

Building a Widening Participation Practitioners' Network during a Pandemic

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Networking – remember that? The ease and comfort of meeting new or existing colleagues in trains, in the coffee queue pre or mid-event, at lunch or between breakout sessions, sparking ideas, clarifying or checking details, building - or building on - connections and friendships.

I took up the reins of SCAPP (Scotland's Community of Practice for Access and Participation) in January 2020, after its launch in May 2019 as part of Scotland's Framework for Fair Access. After an intensive and fulfilling period of networking, meetings and events attendance in the familiar and traditional sense of these activities, 51 days later I found myself in my spare bedroom (now office) wondering where SCAPP goes from here!

SCAPP's aim is to support the development and professionalisation of a strong widening access and participation community in Scotland. Networking and communication is at the heart of what we do, something which has required new ways of thinking, working and surviving during the pandemic.

So how has SCAPP developed and responded since March 2020? All activities, communications and operations have had to be reconfigured to ensure business continuity. Colleagues without exception have responded creatively, positively and collaboratively to support SCAPP's progress and development. We will all be familiar with new online platforms and delivery methods, dodgy WIFI connections, mute buttons and for some home schooling, all within, and often in addition to, a day's work!

Notwithstanding this, membership has grown from 87 in January 2020 to just over 260 at the time of writing incorporating university, college, charities and other public sector organisations.

A key objective of SCAPP has been to develop appropriate opportunities to raise the status of widening participation and access work. To this end a staff mentoring programme has been established - MAPS (Mentoring for Access and Participation Practitioners). 42 professionals are participating, as mentors, mentees and in some cases, both.

Another key development has been in establishing a Professional Standards Framework which will support the professional recognition and accreditation of WP colleagues designed to raise the profile and support continuing professional learning and development of staff working in the field. Work continues throughout 2021 to complete a workable model which we hope to pilot later this year. Watch this space!

Central to the activities many colleagues undertake is the evaluation of WP activities to ensure practitioners are equipped with the right evaluation tools to evidence impact, measure success and enhance the work which has been developed, by sharing practice and ensuring our techniques are relevant and informed by research. An event in January 2021 brought together members of the widening access and participation network and the research community to explore a collaborative approach to working more closely and many exciting and interesting opportunities and tangible activities were explored - such as a Directory of Practice, an online forum and Sharing practice events - which could be progressed quickly and we hope to bring these to fruition in the coming months.

There has been a huge appetite for networking and events, perhaps not surprisingly fuelled by the, often, isolating nature of the working environment that we all find ourselves in but also a need to connect, meet, learn and engage in something different but meaningful within the working day.

Seventeen events have taken place since August 2019, fifteen of which have been delivered online since March 2020. We have introduced regular *Connect with Coffee, Lunch and Learn and Brunch and Blether* events - plans for *Afternoon Tea and Talk* too! - as well as topical or relevant workshops covering about the articulation agenda and the work of Student Ambassadors. Events will continue during 2021 recognising their importance in enabling networking and connections to develop.

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. Early discussions have also taken place about coordinating a community of practice for professionals supporting Refugees and People Seeking Asylum in collaboration with City of Sanctuary as a result of interest within the sector.

So what about the future? SCAPP is addressing a gap in basic opportunities to meet (currently online), share and develop ideas and practice, supporting the needs of wider access professionals, and providing a sense of community and belonging which is masked in the current working environment.

SCAPP's strength lies in its collegiate and partnership approach, providing a neutral stance within which activities can be developed and implemented. As the scope of widening access and participation grows and diversifies, SCAPP is appealing to a broader widening access and participation professional community.

Beyond the funding which currently supports the activities of the DC role, all of the work undertaken by working groups, events, activities and programme developments is currently supported by invaluable in-kind support, relying on busy but willing practitioners to make activities and developments possible, and to broaden the support network of SCAPP.

But we need to work towards a sustainable model of delivery and support in the future. As all organisations tighten their financial belts within increasingly challenging economic circumstances, that collaborative, in-kind support might be a vital ingredient if we are to continue the work of this important Community of Practice in supporting the ambitions of the Framework for Fair Access.

But first, let's get networking a la traditional! Look forward to seeing you in the pre-event coffee queue!