

## Creating a project to develop student representation in the Highlands and Islands region

### Outline of Development

The Highlands and Islands region is a complex one in terms of college regionalisation. It combines a network of colleges and specialist institutions with the existence of a federal university, so does not fit any typical model or approach elsewhere in the sector. To meet the needs of this network in a regionalised context, the institutions and students' associations bid for and gained transformation funding specifically to explore the challenge that it faced.

The main driver for the project was the regionalisation agenda. Within the Highlands and Islands, the thirteen academic partners already cooperate through a federal university model for the delivery of their higher education, and a university students' association has existed for some years which has engaged on these HE matters. However, regionalisation has created an impetus for restructured governance in the Highlands and Islands region. FE funding will now go through the University Court, albeit passed on to the FE Regional Board which will act as a sub-committee to Court. These revised structures will obviously now require student engagement that is representative of further education as well as higher education. No such FE representative structure exists to provide this, and nor has there been a clearly agreed or defined basis for the creation of it. Through the support of Partnerships for Change, the colleges, the university and their students' associations created a bid for transformation funding that could be used for a project to research and develop a model that would meet this challenge.

Through the support of Partnerships for Change (PfC), the colleges, the university and their students' association agreed that there was not the resource or capacity to fully explore the way forward for regional representation. Yet the need for student engagement in regional structures was universally accepted.

A gathering of student representatives of both HE and FE (under the name of the Students' Associations Regionalisation Working Group) was created to discuss this at a regional level. It discussed and approved the need for a bid, as well as the detail of the bid paper. UHI's Executive Board provided endorsement from the institutional side. It was agreed that the bid should seek to fund two full-time posts and a team of part-time student researchers, who would conduct extensive research of student and staff views, and explore comparable external models and drivers. The total sum of the bid was over £200,000 over two years. It was further

# Creating the Future

## Students' Associations and College Partnerships



agreed that the project should be managed by a project board comprised of staff and students from across the range of academic partners. From conception of the idea of a funding bid through to successful commencement of the project posts, the process took around a year.

The primary testament to the project's success is the swift approval of the total sum by the Scottish Funding Council, and the formation of a strong project board that includes a number of key senior staff and student officers plus a good balance of the range of academic partners. The full-time project posts have been advertised and appointed, and post-holders commenced work in July 2013.

A key challenge was the diverse needs, profiles and interests of the various academic partners, and this diversity was a key defining characteristic of discussions. The partnership includes large and small, rural and urban, and specialist and generalist institutions; all with a wide range of experiences and successes in representative structures. Therefore there was a need for the bid paper to be as inclusive as possible and for the resulting project to serve the needs of the entire partnership.

One element of this inclusivity was an agreement that the bid should not seek funding to develop any preconceived model of representation, but rather undertake extensive research to inform what that model should look like. Discussions were naturally sensitive and complex, with a need to balance aspirations for strong, locally-focussed structures within the academic partners, with the desire for effective collective engagement at the regional level.

Partnerships for Change provided a useful externality in its facilitation of the process, supporting and chairing certain meetings, undertaking research, drafting documentation, and engaging with staff and officers at both a network and individual college level to ensure that the bid included the range of perspectives being presented.

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