

Scottish Funding Council Wider Access Regional Forum

Annual report for the period: Academic Year 2006/07

Regional Forum:	The North Forum
Lead Institution:	Lead institution for finance – The Robert Gordon University Lead institution for employment of Forum staff – University of Aberdeen

1. Provide a summary of the activities undertaken in the period.

In 2006/07, the Forum continued to fulfil its mission:

To work in partnership to increase the number of people from under-represented groups in the North of Scotland who progress on to higher education and to work together to reduce barriers to progression between education sectors

In pursuit of this mission, the Forum's work programme assigned funds to three key areas, together with ensuring effective management of the Forum:

- 1 Schools:** schools with low progression (i.e. 30% and under) to higher education (i.e. higher education in colleges and/or HEIs)
- 2 Communities:** communities with low progression, with particular reference to those which fall within category 5 of the deprivation zones identified by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation
- 3 Transitions:** transition from FECs to HEIs and progression from FE to HE in FECs

A summary of the main activities undertaken in 2006/07 for each of these three key areas follows:

1 **Schools:**

The North Forum's schools programme, **ASPIRENorth**, completed its first full year of operation in 2006/07. During that time, the ASPIRENorth team were working extremely hard to build positive relationships with all partners and to deliver their first series of activities within schools. The team are now delivering high quality work across the whole of the north of Scotland, from Shetland to Fort William to Aberdeen.

The Forum agreed at its meeting in November 2006 that the programme should be subject to an internal evaluation, so that the Forum's position in relation to the provision of funding after July 2008 could be decided upon well in advance of that date. The internal evaluation was considered by the Executive and Full Forum on 20 June 2007, when it was agreed that the evaluation provided satisfactory evidence of the programme's success and that the Forum would continue to support the programme into the foreseeable future.

In addition to its routine operational activity, ASPIRENorth also managed the North Forum's **promoting post-compulsory education video/DVD** project in 2006/07. This project resulted in the production of high-quality case-study DVDs, which were widely distributed to schools and relevant organisations throughout the North of Scotland. Initial feedback indicates that the DVDs were found to be useful by recipients, who welcomed the use of local students as potential role models and the range of educational opportunities highlighted by the DVDs. (See section 4 for more information on this project.)

2. Communities

The **engaging men in learning through local learning centres** project aimed to identify, develop and disseminate good practice in encouraging men to engage with learning through local learning centres. The first phase of this project was completed in 2006/07, and the work and subsequent report from this phase were well received. The project was very successful and that made a positive difference to the lives and aspirations of many of the men involved. (For more detail on the impact of this project, see also section 4.) To build on this success, the Forum approved a second phase of the project to run in 2007/08.

Learning centres in the North East of Scotland did not respond to the invitation to tender for courses in the first phase of the 'engaging men' project (all participants were in the Highlands and Islands). To try to understand this position and to encourage those centres to participate in the Forum's future work, the Executive Group commissioned a short project to **scope the learning centres in the North East of Scotland**. This project, held at the end of 2006/07, identified all of the learning centres in the North East and their contact details; it also gave project staff the opportunity to promote the role of the Forum to learning centre staff and to encourage participation in the second phase of the 'Engaging Men' project.

The **access route planner** project completed its work at the end of March 2006, and in 2006/07 the Executive Group decided to fund one further phase of work, to re-model the database that supports the 'Course You Can' website so that the information held can be updated easily by the institutions and organisations directly. This work began at the end of 2006/07, and will complete in 2007/08.

The Forum is a partner in the national project being undertaken by The Open University in Scotland to develop a **'diversity pack'** for people from minority ethnic groups, including refugees and asylum seekers. The pack aims to supply information about different types and levels of post-compulsory education, along with details about local institutions, community groups etc. The second version of the pack was promoted to Forum members at their meeting in June 2007.

In 2006/07, the work of **SWAPNorth** continued, although this received no specific funding from the Forum. SWAPNorth continued to participate in work with the other two SWAP consortia and with the SQA to develop national accreditation for SWAP courses. Detailed discussions about the

implementation of SQA accreditation for SWAP courses were ongoing and SWAPNorth information was uploaded on to the national SWAP website.

