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The healthy settings approach: the growing interest within colleges and universities

The success of the National Healthy Schools Programme over the past seven years has encouraged some further education and higher education (FE/HE) organisations and their partners to apply the same principles to address health issues. These principles come from the healthy settings approach within public health.

Despite the lack of formal national standards for FE/HE, interest in using the settings approach is growing rapidly. The Healthy College Network now has over 100 FE organisations in England and a new informal Health Promoting University Network has 16 HE organisations as members.

The Settings Approach

At their simplest, settings such as schools and workplaces are convenient places for health interventions. However, healthy settings are about more than this, because they use whole systems thinking. This aims to integrate a commitment to health into the fabric of settings - within their cultures, structures, processes and routine life.

The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization, 1986) states that 'Health is created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play and love.' This was important in encouraging a move towards a more holistic model of health.

The settings approach is usually applied to organisational settings, but has also been applied to broader-based initiatives such as Healthy Cities. Some initiatives, such as Healthy Schools, are well-developed and firmly supported by formal Government programmes. Others, such as Health Promoting Hospitals, are supported by World Health Organization programmes but not linked directly to any current national initiative. Yet others, such as Healthy Colleges and Healthy Stadia, are not linked to any national or international programme and are at early stages of development (see www.healthysettings.org.uk).

The settings approach offers a structured process to work through with the aim that this way of working becomes embedded in that setting, enabling sustainable changes to take place. Those familiar with healthy schools will recognise these stages within the approach (see below Figure 1).

The values that underpin this approach are participation across the whole setting, empowerment, equity, partnership working and sustainability. After the consultation and needs assessment phase the setting decides on their targets and works on health topics and/or themes relevant to them. For example, smoking, healthy eating, environmental impact, leadership or community links. These targets may be linked to formal standards and in this situation the setting can then work to gain accreditation.

Health work in colleges and universities

FE/HE have been working to address health issues for a number of years. This has often been initiated at a grass roots level without a strong strategic lead or co-ordination, frequently in partnership with local health agencies and with a focus on specific topics such as drugs and sexual health. It has tended to develop in areas where there has been interest and capacity amongst both FE/HE and health partners

Topic-based work continues to take place, but in addition, over the last five years, the concept of a Healthy College has emerged and is continuing to develop at a local, regional and national level. The concept of Health Promoting Universities (HPUs) has been around longer, since the early 1990's.

What is a healthy college or university?

As highlighted in paragraph 101 of Choosing Health: Making Healthier Choices Easier, the Government's Public Health Strategy (Department of Health, 2004), a health promoting college or university works to integrate health into its organisational structure and aims to:
- create healthy working, learning and living environments
- increase the profile of health in teaching and research
- develop healthy alliances in the community

Figure 1. Settings: An Operational Process
Source: Healthy Settings Development Unit, UCLan
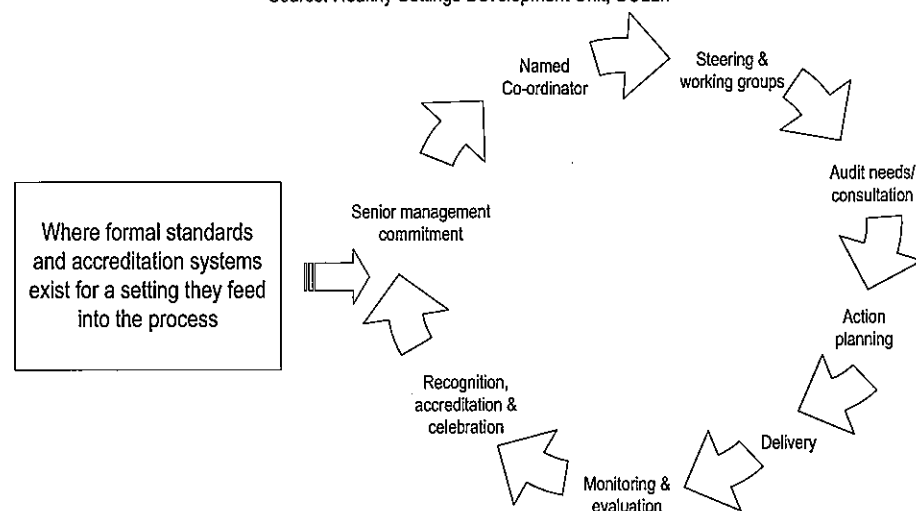
Key developments towards a Healthy College Concept

