

Scottish Funding Council Wider Access Regional Forum

Annual report for the period: Academic Year 2007/08

Regional Forum:	The North Forum
Lead Institution:	University of Aberdeen

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

In 2007/08, the North Forum updated its mission to reflect its new, wider remit, replacing the previous emphasis on widening access to higher education alone. Our mission is:

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

The Forum also produced a detailed strategic plan setting out how it aims to achieve this mission in the coming five years.

The full North Forum meets together twice each academic year to set and review its strategy. The structure of these meetings is designed to allow participation by a range of members from across the geographical area (to facilitate attendance, meetings are held alternately in the North East and the Highlands). The focus of the meetings is on enabling contributions from all members; to this end, a plenary discussion session, designed to inform the ongoing work of the Forum, is a key part of each meeting.

The business of the Forum is undertaken by an Executive Group, which meets six times in each academic year. Its role is to oversee and co-ordinate the Forum's work programme and to develop policy proposals for consideration by the Forum. Membership of this Group is drawn from across the different educational sectors and geographical areas represented by the North Forum. The Executive Group is an important part of the structure of the Forum, with a key role in guiding and overseeing the Forum's programmes of activity. A full-time Forum manager was appointed in 2007/08 to work with the Forum and the Executive Group to provide strengthened central oversight of Forum activity.

The North Forum operates in three key areas:

A Communities: Promoting the development of educational opportunities in community locations which will encourage non-participatory groups to engage with learning and provide clear progression routes into more formal certificated learning.

B Schools: Providing motivation and information for pupils in schools who do not aspire to participate in post-compulsory education to enable them to see the value of participation.

C Transitions: Easing transition for people moving between stages in education – from school to college or university, from college to university, from informal community based education to more formal education and so on.

A summary of the main activities undertaken in 2007/08 for each of these three key areas follows:

1 **Schools:**

The North Forum's schools programme, **ASPIRENorth**, completed its second full year of operation in 2007/08. During that time, the ASPIRENorth team continued to build positive relationships with partner organisations and to deliver their programme of activities for S1 to S4 pupils in 24 target secondary schools in the north of Scotland. The team deliver this programme across the whole of the north of Scotland, from Shetland to Fort William to Aberdeen. To cover this wide geographical area, the team is based in two locations, with three staff based in Inverness (to deliver in the Highlands and Islands) and three in Aberdeen (to deliver in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Moray).

ASPIRENorth's remit is to engage with young people from P7 (in selected feeder primary schools) to S4 in order to raise their early awareness of the value of post-school education, provide impartial and relevant information and advice and deliver a programme of activities which motivate, encourage aspiration and build self-confidence. The overarching objective of the programme is to facilitate young people in making more positive and better-informed decisions about their post-school educational choices. By establishing longer-term relationships with key influencers such as teachers and parents, the project also aims to build capacity by helping change local cultures and mindsets, in addition to motivating individual youngsters.

ASPIRENorth carries out thorough evaluation of its activity each year. A summary of some key points from its annual report is included as appendix 1.

In addition to its routine operational activity, ASPIRENorth also undertook a web development project in 2007/08, updating the website to make it appropriate for a range of users. In particular, the materials available for school pupils were improved, and three interactive educational games targeted at pupils at key age-stages were added.

Additionally, a project to engage young employees as volunteers for ASPIRENorth took place in 2007/08. This has led to a number of new employee volunteers who can assist the ASPIRENorth team in activity delivery and act as role models for pupils.

2. Communities

The **engaging men in learning through local learning centres** project completed its second phase of activity in 2007/08. This project, which built on the successful first phase in 2006/07, aimed to identify, develop and disseminate good practice in encouraging men to engage with learning through local learning centres. Learning centres across the whole North Forum area participated in this project, following a bidding process, and a range of interesting and innovative provision was developed and offered to learners. The lessons learned from this project were detailed in the project report, and specific recommendations will be taken forward in the Forum's 2008/09 communities programme.

