Overview of the event

On 15 June 2015, SFC hosted an event to share good practice and consider how the gender action plan, currently being developed by the SFC, should be shaped to support colleges, universities and partners in addressing gender imbalances to meet the ambitions of Government policy, such as in *Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy (DYW)*. Whilst the action plan will ultimately have a broader focus, this initial event was focused on looking at gender imbalances amongst students.

The conference began with keynote speakers from both the college and university sectors, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and Engender. Delegates heard a range of perspectives on the case for change and current institutional approaches to tackling gender imbalances at a student level. Each table of delegates was then invited to discuss the following questions:

1) Of the work currently being undertaken by Scottish colleges and universities to address gender imbalances at a student level what do you think is and is not working well and why do you think this?
2) What level of change can we expect from both sectors in 10 years?

In the afternoon there were four workshops in which participants shared good practice around particular issues and challenges. This report gives a summary of the key themes from each of these sessions before highlighting where more information on the gender action plan’s development can be found.
Keynote Presentations

The case for change

Alice Brown, Chair of the Scottish Funding Council, started the day by welcoming the group of approximately 90 people from across colleges, universities and partners. Delegates heard from Rebecca O’Neill, an undergraduate student at the University of Stirling, who had previously chosen to leave an undergraduate course in a discipline within science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) at another institution. Rebecca gave her personal perspective on some of the challenges she faced. Emma Ritch, Director of Engender, called on all colleges and universities to think about how they can play a part in dispelling societal myths about what boys and girls can do, emphasising Higher and Further Education’s role in tackling the structural issues underlying such stereotypes.

Institutional approaches to tackling gender imbalances

Marla Baird, Equality and Inclusion Manager at Ayrshire College outlined the strategic ‘Whole College Approach’ Ayrshire had adopted to implementing gender equalities across all departments, including the Student Association and tackling broader inequalities such as violence against women. They are focussing on several areas of gender imbalance including women into STEM and sport, and men into care, recognising that it needs a sustained approach. Neil Speirs, Senior Widening Participation Officer at the University of Edinburgh then outlined the university’s use of notions of Olympism to improve engagement with young men in the project ‘Educated Pass’, emphasising the research base underpinning the approach.

SDS and SFC approaches

Katie Hutton, Depute Director of National Training Programmes at SDS outlined how SDS is working to mainstream their consideration of gender, ensuring sustained interventions from school onwards. She outlined their work to address these differences included work at a regional and national level as well as building their own capacity with CPD for staff and equality plans for service delivery teams. She emphasised their focus on Modern Apprenticeships.

John Kemp, Director of Access, Skills and Outcome Agreements at SFC outlined how SFC has been working in partnership with SDS on developing a Gender Action Plan (GAP) for colleges and universities in Scotland. He highlighted the first priority is to address the significant gender imbalances in course uptake across the further and higher education (FE/HE) sectors in Scotland. The plan will be used to shape Outcome Agreements in the future and will only result in meaningful, sustainable change through strong leadership and partnership along with wider cultural change. John stressed that it will require a collaborative approach between the FE/HE sectors, schools and local authorities, SDS, SFC and the Commission on Widening Access.
Table Discussions

Each table of delegates was invited to discuss the following two questions:

1. Of the work currently being undertaken by Scottish Colleges and Universities to address gender imbalances at a student level what do you think is and is not working well and why do you think this?

“Lots of initiatives are working well in parallel, everyone is talking about it.”

- A number of initiatives and approaches were highlighted as working well, these included some school engagement activities and mixed sporting clubs (e.g. mixed rugby clubs) helping to tackle challenging behaviour like ‘laddism’. The Athena SWAN charter and unconscious bias training are examples of effective tools to address gender inequalities. Survey and consultation methods are becoming more sophisticated as we learn more and will continue to improve.

- Further improvement is required to develop a better understanding and incorporation of gender equality (as well as other protected characteristics) at board level in each institution and to ensure this is disseminated across the whole institution; the process of mainstreaming is a long journey and needs equality champions to keep the agenda alive and moving forward. Equality outcomes should be more effectively embedded in Outcome Agreements and Professional organisations (e.g. General Teaching Council) need to be engaged. Overwhelmingly the topic of better participation with schools and Local Authorities was raised and included working with parents at an early stage to address stereotypes.

2. What level of change can we expect from both sectors in 10 years?

“It’s everyone’s responsibility to tackle inequalities - “that’s not my role” isn’t appropriate”

- Across both sectors individual institutions are at very different stages in addressing gender imbalances. It was felt that the targets from DYW are very ambitious and would present different challenges for different subject areas and institutions. There was acknowledgement that this was an area where it would be a challenge to have a direct impact as there are wider societal factors contributing to the issue. Therefore greater engagement with employers and communities is certainly possible, and key, across both FE and HE.