3. Transitions/progression

In 2006/07, the Forum ran two projects in the area of **transition to and within colleges**. Both of these projects were the output of a short-life sub-group set up by the Executive Group to look at the area of transition to and within colleges.

The **easing transition from schools to colleges** project examined arrangements between schools, local authorities, colleges and other interested bodies such as Careers Scotland throughout the whole of the North Forum area – from the Aberdeen in the east and south, to the Shetland Islands in the north and Eilean Siar (the Western Isles) in the west. The research identified the numerous, diverse factors which lead to a variation in access to college facilities for school pupils and access for school leavers to post school education across the North Forum region. Although many of the factors influencing pupil progression may not be unique to the region, the report highlights that it is the combination of these which plays a unique role in how pupils in the North Forum area may or may not be able to progress easily and comfortably to FECs. The project led to a number of useful recommendations for the Forum and for individual colleges. It also highlighted case studies of best practice, covering topics such as school-college joint publicity, award-winning programmes of school-college links, the embedding of the concept of further education amongst school pupils from primary upwards, including the use of residential weekends and the use of college websites to offer integrated advice to school leavers and their parents.

The **creating independent learners in colleges** project aimed to identify:

- why independent learning is being developed and delivered;
- whether and to what extent it can be developed at all levels and in all subjects;
- what barriers there are to its development including the issue of core skills development; and
- how successful has it been.

As well as providing some detail about the type of development which had proved successful, the project made a number of recommendations about how best to develop independence in learning.

In addition to these, the Forum contributed to the **national bridging project** by undertaking work to promote the effective articulation between Colleges and HEIs in the subject areas of **computing and engineering**. This project was subject to separate funding from the SFC. The project is complete and the findings of both the national project and the Forum element of the project were presented in the dissemination section of the Forum event in June 2007.

Towards the end of 2006/07, the Executive Group commissioned a further, short-life project to **map summer school provision in the North of Scotland**. The information gathered listed the summer schools and described their work; this information will feed into the further development of the Forum's 'Course You Can' site in 2007/08.

2. What barriers did the Forum face in achieving its objectives?

In producing its strategic plan for 2008/09–12/13, the Forum reflected on the areas where it currently faces barriers or difficulties and decided how these could be overcome. The Forum's management objectives demonstrate the outcomes of these reflections; these are shown below (in the right hand column of the table), along with an indication of the barriers or difficulties that they were intended to address.

Barrier/difficulty	Action to be taken to address barrier/difficulty
<p>Uncertainty over post July 2008 funding level; implications for the Forum's work and future</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seek from the Scottish Funding Council sufficient funds to maintain the staffing structures needed to deliver the objectives relating to schools, communities and transitions and to commission relevant activities. • seek alternative and additional streams of funding and take steps to ensure that where possible Forum activities are mainstreamed.
<p>Varying levels of involvement of Forum members; need to promote broader involvement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue to discuss and develop mechanisms to ensure that the full Forum are engaged with and fully supportive of the Forum's workplan and that members are involved at each step of the process. It is recognised that institutions and organisations are only able to participate in the partnership as the result of their goodwill. It is vital, however, that the Forum develops mechanisms to engage meaningfully with people at all levels in its partner institutions and organisations in order to deliver its workplan effectively and in order to achieve the highest possible degree of positive change.
<p>Need to ensure that outcomes to projects are not 'lost'; need to embed outcomes of activities to ensure sustainability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitor and build on activities and projects that the Forum has funded and carried out in recent years to ensure that outcomes are fully used and shared; from these outcomes and other activities, identify and share good practice and relevant information across the Forum area and nationally. • build capacity within Forum partners and ensure that its work is embedded in the partners; Forum programmes will include appropriate staff development and sharing of resources and information.

3. Summarise the Forum's achievements and the challenges/difficulties faced.

The Forum has operated successfully as a partnership, drawing together institutions from across a vast geographical area to undertake and complete activities that address the three key areas of schools, communities and transitions. The work of the partnership is not dictated by institutional interests, but seeks to achieve outcomes that are genuinely beneficial to learners and potential learners in the area.

