Supporting the Fair Access community to tackle under-representation in higher education: The Framework for Fair Access and the role of SCAPP (Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners)

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Scotland's Framework for Fair Access[1] comprises an online toolkit to assess the effectiveness of interventions to support fair access to higher education and a professional network for access practitioners (Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners: SCAPP). The Framework aims to support those involved in access to understand and contribute to the evidence base on what works. This paper introduces the Framework, focusing in particular on the role and developments of SCAPP.

Patterns of higher education participation remain stubbornly uneven, with fewer people from lower socio-economic groups entering higher education, particularly degree-level study directly from school, when compared to their more affluent peers. Widening access/widening participation professionals work to change that, providing an array of successful outreach initiatives and policies to support under-represented people into and through HE.

The aim of SCAPP is to provide a practitioners' network to support the development and professionalisation of a strong widening access and participation community in Scotland. SCAPP aims to be inclusive with a focus on supporting those directly engaged in delivery, with the purpose of embedding, enhancing and supporting effective practice in Scotland. Work and developments of SCAPP are shaped and driven by 5 key objectives: Networking, Training and Development, Evaluation and Research, Quality Standards and Toolkit Development. The key activities and developments progressed so far will be outlined together with some challenges, not least those of developing a network within a context currently governed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background to the Framework

As noted in the final report[2] of the Commission on Widening Access (2016), there has long been uneven access to higher education across different socio-economic groups. At that point in time, 18-year-olds from Scotland's 20% least deprived neighbourhoods were more than four times as likely to enter university compared to their peers in the 20% most deprived areas. The Commission was established to challenge that barrier to social mobility, determining 34 recommendations all of which were accepted by the Scottish Government. These included the recruitment of a Commissioner for Fair Access, a role taken on by Sir

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[1] https://www.fairaccess.scot/
[2] https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/

Professor Peter Scott, and an overall target that by 2030 there would be parity of access for those from deprived communities; specifically, that students from the 20% most deprived areas should represent 20% of entrants to higher education.

Recommendation 2 called for a Scottish Framework for Fair Access:

"…the Commissioner for Fair Access, working with experts, should publish a Scottish Framework for Fair Access. This authoritative, evidence based framework should identify the most impactful forms of access activity at each stage of the learner journey, from early learning through to higher education and provide best practice guidelines on its delivery and evaluation"

Whilst the report commended innovative access interventions across Scotland, it noted that it was near impossible to determine which programmes delivered meaningful impact given the dearth of robust evidence, a finding echoed most recently by Robinson and Salvestrini (2020)[3] when exploring the impact of widening access activities in England. The Framework was intended to begin to fill that gap.

A Framework Development Group was established by the Commissioner drawing on representatives from across the school, college and university sectors. Following consultation, the group determined the Framework should comprise two pillars: an online toolkit and a professional development network for access practitioners. With funding from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the group commissioned CFE Research to develop the toolkit. They undertook a rapid review of published literature and a call for evidence, focusing on interventions developed in a Scottish context, with an assessment of impact, cost, and volume and credibility of evidence for each intervention. In its first iteration, the toolkit covers access, retention and progression with links to guidance and toolkits to enhance evaluation.

For the second pillar, the Framework Development Group established a short life working group with the remit to develop a national Widening Access and Participation Network with an interim title of CAPPS - Community of Access and Participation Practitioners Scotland. This built on work developed by the SHEP[4] Practitioners' Group in 2016. Building on this momentum and with the ongoing work of CAPPS, funding was successfully secured from SFC for a Development Coordinator to take forward a Community of Practice. From this was born SCAPP (Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners). The framework was officially launched on 7th May 2010

A Community of Practice - The Context

Widening participation addresses patterns of under-representation in schools, further and higher education and is a key part of governmental education policy in Scotland and the UK. A significant and important number of professionals work within admissions, recruitment, lifelong learning, research, teaching departments, policy and widening access and participation departments across many sectors. They are dedicated to developing, promoting, delivering and researching and evaluating activities and programmes at all stages of the learner journey to encourage, motivate, monitor and retain the proportion of learners from under-represented groups.

Over the years, momentum and demand has been building for a membership organisation with a Scotland wide focus to support the work, activities and communication of widening

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[3] https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/impact-of-interventions-for-widening-access-to-he/
[4] Schools Higher Education Programme

access practitioners within schools, colleges, universities and other related organisations. There are a number of existing and well established organisations such as UALL/SUALL[5], FACE[6], HELOA[7] and NEON[8], but most are linked to networks outwith Scotland, although some with regional presence. In the absence of a widening access network with a Scottish specific focus there has been, over the years, a lack of opportunities to share development activity, benefit from experience, exchange good practice and build the capacity of Scotland's widening access and practitioner professionals.