The Forum funded a **capacity building project** for the second half of 2007/08. The purpose of this project was to develop and provide a resource pack for use in staff training and development within the Forum's partner organisations, particularly those who engage with adults at the level of access and pre-access to post-compulsory education. This project aimed to provide information, advice and guidance in the community, and was supported by a series of workshops. A website was developed to bring together the outcomes of this project, and it is now available at www.staff-support.co.uk. This resource will be of particular benefit to smaller institutions and people working in community settings. Publicity and training materials are available for users of the website, and this will be further used as the Forum develops its 2008/09 communities programme.

In 2007/08, work took place to remodel the database that supports the '**Course You Can**' website so that the information held can be updated by the institutions and organisations directly. The 'Course You Can' website covers both formal and informal course provision, giving information for potential learners and careers and guidance advisors on the entry points and routes into and through further and higher education in the north of Scotland. The website was relaunched in early 2008, and is available at www.courseyoucan.org.uk. The success of the website depends on individual institutions updating their entries, and this approach has been proving problematic. The North Forum's Executive Group has been monitoring this situation, particularly with regard to the accuracy and completeness of information on the website, and carrying out a more detailed review of the website will be a priority for early 2009. Depending on the outcome of the review, the website will either be fully updated or it will be refocused, to remove the course database information and concentrate on the provision of advice and guidance.

The Forum was a partner in the national project 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 supplies information about different types and levels of post-compulsory education, along with details about local institutions and community groups: one section of the pack is dedicated to the North of Scotland, and contains useful contact information for the region. The latest version of the pack was circulated in Summer 2008, and the website is available at <http://www.diverseroutes.co.uk/>. Discussions are ongoing at a national level to secure the long-term future of this resource; in the meantime, the North Forum has contributed towards the maintenance of the website in 2008/09, until a suitable long-term host can be found.

3. Transitions/progression

The Forum has also contributed to the **national bridging project** by undertaking work to promote effective articulation between colleges and HEIs in the subject areas of **computing and engineering**. The Forum funded an additional phase of this project for 2007/08, to pilot the use of soft skills materials for students in these subject areas; this work was project managed from Moray College, and students from throughout the Forum area were involved in the project. Information about accessing the materials developed through this project has recently been circulated to all Forum members.

The work of **SWAPNorth** continues, although this receives no specific funding from the Forum at present. SWAPNorth continues to participate in work with the other two SWAP consortia.

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

In producing its strategic plan for 2008/09–12/13, the North Forum reflected on the areas where it faced barriers or difficulties and decided how these could be overcome. These are shown in the table below:

Barrier/difficulty	Action taken to address barrier/difficulty in 2007/08 and work remaining to be done
Uncertainty over post-July 2008 funding level; implications for the Forum's work and future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2007/08, the Forum sought and secured 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. • In 2008/09, the Forum will continue, as appropriate, to seek alternative and additional streams of funding and take steps to ensure that where possible Forum activities are mainstreamed.
Varying levels of involvement of Forum members; need to promote broader involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have continued 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.
Need to ensure that outcomes to projects are not 'lost'; need to embed outcomes of activities to ensure sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We recognised the need to 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: to this end, we carried out a review of all previous Forum work and its outcomes; from this, we have identified key aspects of good practice and relevant information that we

	<p>will share more widely in 2008/09.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will continue to build capacity within Forum partners and ensure that work is embedded in the partners; Forum programmes from 2008/09 will include appropriate staff development and sharing of resources and information.
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3. Summarise the Forum’s achievements and the challenges/difficulties faced.

The North 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.

The Forum always seeks to improve its work and impact, and section 2 (above) highlights some of the ways in which we are seeking to overcome challenges and difficulties.

A full-time Forum manager was appointed in 2007/08 (before this, the work of the Forum had been co-ordinated by a part-time administrator). This has provided greater central oversight of the Forum’s work and has strengthened the work of the partnership, improved planning and communication, and allowed greater links with national activity.