At the same time, the Forum always seeks to improve its work and impact (see section 2, above, for more discussion about the ways in which it is seeking to overcome current challenges, and section 5 for an overview of the ways in which it has developed its approach in order to maximise benefit from its work).

In 2006/07, the Forum successfully managed a diverse and useful programme of work. At the same time, the Forum made every effort to engage with relevant work and discussions nationally. Some of the Forum's achievements, both within the Forum area and nationally, are listed below.

Forum projects and activities

The Forum formally launched ASPIRENorth in September 2006. ASPIRENorth successfully completed the first full year of its work in schools.

The Forum planned, undertook, completed and evaluated a suite of project activity in the areas of schools, communities and transitions. These included the following key projects:

- Promoting post-compulsory education DVD (schools)
- Creating independent learners (transitions)
- Easing the transition from schools to colleges (transitions)
- National bridging project (transitions)
- Engaging men in learning through local learning centres (communities)

National engagement

The Forum contributed as appropriate to national projects. It continued to work with the other three Regional Forums to share good practice and to contribute to national reviews and developments. It also oversaw the co-ordination of the SWAPNorth projects and participated in the national SWAP discussions and debate, contributing to the national SWAP website.

In working with the SFC on a range of issues, the Forum

- participated fully in the SFC's review of widening participation policy and practice.
- contributed to the SFC's consultation on the outcome of the review of the Regional Forums
- responded to the SFC's invitation to bid for funding for additional schools activity
- worked with the SFC to develop a greater mutual understanding about the way in which Forums operate and are funded
- contributed to the SFC's review of the national premia for wider access, including the proposal to provide direct funding for summer schools
- worked with the SFC to understand the new timescale and parameters for Forums to secure funding in 2008/09; produced strategic and operational plans.

The Forum's projects and activities are beneficial in bringing people from different institutions and organisations together and allowing them to discuss matters of common interest. This can build relationships and goodwill that goes way beyond the scope of the actual project.

4. What impact have the activities made, and what are the future planned developments?

Over time, the Forum has developed its work programme in response to local needs and to the national policy framework, particularly the 'Learning for all' report. The Forum's aims are taken from the priorities identified in this document and in the follow up, 'Learning for all: report on measures of success'.

Each of the Forum's activities has been designed to meet a particular need, taking account of the local and national context mentioned above. Each of the projects that the Forum undertakes has a clear purpose and the Forum assesses whether or not that purpose has been achieved at the close of the activity, and through ongoing evaluation during the activity. Each activity has objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound; a clear reporting structure, which has a direct relationship with the payment structure; and clear management guidelines and regular contact with the Forum's management. The Forum, therefore, measures each activity's success against this framework, both whilst it is being undertaken and at the end of its life.

The Forum's video/DVD project is a good example of how the Forum seeks to marry local need and the national policy context into an outcome that achieves the Forum's purposes. The video/DVD report produced at the end of the activity sets out the project objective as follows:

The Learning for All report recognised that 'learners need more help and information to make their choices.' It stated that 'people from under represented groups are more likely to view lifelong learning negatively...and this is partly a consequence of lack of information.'

The video project tackles this through providing information and inspiration through the medium of high quality visual and sound production, thus creating a positive and accessible impression of further and higher education.

It seeks to inspire pupils who for a range of reasons may be less likely to pursue further or higher education by promoting a range of different educational routes and demonstrating the flexibility, versatility and sheer enjoyability of post-school education.

The videos also act as a source of information to facilitate access to institutions, courses, funding and guidance.

References are made to the rewarding aspects of student life and life-long learning, and career opportunities and student lifestyles are explored.

As the underpinning point of the video was to provide local role-models for local school children the students appearing have been primarily selected because they come from each of the areas identified in the video. This is part of a conscious effort to create a sense of familiarity and empathy with the potential viewer.

Obviously, the key impact of a project such as this is the practical outcome, rather than just the evaluation of the outcome: i.e. the DVD itself and how effectively it can be used to achieve its aims in

schools. Initial feedback from users is largely positive, giving the Forum assurance that the aims of the project were met. However, the challenge for the Forum, as in any of its projects, is to ensure that this resource continues to be used and promoted by all partners, and the Forum is addressing this through its continuing work.

