

National Widening Access and Participation Forum response to SFC Review

This paper is in response to the Scottish Funding Council Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability, published June 2020. We seek to address some of the issues the review intends to focus on, including coherent provision, sustainability and a learner-centred approach. In particular we are responding to review question B around what works, what doesn't and what we can do differently.

As individual institutions and partnerships we are doing all we can to replace face-to-face provision with online content and other alternative provision. Widening access teams, SWAP, ADHP, SHEP, SCAPP and others are working hard to maintain support throughout lockdown and the summer break, and to look forward to how we can support students in the coming months. As a national group we are developing work in partnership to address the immediate needs of senior phase school students, college students, and their advisers who may be considering subject choices and routes into college and university in the coming months.

This work, and the discussions leading up to and around this, has highlighted the ongoing issues regarding online and collaborative delivery which we all faced before the pandemic and that have been brought into stark focus by Covid-19. For a number of years various initiatives have requested a nationally supported online resource to support their individual activities, including the development of a national articulation finder based on the Regional Learner Passport app in the south east of Scotland, the roll-out of Focus Point to the other SHEP providers and the maintenance of SCAPP resources. The current collaborative work of the national forum to provide impartial information, advice and guidance will require an online repository to house recorded versions of online engagement to enable engagement by as many learners as possible across the country.

What we propose to address this would be the provision of a national online platform for widening access. This would address a number of current issues, including the focus of the Blueprint for Fair Access on a whole system approach to join different parts of the system, provide better pathways and clear and concise information, advice and guidance. This could be split into sections, enabling each part to be focussed on the relevant audience, and be tailored to each group. This would enable widening access advice to be more readily accessible to the learner and wider access colleagues across the sector could more easily facilitate collaborative working and the sharing of best practice. In addition the work of the Scottish Framework for Fair Access, including the Toolkit, could be added to this to provide a single national online support for widening access across the country.

Exactly how the platform was built would need careful consideration and time to get it right, but would negate the need for individual institutions to 'host' particular projects. It would improve collaborative working across the sector and produce significant economies of scale if designed correctly. Most importantly it would maintain impartiality in the provision of tailored information, advice and guidance to both learners and practitioners.

It needs to be centred on the learner and how widening access practitioners can best support them, and each other, to achieve the best outcomes for the learners. It should cover the range of different learners, from early years outreach through to adult and lifelong learning. It is the ideal way to get important messages out quickly and efficiently and to provide up-to-date information on widening participation activity and admissions policies. It could become the easily identifiable source of trusted information, advice and guidance which a lot of current practitioners, especially in schools and colleges, are desperate for.

For widening access practitioners it will provide a space of groups like SCAPP to shape and grow with a dynamic and interactive space. HEIs and FEIs have an independent space to host collaborative working and practitioners know where to go to find trusted IAG and to learn from the best practice of others through spaces such as the Toolkit.

Examples of platforms with sections tailored to multiple users and audiences already exist. UCAS has, for some years, maintained access for applicants, advisers and admissions staff alike and limits access accordingly. The new government initiative to provide tailored support to current learners through the pandemic – Student Information Scotland – is government owned and run and puts the learner at the heart of the information it provides, whilst addressing multiple audiences.

Key to the provision of a national platform is input from across the sector. This would necessarily include the learner voice, for example SPARQS, schools, colleges, widening participation partnerships, universities and parents. Input from other interested parties such as the SFC and Commissioner for Fair Access would also be crucial to ensure it is fit for purpose for the sector as a whole. It can facilitate a move away from individual silos of information and service. It should be widely available to all those willing to engage to guarantee comprehensive coverage and provision of information, advice and guidance across the country.

Whilst the current situation created by the pandemic has created massive problems it has also meant that we have a unique opportunity to address a number of ongoing issues and make significant progress in the advancement of widening access provision across Scotland. To achieve this will require a strong focus on the growing issues and action to halt the current divergence in funding and other support, at institution and national level, to make this a reality. We are confident that, collaboratively, and with sustained support from across the education community, we can move this forward.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kind regards

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