The Commissioner for Fair Access notes in his first report in 2017 – Laying the Foundations for Fair Access – the commitment and expertise in (fair) access in Scotland and the significant body of experienced and enthusiastic practitioners and research professionals across institutions and organisations, including individual experts, writers, journalists and other public bodies and figureheads. (Commissioner for Fair Access, Laying the Foundations for Fair Access, page 37)[9]

Feedback from 200 respondents from research carried out by the Framework Governance Group, on behalf of the Commissioner for Fair Access, showed an appetite for a Community of Practice for Practitioners and further feedback revealed a gap in support for practitioners that covers all stages of the learner journey.

SCAPP - Building a Community of Practice

With SFC funding, a Development Coordinator was appointed from 2019 to take forward the development and coordination of SCAPP which was introduced at the Fair Access Conference in June 2019 as part of the Scottish Framework for Fair Access.

The aim of SCAPP is to provide a practitioners' network to support the development and professionalisation of a strong widening access and participation community in Scotland with the purpose of embedding, enhancing and supporting effective practice in Scotland.

There are four important principles underpinning the shape and development of SCAPP:

- to be inclusive: to represent diversity of interests, activities and work in which practitioners are engaged;
- to be system wide: universities, colleges, schools, third sector, and other organisations where access to higher education is supported in activities;
- to be practitioner focussed and supporting those directly engaged in delivery or evaluation and research of widening access and participation activities; and
- to build on, not duplicate, existing national and local networks.

Work and developments of SCAPP are shaped and driven by 5 key objectives:

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[5] Universities Association for Lifelong Learning/Scottish Universities Association for Lifelong Learning
[6] Forum for Access and Continuing Education
[7] Higher Education Liaison Officers Association, there is also a Scottish regional branch of this called SHELOA. The role of HELOA has broadened from schools liaison to encompass recruitment, marketing, admissions and widening participation
[8] National Education Opportunities Network
[9] https://www.gov.scot/publications/laying-foundations-fair-access-annual-report-2017-commissioner-fair-access/

Networking

Providing opportunities to collaborate, discuss and share practice, resources and skills. Identifying and working with existing communities of practice across Scotland to ensure a positive impact on the learner journey.

Training and Development

Developing and enhancing practice by creating, identifying and promoting training opportunities. Developing working groups, activities and training linked directly to elements of the Fair Access Toolkit and other relevant resources.

Evaluation and Research

Working with research to ensure practitioners have access to up-to-date evidence to inform their work. Sharing practice in the effective use of evidence to improve implementation and evaluation strategies. Supporting the collation of national and regional data to better track and target relevant groups.