In 2007/08, the Forum successfully managed a diverse 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 activities
<p>ASPIRENorth successfully completed the second full year of its work in schools. A list of its key achievements is included at appendix 1. Quotes from ASPIRENorth learners and teachers are included at appendix 2 as an interesting indication of the impact and effect that the activities are having.</p>
<p>The Forum planned, undertook, completed and evaluated a suite of project activity in the areas of schools, communities and transitions. These included the following projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Engaging men in learning through local learning centres” • Capacity-building staff support resource • “Course You Can” updating • ASPIRENorth employee volunteer project • ASPIRENorth web development project • Subject elements of the national bridging project

National engagement

The North 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. The Forum Manager took part in an exchange visit, with the other Forums, to Welsh wider access organisations and contributed to a summary of learning points from the visit. Forum representatives attended the 'Learning for All' update event in early 2008.

The Forum also oversaw the co-ordination of the SWAPNorth projects and participated in the national SWAP discussions and debate.

The Forum worked with the SFC on a range of issues. The Forum

- worked with the SFC to understand the new timescale and parameters for Forums to secure funding in 2008/09, and produced strategic and operational plans.
- worked with the SFC to develop a greater mutual understanding about the way in which Forums operate and are funded and how the Forums will develop their work in the new funding arrangements from 2008/09.

The Forum's 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 activities.

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

Over time, the North 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 first and second updates on the progress of 'Learning for all'. All Forum activities are learner-focused, designed to meet the needs of local learners and not just the needs of institutions.

Each of the Forum's activities in 2007/08 was designed to meet a particular need, taking account of the local and national context mentioned above. Each of the projects that the Forum undertook had a clear purpose and the Forum assessed whether or not that purpose had been achieved at the close of the activity, and through ongoing evaluation during the activity. Each activity had objectives that were specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound; a clear reporting structure, which had a direct relationship with the payment structure; and clear management guidelines and regular contact with the Forum's management. The Forum, therefore, measured each activity's success against this framework, both while it was undertaken and at the end of its life.

Obviously, the key impact of most projects are the practical outcomes, rather than just the evaluation of the outcome: in many of the projects listed above, the outcome was a resource (often a website), and

the ongoing challenge for the Forum is to ensure that these resources continue to be used to help learners and potential learners. In 2007/08, we were increasingly aware of the shortfalls of a project-based approach, in terms of control of the project outcomes and also in terms of sustainability of the outcomes. This helped us in developing our approach to the communities programme from 2008/09: we have taken steps to ensure the 2007/08 projects can be integrated into our new communities programme from 2008/09, improving the sustainability of the Forum's activity, and having a longer-term impact on learners.

ASPIRENorth is the Forum's largest programme, working to ensure 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. Appendix 1 contains some key points from the ASPIRENorth annual report for 2007/08, and highlights particular areas of impact for ASPIRENorth in 2007/08. We have paid particular attention to the need to monitor, evaluate and track our ASPIRENorth outcomes. A detailed programme evaluation strategy is in place and regularly reviewed/updated as appropriate; we also have established a good database to capture wide range of relevant information from the outset of the programme. So far, all our evaluation tools are pointing to successful achievements of the key aims and objectives they address.

Individual Forum activities in 2007/08 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. 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; this has been used widely in learning centres across the 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. We welcome the national endeavours to agree on an evaluation framework for the Forums, to enable us to set our work in context and to demonstrate impact more effectively.

Meantime, the Forum continues to focus on the good management of its programmes of activities to meet the needs of learners in the region. The Forum also continues 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 our approach to developing a communities programme to replace our previous project-based approach. In preparation for moving to a programme-based approach, we carried out a comprehensive mapping exercise in summer 2008, looking at the outcomes of previous activities, to ensure that we build on the work of previous years.

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

The North 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.

In preparation for our move to a programme-based approach from 2008/09, we carried out reviews of our activities and structures in 2007/08, which resulted in several changes to our work. In 2007/08, we

- reviewed and then revised the management structure of ASPIRENorth to ensure its sustainability and continued operation
- refined the evaluation methodology for ASPIRENorth, to include consideration of progression into FE, not only HE
- reviewed and changed the financial and HR arrangements for the Forum, so that these are now both managed by a single institution
- reviewed the mission statement, constitution and name of the Forum in 2007/08; as a result of the review, we increased the membership of the Executive Group to include more College representation and we also clarified and improved the arrangements for appointing the Chair and Vice-Chair positions.