Further themes emerging:

Integrated Institutional approach

Efforts to ensure gender equality need to be integrated throughout every institution, providing a consistent message to staff and students. It is not the responsibility of a particular department or individual but should be driven at board level and implemented throughout each organisation at all levels and departments. This includes academic staff, facilities, Students’ Associations and support staff. This should include compulsory training for staff and students alike and should be included in all codes of conduct for staff.
FE/HE and School partnerships

Spreading the message that no course or career path is gender appropriate should be the responsibility of teaching staff at all levels, this includes within schools. This should take the most hands on approach possible: publicity material containing images of individuals in non-traditional gendered roles can be seen as tokenistic and does not go far enough. Engagement with schools should include positive female/male role models from teaching staff and industry demonstrating to young people the potential for opportunities in areas previously not considered.

Sharing best practice and evaluation

There is evidence that initiatives are in place across a range of however there is insufficient oversight of the performance or outcomes from these projects. A forum to share best practice, learn and reflect on what is happening across the country could provide valuable insight into areas for future development. There is also benefit to be had from different academic disciplines sharing practice in their approach to tackling this.

Outcome Agreements

Addressing the gender imbalance in student numbers on a course by course basis needs to be explicitly targeted and measured as part of Outcome Agreements in order to emphasise the importance of tackling this area of inequality.

Engagement with stakeholders

Gender imbalances are part of wider society and therefore a consistent message needs to come from all stakeholders including
- Local Authorities
- NHS
- Employers/Industry
- Professional Bodies and specific organisations in areas of significant gender imbalance.

STEM vs other areas of gender inequality

While a focus on STEM provides a helpful tool to include females in a range of non-traditional subject areas, other subject areas with gender imbalances require a similar level of focus e.g. Men into Care.
Workshops

**Workshop 1 - Challenging gender imbalances in degree courses**

The workshop analysed the complex issue of gender imbalances in degrees, considering the experiences of Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) students who have studied an access programme and are now at University studying nursing, primary education and engineering. The workshop considered the challenges faced by students in breaking down stereotypes and practical ways universities and colleges can address these issues.

The significant influence of schools and parents over decision making before a young person enters FE/HE was discussed and it was felt that there were varying levels of commitment from the FE/HE sectors in trying to address this. Some participants felt that it was a key part of their outreach and development work with local communities as well as CPD, others believed that it was out with their control and not within their remit. Generally it was agreed that young people need to be exposed to different types of non-gender specific work earlier to prevent pigeon-holing and that schools should engage with this agenda to a greater extent, especially with role models and industry representatives.

**Further discussion**

- Opinions were mixed whether the 5% KPI for colleges stemming from DYW was achievable in the timescales indicated. Some organisations are still in the early stages of measuring gender imbalance data and others are more advanced in their understanding. Continuing to gather data and analyse this will allow greater understanding of what is working.
- It was stressed that Outcome Agreements need to be SMART in this field and it was suggested that institutions need to be held to account.
- It was suggested that there needs to be a better forum for sharing info about best practice to have any positive impact.
- Better engagement with industry was highlighted. This needs to promote ‘alternative’ routes to school pupils to allow them to get an appreciation of the realities of these I roles
- Several examples of good working practises were highlighted, including Interconnect.

**Workshop 2 - Gender plus: understanding the multiple factors that influence student access**

This workshop took gender as the starting point for a discussion about the concept of intersectionality and its relevance for access to further and higher education. As a general rule, multiple factors depressing participation serve to combine and inhibit participation in HE. An intersectional approach takes account of the fact that peoples’ identities in society are formed by multiple factors. Adopting an intersectional approach would mean initiatives such as Gender Plans are less likely to overlook people in specific circumstances with particular combinations of disadvantage.

In order to adopt an intersectional approach and make widening participation initiatives more efficient some institutions involved in the Attracting Diversity project are using multifunction teams for example combining Widening Participation and Equality and Diversity staff. Such an approach will enhance the likelihood that an initiative can be sustained and or mainstreamed.
An intersectional approach offers two distinct benefits to project design – it allows interventions to be more targeted where appropriate (for instance if research shows particular under-representation among women from a specific BME background) and allows initiatives for women to be mainstreamed, and easily adopted for other groups (where research shows common barriers to access).

**Workshop 3 - Achieving non-gendered pathways from school choices to employment outcomes**

This workshop discussed Forth Valley College’s STEM and SCOTS program (see delegate pack from the event for further information on these programmes). Following an overview of the college’s work, delegates were given two exercises to consider.