Quality Standards

Ensuring quality of practice by supporting and promoting the alignment of practice with evidence. Exploring the development of a formal accreditation process to endorse and value the work of practitioners and to assist in raising the status of Widening Access and Widening Participation.
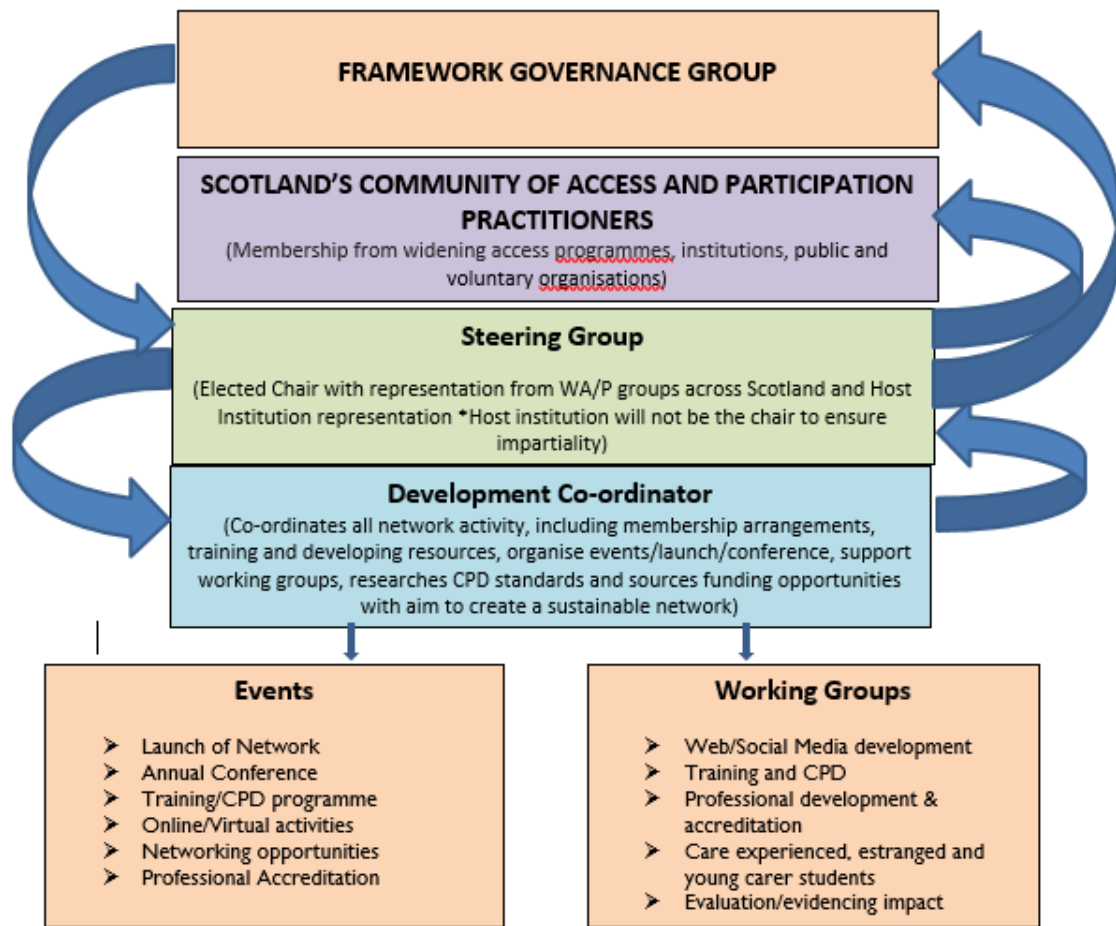
The Toolkit

The Toolkit is intended to support practitioners to plan and evaluate engagement and approaches. The practitioners' network will have a key role in informing the content and contributing to the Toolkit, as well as championing its use.

Membership and Governance

SCAPP aims to be a member-led community. The membership is growing to include representation from universities, colleges, skills, voluntary and public sector organisations and will continue to build the network to represent the diversity of interests, activities and work in which practitioners are engaged.

SCAPP is governed by a Steering Group with representation from across the university, college, school and charity sector. As a central pillar of the Scottish Framework for Fair Access, SCAPP works closely with the Framework Governance Group and has representation on this group to enable continuity, coherence and communication.

FRAMEWORK GOVERNANCE GROUP

SCOTLAND'S COMMUNITY OF ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION PRACTITIONERS

(Membership from widening access programmes, institutions, public and voluntary organisations)

Steering Group

(Elected Chair with representation from WA/P groups across Scotland and Host Institution representation *Host institution will not be the chair to ensure impartiality)

Development Co-ordinator

(Co-ordinates all network activity, including membership arrangements, training and developing resources, organise events/launch/conference, support working groups, researches CPD standards and sources funding opportunities with aim to create a sustainable network)

Events

- ➤ Launch of Network
- ➤ Annual Conference
- ➤ Training/CPD programme
- ➤ Online/Virtual activities
- ➤ Networking opportunities
- ➤ Professional Accreditation

Working Groups

- ➤ Web/Social Media development
- ➤ Training and CPD
- ➤ Professional development & accreditation
- ➤ Care experienced, estranged and young carer students
- ➤ Evaluation/evidencing impact

Progress

In spite of staffing changes throughout the funding period, a significant amount has been achieved within a relatively short space of time in working towards the objectives of SCAPP.

Since January 2020, individual membership has more than doubled to over 190 with representation from the university and college sector as well as many individual charities and other public sector organisations and with aspirations to broaden and grow the membership further from all sectors and particularly to encourage more participation and input from the college and school sectors. There are now 150 twitter followers and regular activity takes place on Twitter to share relevant news.

Three working groups have been established and supported by colleagues providing their knowledge, expertise and skills to take forward the objectives of SCAPP.

- **A Learning and Development Group** was established to take forward elements of the Training and Development and Quality Standards objectives, including plans for an accreditation framework, exploring appropriate learning and training opportunities, and to explore an online platform for learning engagement.
  A key development has been the planning for, and implementation of, a Staff Mentoring Programme - MAPS (Mentoring for Access and Participation Practitioners) which supports 22 mentors and mentees.