ASPIRENorth is the Forum's largest programme. ASPIRENorth carried out a full internal evaluation of its impact in 2006/07: the report of this evaluation notes that, although time is needed to fully assess the longer-term effects of this work, in the short-term there is no doubt that the project is fulfilling all the aims and objectives that it would be reasonable to assume it could have achieved to date. The project ensures that children in schools with lower than average progression rates are able to benefit from a structured and co-ordinated programme of activity to raise their awareness about and aspirations to participate in post-compulsory education.

Individual Forum projects in 2006/07 had an impact both for the participants and for the Forum more broadly. An example of this is the 'engaging men through local learning centres' project, which had a direct and sometimes profound impact upon the lives of individual participants: this is evidenced in the summary of learner case studies. However, as well as this direct effect, the project also had wider impact in allowing the Forum to identify influences on non-participation in HE and some key reasons that discourage men from engaging in learning: these outcomes led to a number of practical recommendations at both local and national levels, and fed directly into the Forum's continuing work in this area. It also led to advice and an action plan for use in all learning centres in the Forum area.

It is recognised, however, that the higher order of evaluation as to how far, taken together, the activities of the North Forum are having an impact on widening participation in post-compulsory education is difficult. The North Forum is only one of various strands of activity in the promotion of widening participation. Each of the educational institutions that are members of the Forum and many other organisations in the north of Scotland are undertaking some form of activity in that regard in its own right, for example, and there are many other national initiatives and funding streams outwith the North Forum arrangements that will have a bearing on the situation. It is also the case that there are socio-economic factors that are substantial influencers of behaviour with regard to educational participation and achievement, and which are outwith the control or even the influence of the North Forum.

However, the Forum continues to focus on the good management of an appropriate programme of activities, and the achievement of planned outcomes. The Forum will also continue its strategy of building on previous successful work in order to maximise benefit and build coherence, through considering the impact of activity, including identifying areas of weakness and taking action to address gaps in provision. This is evidenced in the Forum's strategic plan for 2008/09 to 2012/13, which sets out how the Forum hopes to develop in the future, building on the work that it has developed in previous years.

5. List any changes to strategy which resulted from developments following implementation.

The Forum has demonstrated capacity to learn from experience in the work that it manages; its work plan over the past few years shows that the Forum has reflected on its areas of engagement in order to focus its resources on areas where further work would be of benefit.

The recent strategic planning process has been a useful opportunity for the Forum to reflect on its work and developments over the past few years, and to agree how these should affect future strategy. From this reflection arose five key principles which underpin the Forum's work. While these are not all changes in strategy in 2006/07, they are a useful statement of what the Forum has learned and confirmed over the past few years. These five principles are outlined in the table below:

North Forum: principles	
1. Learner-focused	
	The Forum sees the issue of widening participation from the perspective of the learner (or the potential learner). It is not an agency that represents institutional or organisational interests.
2. Benefits partners	
	The Forum is a partnership and the work of the Forum should benefit as many partners as possible. The Forum will not fund activities that involve only one partner, unless in exceptional circumstances.
3. Benefits whole geographical area	
	The Forum covers a huge and diverse geographical area and is committed to ensuring that its work benefits the whole area. Any projects that do not cover the whole geographical area are required to consider the practicalities and implications of rolling out the resulting good practice across the whole of the North of Scotland.
4. Builds capacity in existing agencies	
	The Forum recognises that the people it is seeking to influence within communities are often 'difficult to reach' The most successful way of reaching these people is by working with and through agencies that already exist to meet their needs. The Forum seeks to build capacity within those agencies, rather than setting up separate structures that then disappear when Forum funding ceases.
5. Engages partners	
	The Forum is only as strong as the commitment of its membership allows. The Forum is committed to ensuring that partners are engaged in its work and it recognises the huge benefit of successful projects in raising awareness about the Forum and building respect for its principles and practice. All project staff are ambassadors for the Forum.