The strategic planning process, which led to the finalisation of the strategic plan in 2007/08, was 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. 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 activities 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

Appendix 1: Summary of ASPIRENorth annual report 2007/08

This summary draws together the key points from the ASPIRENorth annual report 2007/08

Key achievements - TARGET SCHOOLS:

- 24 high schools committed to programme
- Prioritisation strategy successfully reviewed and minor changes made
- Councils and individual schools recognizing the value of ASPIRENorth and requesting additional participation where possible

Key achievements - WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP:

- All six local authorities in the project's area are supportive of the programme's activities
- All FE and HE partners local to target schools engaged in working with ASPIRENorth and willing to contribute as appropriate to the programme of activities
- Relationships with all local FE and HE partners have been strengthened further over 2007/08 enabling increased support for both activities and student volunteering opportunities
- Strong relationships now established with other Regional Forums and key schools outreach widening participation projects across Scotland
- ASPIRENorth staff attending relevant external committees, forums of events as appropriate.
- Two regional ASPIRENorth Advisory Groups now well established

Key achievements – PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES:

- By the end of the 2007/08 school year:
- 22 primary schools and 575 pupils participated in P7 Big School and Beyond activity (370 Grampian, 205 H&I)
- 2439 pupils participated in S1 F.A.M.E. activity (1287 Grampian, 1152 H&I)
- 1700 pupils participated in S2 Try It Out activity (960 Grampian, 740 H&I)
- 11 FE/HE partners hosted S2 'Try It Out' events across 16 separate days of activity:
 - Aberdeen College (97 pupils attending)
 - Inverness College UHI (421 pupils attending)
 - Lochaber College UHI (18 pupils attending)
 - Moray College UHI (325 pupils attending)
 - The Robert Gordon University (170 pupils attending)
 - Scottish Agricultural College (195 pupils attending)
 - University of Aberdeen (146 pupils attending)
 - Banff & Buchan College (103 pupils attending)
 - Shetland College/NAFC Marine Centre (joint event) (42 pupils attending)

- 2341 pupils participated in S3 University Challenge activity (1107 Grampian, 1234 H&I)
- 54 pupils from 11 (including 2 Junior High Schools) different H&I schools have participated in the S4 Student Life Experience residential in March 2008, accompanied by 8 teachers
- 2429 pupils participated in S4 What's Next? Activity (1177 Grampian, 1252 H&I)
- Total of core programme pupil interactions is 9538 – this does not include floating activities
- Team has interacted with approximately 290 parents at 12 parent events
- 14 floating events delivered

Key achievements – STUDENT VOLUNTEERS (numbers correct as at time of ASPIRENorth annual report, summer 2008):

- All local FE and HE partners providing ongoing support to student volunteering initiative
- 14 new student volunteer applications received in total during 2007/8 (10 Grampian region, 4 H&I region)
- 11 student volunteers have attended a total of 9 Volunteer Training events during 2007/8 (6 Grampian, 3 H&I)
- 2 student volunteers awaiting Disclosure checks prior to becoming active (both Grampian)
- 15 student volunteers in total fully approved as operational (10 Grampian, 5 H&I)
- 10 student volunteers have participated in 23 days of activities (15 Grampian, 8 H&I)

Key achievements – YOUNG EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERS (numbers correct as at time of ASPIRENorth annual report, summer 2008):

- 21 young employee volunteer applications received in total at 4th June 2008 (Grampian only)
- 18 young employee volunteers have attended a total of 11 Volunteer Training events (Grampian only)
- 2 young employee volunteers awaiting Disclosure checks prior to becoming active (Grampian only)
- 16 young employee volunteers fully approved as operational (Grampian only)
- 4 young employee volunteers have participated in 5 activities (Grampian only)
- 10 employers in Grampian are enrolled in scheme (including ConocoPhillips UK Ltd, MCS, Robertson Construction Eastern Ltd, Shell UK Ltd, Tinto Architecture, McAdam Design Partnership, Score Europe Ltd, DM Hall, Moray Council, Springfield Properties)