A number of key developments can be identified:
- In 2000, the Schools Health Education Unit extended their primary and secondary work to include the FE sector
- From 2001 onwards, some local Healthy School Programmes expanded their work into colleges
- Over the past 5 years, the Kirklees Healthy College Standard has been developed and has become the main 'hub' for healthy college work with the development of the Healthy College Network, co-ordinated by Huddersfield New College
- In 2002, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) produced Healthy Colleges, with funding from the Department for Education and Skills (Escolme, James and Aylward 2002). Working with five Colleges, this was a first attempt to define the area and assess whether it was an appropriate time to promote the development of Healthy Colleges
- In 2003, NIACE produced A Health Promoting College for 16-19 year Old Learners, commissioned by the Department of Health (James, 2002). The report highlighted the huge potential of colleges to develop a healthy settings approach and recommended that demonstration projects should be developed to pilot a standard, based on Healthy Schools
- In 2004, the Government published its Public Health White Paper, Choosing Health (Department of Health, 2004), which explicitly recognised the potential of developing FE/HE as a healthy setting

The Healthy College Network

The Healthy College Network has attracted a high level of interest from colleges and provides a much needed forum for sharing practice and linking colleges and health professionals together. It has grown quickly, particularly in the past two years, and in addition to enabling email contact between members, regional meetings are now held once a term and a Health Promoting College conference is being planned for February 2007. Colleges and partners can join the network by contacting Kate Birch (see below Further Details).

Background to Health Promoting Universities in England

In much the same way as colleges, universities address health issues with students and staff, providing services, training, health education and campaigns. However, few universities deliver this within the context of a 'whole system' commitment to promoting health - and until recently, only a handful of universities worked in this way. However, over the last two years there has been an increase in interest and a number of new posts have been established with the aim of applying the healthy settings approach.

Internationally HPUs exist in Germany, Canada, Chile, Spain, Australia and Hong Kong. A Charter for Health Promoting Universities was developed during the 2005 HPU conference in Edmonton, Canada (see www.healthysettings.org).

Key HPU developments in England

A number of key developments can be identified:
- In 1994, Lancaster University established the first HPU (which ended after two years initial funding)
- In 1995, the University of Central Lancashire established its HPU initiative (which is still going and last year celebrated its 10th anniversary)
- In 1998, the World Health Organisation published Health Promoting Universities: Concept, Experience and Framework for Action, jointly edited by HPU Co-ordinators from Lancaster University and the University of Central Lancashire (Tsouros, Dowding, Thompson and Dooris, 1998)
- In 2006, the Healthy Settings Development Unit hosted the inaugural meeting of an informal HPU network

Policy context

For colleges, Every Child Matters is a key driver and has increased interest in using a Healthy College approach. A number of colleges which have been through inspections have received positive feedback on how this approach can manage, co-ordinate and deliver Every Child Matters targets. In 2005, the Learning and Skills Council produced From Here to Sustainability: The LSC Strategy for Sustainable Health (Learning and Skills Council, 2005). Under recommended actions this strategy encourages as many colleges as possible to develop and implement a healthy college programme.

For universities, a number of policies, strategies and guidance documents - e.g. Reducing the Risk of Student Suicide (Grant, 2002), Sustainable Development in Higher Education (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2005) have relevance to the HPU concept - although they have yet to be formally linked at a national level.

Future steps?

While Choosing Health provides Government endorsement for the development of local college and university initiatives, further dialogue and guidance is still required on whether national standards and programmes should be developed. Stakeholders need to meet to discuss the future co-ordination of this work as it gathers greater momentum. Discussions need to clarify the level of formality of Healthy Colleges and Health Promoting Colleges and Universities. Do standards and accreditation need to be developed at a national level? What support should be available to FE/HE organisations?

As these questions are being asked more colleges and universities continue to applying a healthy settings approach, knowing that the structures and processes they are putting in place will bring a positive contribution to their organisation.

Further Details

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Kirklees Healthy College Standard/Healthy College Network: Kate Birch, K.Birch@huddnewcoll.ac.uk

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Editor's note: A Snapshot of the Health Related Behaviour of Young People in Further Education Colleges, Balding, A., 2005 (63kb pdf) is available at www.sheu.org.uk/publications/ehfreearticles.htm