large number of students to feel involved in the services; most students seem satisfied that their comments would not be ignored.

To what extent do students feel that they would use these services?

The overall figures indicating which services students would feel comfortable using were fairly low. On average, only 36% of participants indicated they would feel comfortable discussing topics with Student Services, with the lowest number being willing to present issues around sex and sexuality. This may be an indication of how sensitive young people perceive these issues to be; however, a sizeable proportion of students indicated that they would not even feel comfortable discussing career advice with Student Services, a topic which requires little personal information to be revealed. There are a number of possible explanations for this: reluctance to discuss topics with Student Services may result from students’ attitudes or their desire to take personal responsibility for all aspects of their health and well-being. It should be noted that low numbers intended to reflect students’ comfort discussing student services does not necessarily equate with failure on the part of Student Services.

In questions regarding factors which act as barriers towards students utilising SS, some respondents indicated that they were reluctant to discuss personal information with individuals with whom they were not familiar. A number also expressed a certain scepticism that staff would completely adhere to the confidentiality policy. It is also interesting to note that although more than two-thirds see the information SS provides as comprehensible and trustworthy, a significant minority (45%) do not find that it usually applies to them.

If students have used these services, what were their experiences?

It is heartening to observe that only 6% of the sample reported having problems getting information from SS when they wanted it. Four students cited prohibitively long queues and a lack of sufficient time between lessons as the main reason for this.

Recommendations

To reach You’re Welcome standards regarding user involvement, CRC should:

- Publicise their services to a greater extent; in particular, students should be made aware that they can be referred to other local services.
- Consult students further regarding what information they would find useful and relevant to them.
- Make the confidentiality policy more accessible, and work to convince students that staff will abide by it in all cases.