Key achievements – MONITORING, TRACKING AND EVALUATION:

- Establishment of a sophisticated database to capture wide range of relevant information from the outset
- Growing co-operation of schools in providing detailed participant information to enable long-term tracking
- Detailed programme evaluation strategy in place and regularly reviewed/updated as appropriate
- All evaluation tools pointing to successful achievement of the key aims and objectives they address
- Extensive list of relevant quotes being captured from all stakeholders recognizing ASPIRENorth's benefits, value and achievements
- Published progression rates to both FE and HE now being tracked in ASPIRENorth target schools

Key points to note - BUDGET:

- The programme worked effectively within budget to date and having undergone a management restructure there are no foreseen problems working within a reduced budget of £250k during 2008/9
- Any underspend has derived mainly from situations beyond the programme's control, e.g. staff leaving and not being able to replace them at all (i.e. H&I Volunteer Development Worker), or promptly, as in the case of the Grampian Administrative Secretary – a post which had to remain unfilled for six months
- The delays in a decision on future funding affected the way expenditure could be planned, (e.g. whether/what to spend on web development; whether to buy equipment which might then be redundant; the restriction on re-advertising posts)

Appendix 2: Quotes from learners and teachers engaged in ASPIRENorth activities, 2007/08

"Thank you for your visit to our staff meeting yesterday – some staff stopped me at the end and remarked on how much they enjoyed your presentation, they found it very interesting." (Kathryn Philips, PT Guidance, Inverness HS)

"Our pupils at Nairn Academy are expressing their desire to go on to further education in the light of their experience through this trip. It has renewed motivation in their present studies to ensure the possibility of doing further education. It just gave them a taste of student life which they all loved." (Accompanying teacher from Nairn Academy – S4 Residential Experience, 2008)

"On a personal note I would like to thank you and your team for the thoughtful and indepth contributions you have made to Northfield Academy this year. The P7 activity was amazing and you delivered exactly what we required. I look forward to further building on this." (Joanne Campbell, PT Guidance, Northfield Academy)

"Thank you very much for organizing and taking care of our 9 pupils in Aberdeen (S4 Residential Experience). They have all told me that they absolutely loved it and they are all talking about ideas they now have for what they may go on to study at college or university...so it's been a big success." (Yvette Lathe, PT Guidance, Kinlochleven HS)

"It was good and would help people to understand how important your future is and to start thinking about it" (S1 pupil, Dyce Academy)

"Today was a really good experience to see others, the students at the college, teaching you, and also doing what they want to show you at the same time. Would do it again, choosing other subjects, just to see how they are, after seeing how my opinion has changed on the three subjects I did in today's session." (S2 pupil, Keith Grammar School)

"The session was really helpful and helped me figure out where I should go and what I should do in the future. It also helped me think about what I wanted to take near 4th year and not to follow my friends and do what they are doing because it is my decision and my life that I am planning." (S1 Pupil, Nairn Academy)

"I thought it was the best visit that we have ever come to – it was brilliant" (S2 pupil, Keith Grammar School)

"Very good, well presented and a lot of information learnt today. Amazing presentation and has now confirmed fully what I want to do in later life." (S4 pupil, Dyce Academy)

"Today I know a lot more. I didn't know anything about NC, HNC or anything. Thanks!" (S1 pupil, Elgin High School)

"I thought it really helped me understand what is coming up in the future, and I should start thinking about what I want to do in the future" (S1 pupil, Banff Academy)

"Today's visit was an inspirational visit and we should do it again." (S2 pupil, Buckie Community High School)

"I thought today's session made me think about what I wanted to do in the future and now I know what I have to do to get my future job. The course was great and I enjoyed every minute of it." (S4 pupil, Peterhead Academy)

"The session was good and I did learn some things I never knew before. It has made me more determined to succeed in the career I want." (S4 pupil, Grantown Grammar School)

"MAGIC! It was educational, I am very grateful for you to take the time to come and explain to us. Thank you."
(S3 pupil, Lochaber High School)