- Considerable work has taken place to explore the development of a **Professional Standards Framework** which could be applicable potentially for both institutional and individual purposes. Ultimately, it is envisaged that the framework will be incorporated into institutional professional learning and development processes, enabling individuals to gain professional accreditation in widening access through the submission of an evidence-based portfolio that provides a reflection of their practice and a value and measure of success for the work and activity that they undertake. The framework will be piloted with individual colleagues in 2021.

- Equally a cross-institutional **Evaluation and Research Working Group** aims to develop the evaluation capacity of practitioners working in the field of widening access. This group will explore the development of Evaluation Frameworks and practical evaluation tools for WP practitioners as well as developing opportunities to bring widening participation research and practice closer together in order to facilitate exchange of ideas and outcomes between the two communities. Ultimately the aim is to ensure that SCAPP, through the activity of the Working Group, will encourage and support practitioners to feed into the Toolkit, informing the content and contributing to the Toolkit, and championing its use.

- To address the demand and appetite for networking and events, an **Events and Communications Group** has been established to organise, promote and run suitable events, establish and facilitate appropriate mechanisms via digital capability to enable effective networking and connections amongst the members and to create ways to keep members informed and increase social media presences.

  Six events have taken place since August 2019, four of which have been delivered online since March 2020. These are important ways to enable networking and connections to develop and monthly Connect with Coffee and Lunch and Learn events are planned for future months.

Some events have taken place in collaboration with other partners – LEAPS and University of Sanctuary - to maximise visibility and attendance. Improved and regular contact with members has resulted in better dissemination of events via JISC and the FairAccess website and events organised by member organisations have benefitted from this shared communication.

- **New communities of practice.** An **Articulation network** is being developed to support practitioners who have an interest or role in articulation and the broader learner journey within which it exists. In addition, early discussions have taken place about a community of practice for professionals supporting refugee and asylum seekers in collaboration with City of Sanctuary.

- Work is also ongoing to further enhance the configuration, functionality and content of the **FairAccess.scot website** which will be more useable and continue to contain interesting, useful and relevant materials for the range of stakeholders.

Challenges

Building a community online

Traditionally networks are established, nurtured and enhanced by attendance at face-to-face events and meetings where professional relationships begin, develop and prosper, generating new ideas, discussing, creating, and negotiating activities and plans.

The COVID-19 pandemic from mid-March onwards, meant that face-to-face workshops, meetings and other planned events were no longer feasible, at least in the medium term but in reality, and at the time of writing, seems to be endless and perhaps a permanent shift in the way that we may operate in the future. All activities, communications and operations have been reconfigured to ensure business continuity and colleagues have responded creatively, positively and collaboratively to support SCAPP's progress and development.

However, the opportunity to network and make connections, especially for colleagues new to their roles, institutions and even towns, cities and countries has been severely restricted requiring an element of resilience, confidence and positivity on their parts, and support, understanding and flexibility on the part of their employer to make their way in the widening participation world.

A survey commissioned in May 2020 to approximately 160 SCAPP members at that time showed significant resilience, adaption, creativity and flexibility of respondents to cope quickly with a difficult, dynamic and unprecedented situation putting learners and stakeholders at the centre of thinking and developments in order to minimise disruption and maximise support.

More challenges are likely as the community responds to the pandemic and its impact on the ever-changing learning environment

Building a sustainable model

Beyond the SFC funding for SCAPP, much of the work is currently supported by invaluable in-kind support to make these developments work, relying on busy but willing practitioners to make activity and developments possible, and to broaden the support network of the Development Coordinator and of SCAPP.

There is an expectation that SCAPP should become a sustainable model of delivery with funding currently available until April 2022. This will require exploring a number of options based on membership fees, conference and events income, or seeking alternative sources of funding from charities, educational trusts or a combination of both. As all organisations tighten their financial belts within increasingly challenging economic circumstances, decisions on how to spend finite budgets will depend on perceived value for money, based on products, services and events which are available within SCAPP to achieve an affordable and cost effective way for the future beyond its funding timeline.

Conclusion

There is increasing interest, momentum and collegiality across the network as events and activities are developed. SCAPP seems to be addressing a gap in basic opportunities to meet (currently online), share and develop ideas and practice, and support needs of wider access professionals and this is likely to be accentuated as colleagues within the sector continue to work remotely and often in isolation. The interest levels and attendance at the events provided so far demonstrates an appetite to be involved, and learn, from research and activities, evidenced most recently by the participation in the Staff Mentoring Programme (MAPS) which was planned as a small pilot, but is supporting 44 members. The working groups which have been established, and the communities of practice planned, are anticipated to be popular and the support from staff to become involved in their organisation and development is encouraging, and will be a crucial asset to continue the work of this important Community of Practice.