

10 September 2006

Review of the Wider Access Regional Forums – way forward

Purpose

- 1 This paper presents a revised remit and method of operation for the wider access regional forums. It is the result of the review of the forums which the Council executive completed in spring 2006. The Council agreed the outcomes of the review at its meeting on 18 August 2006, subject to local consultation. We invite the Chairs of the forums to comment on this revised paper and to consult locally on the proposals for change. We request a response by 3 November 2006.

Background

- 2 At its meeting on 9 December 2005 the Council agreed its proposed action plan flowing from the Learning for All report. This included a review of the wider access regional forums and implementing the changes required to put them on a longer-term, secure footing.
- 3 The executive began the review process in January 2006. As part of the review we consulted:
 - current chairs and vice-chairs;
 - previous chairs;
 - current managers/co-ordinators;
 - staff currently involved in projects funded by the forums; and
 - other key stakeholders including schools, local authorities and community learning and development.

Outcomes

- 4 During the consultation we received positive feedback from all the groups we spoke to about the way the regional forums have developed their role to meet local need, and are continuing to do this. The groups also provided comments on many things which they felt should be changed to further strengthen and improve the function of the forums and put them on a long-term footing.
- 5 There was strong agreement on the key issues, particularly at the national and strategic level, and the groups made recommendations as to how we might take this forward. There was greater divergence of views at the local/regional level, particularly in relation to operational issues such as funding, staffing and local management.
- 6 There was widespread support to maintain the existing forum boundaries. We do not propose to change the current geographical boundaries of the forums. We encourage forums to consider working together – including sharing staff and jointly funding projects – where this is the most appropriate way to achieve a goal. We would encourage this but would not prescribe any particular model. The main issue for many was that the forums should work towards providing parity of opportunity and support for learners across the regions.

Proposals for change

- 7 We returned to the SWARF Executive at the end of March 2006 with an options paper for possible changes. We have addressed the key issues emerging from the discussions in this revised paper and propose action in five key areas. We will take these in turn below.

Remit of the forums

- 8 The forums exist to promote and fund collaborative action by universities, colleges and their partners to:
 - widen participation in post-compulsory education – both further and higher education – in their area;
 - raise aspirations for learning and raise attainment;
 - promote retention and progression

- disseminate good practice in widening participation; and
 - help implement national policy on widening participation in a regional context where this is best done collaboratively.
- 9 Many of the actions to widen participation are the responsibility of individual universities or colleges, of local authorities or of other local groups or national bodies. The work of the forums should not replace or duplicate these.
- 10 Forums include the universities and colleges in their region. The Funding Council also encourages strong links with other stakeholders – such as schools and local authorities – either through membership of the forum itself or through other links. Forums should work with others to identify the priorities within their area and to identify which activities are best addressed by collaborative action.
- 11 We expect each forum to support activities that support:
- the implementation of the Council’s *Learning for All* report (and other relevant policy documents the Funding Council may identify);
 - work with the schools sector, particularly in areas of low participation to raise aspirations (and, through this, attainment) and support transitions to post compulsory education;
 - work to support FE/HE articulation; and
 - work with adults and with communities where participation and progression in post-compulsory education is low.
- 12 We will expect forums to have clear plans and targets for work in each of these areas of activity and any other areas of need they have identified.

Funding

- 13 The Funding Council will fund the forums to help support collaborative projects or services which support the remit above.
- 14 We expect the need for the forums will continue for the foreseeable future, therefore:
- we will fund the forums on the basis of a rolling two-year agreement between the funding Councils and each forum. This will allow the forum to decide how they use the funding to meet the needs they identify for their area; and

- any decision to end funding to a forum or to alter the level to a major extent will be signalled two years in advance. We therefore do not expect the host institution to have to build in significant contingency funding to accommodate severance arrangements as this would be addressed within any notice period.

Governance and management arrangements

- 15 The Council will channel the funding through a host institution which will be responsible for the financial administration of the funds and will account for this to the Funding Council. In order to help ensure the smooth operation of the forums the Funding Council will produce an advisory good practice guide on the relationships between the forums and the host institutions. This will cover staffing and financial management issues
- 16 The forum Executive Group will be accountable for the strategic decisions made and the projects funded to achieve the stated outcomes.

Closer working between the forums and the Council executive

- 17 We recognise that in many areas the Funding Council executive has access to statistics, research and administrative and evaluation systems that could help support the forums. The Funding Council should work with the staff of the forums to maximise the use that is made of such central resources in appropriate areas.
- 18 While we propose to continue to channel funding for the forums through a host institution we will consider individual cases for the Council disbursing funding directly to projects or services if required but the default position would be as it is presently.
- 19 We suggest that the Council executive work more closely with forum managers in future to share our expertise and input on the gathering and analysis of data related to widening participation, both locally and nationally and on policy developments.

A new strategic-level national group

- 20 During the consultation nearly all stakeholders expressed some disappointment that the Scottish Wider Access Region Forum (SWARF) meetings, which bring together the chairs, vice-chairs, and managers with the Funding Council and the Scottish Executive, had not been as successful as had been hoped in providing a forum for strategic-level sharing of good practice and provision of policy advice. We received many suggestions on how this structure and remit could be improved and strengthened to deliver a national agenda for widening participation.

- 21 We propose that we continue with a national forum for the chairs and vice-chairs of the forums but that we widen the membership to include other stakeholders and a small number of members who would be appointed for their expertise – either academic or as practitioners – in widening participation work in schools, articulation or work with communities. We also suggest membership from other stakeholder bodies.
- 22 In order to align the work of this body as closely as possible with the implementation of *Learning for All*, we propose that this body should help advise the Council on the annual publication and event that we will be holding to monitor progress on *Learning for All*. For this reason we suggest that the new committee be serviced more directly by the Funding Council executive and suggest that it is chaired by the Council’s Director of Learning Policy and Strategy.
- 23 The remit of the national body would be to:
- bring together national expertise to inform the Funding Council’s and the forums’ widening participation work;
 - promote and disseminate good practice in widening participation; and
 - advise the Funding Council on progress with the implementation of *Learning for All* and the annual publication and event to report on progress.
- 24 The membership of the national group would include:
- Director of the Council’s Learning Policy and Strategy Directorate (Chair);
 - the chairs and vice-chairs of the four wider access regional forums;
 - 3 members with expertise respectively in widening participation work in schools, articulation or work with communities;
 - the Scottish Executive;
 - a representative from Universities Scotland, the Association of Scottish Colleges and NUS; and
 - the four forum managers, the SFC executive and national co-ordinator for widening participation as observers.