The first exercise asked the groups to consider how STEM activities could be promoted within different departments within a college, demonstrating its relevance to a wide range of areas of life. Ideas suggested included:

- Care, Health and Sport department: using STEM to discuss how Body Mass Index (BMI) is calculated, how to achieve a good BMI and the effect a poor BMI can have on the physiology of the body.
- Food Science: using STEM to discuss how to eat healthily, looking at different foods and ingredients and why certain foods are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for the body.
- Hospitality and Salon Services: using chemistry to discuss mixing dyes; using biology to look at adverse reactions on the body and different skin/hair types; and using engineering to discuss PAT testing equipment in the salons.

The second session involved designing an innovative program that could cover many of the different departments in the college, incorporating different ways of using STEM. Ideas included the development of a beauty product, a healthy snack bar and designing a building to market as a business space. Participants discussed how the research, development, production, marketing and sale of a product would cross many of the departments in the college and involve different STEM skills.

**Further discussion**

- Questions were raised around how programs like these can be used to encourage males into studying care and about how SDS funding could be provided through DYW.
- The difficulties involved in getting head teacher buy-in for S4 pupils were raised and the importance of getting buy-in from the local Education Officer was discussed.
- The need to be clear on the output of such interventions was highlighted – eg. highlighting whether there is a qualification at the end.

**Workshop 4 - Let’s Talk About Sex: utilising funding to kick start STEM gender equality**

This workshop explored work carried out by Equate Scotland and Edinburgh Napier University in tackling gender inequalities in STEM subjects. The presenters outlined the strategic intent behind their work, challenges encountered and its impact. They outlined that:

- They had reinvigorated the 2 Connect student groups (in School of Engineering and the Built Environment and School of Computing). This support network for women studying STEM subject areas has enhanced the student experience and has helped students to develop confidence and employability skills. The network also involves university staff, employers and other peers.
- This work created greater co-ordination and more open dialogue across all areas of the institution, including planning, admissions, widening access, recruitment and academic schools.
- Gender has been considered in open days and in outreach programmes.
- They have expanded the current provision of employer mentoring, with an extra 20 places for female applicants from STEM programmes.
- When women are offered a place on a STEM course they are sent a welcome email from the Connect Student Group.

They outlined how they are tackling the key challenges:
- Data is a challenge but Edinburgh Napier has invested in data analysis tools to help with analysis and access, supporting a move from data to intelligence. Recruitment data is also monitored within Edinburgh Napier. They have reviewed the current available data. They reconcile it between school and university level, understand it, and compare it with sector benchmarks.
- Edinburgh Napier has a Student Retention Steering Group that meets regularly and considers gender as part of their work. Their aim is to further embed work within planning cycles.
- Some issues are multi-faceted so they need to work with others to maximise impact. Change takes time but they are starting to overcome these issues.

Further discussion

- **What other challenges are there to change public perception of STEM subjects?**
  A big challenge is to challenge society’s stereotypes, for example that these subject areas are controlled by men, that the subjects are too technical, too dirty, too logical. There’s a lack of understanding of the difference perhaps between the various engineering disciplines: Mechanical, Auto, Electronic, Electrical, Civil etc.
- **How can we do this?**
  It would be helpful to have guidance on the types of professions available after a STEM course. The use of female role models is also important for encouraging younger women and for this reason the Connect forum is involved in Napier Open Days. There could be targeted campaigns aimed at parents, career advisors and teachers in the schools so they are clear on the range of courses, professions and opportunities in the STEM subject areas.
- **Do you keep in touch with students afterwards?**
  Interconnect keeps in touch with students after graduation. Graduates might be invited to events, give career advice, and hopefully become role models. Graduates can also access career development opportunities through Equate Scotland’s wider work to support women within STEM sectors.
- **Do you work with schools?**
  Equate Scotland has previously offered nontraditional work placements to S4 pupils and are currently undertaking work around modern apprenticeships. Edinburgh Napier work with schools, hosting events at Edinburgh Napier and visiting schools.
- **Do you work with those wishing to return to work?**
  Equate Scotland also run ‘returning to work’ workshops for women who have been away from the workplace for a while and also returning after maternity leave, to support their transition into the workplace.
- **Final message?**
  Everyone involved in the STEM “pipeline” needs to work actively to create change, both by working with others and reflecting on their own practice: schools, colleges, universities,
employers and organisations such as SDS and SFC. In order for this to happen, universities and colleges need senior managers to take initiative to ensure progress is made. There needs to be a consistent message for women in Science, Engineering, Technology and the Built Environment: demonstrating that STEM is for them and they are welcomed.

Further information and next steps

For more information on the event, please go to the SFC website where you can find the delegate pack from the day, alongside presentations from the keynotes and workshops. You can also find more information on the gender action plan including a timeline and details on further opportunities to participate in its development.