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## sigma-sw: the regional hub pilot for sigma

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Two years can certainly fly by; sometimes that means that July 2008 seems to be only yesterday but sometimes, it is hard to imagine life before that date. In the case of sigma-sw, which held its initial development meeting in that month, I err towards the later sense.

A brief sentence in a funding bid to sigma was the spark that ignited the idea of regional hubs and having been at the heart of this pilot, I am delighted to see that sigma-sw was deemed sufficiently successful that support from the HE STEM programme will now allow the regional hub programme to be rolled out nationally. It seems timely, therefore, to review what we have done and how we have done it and to look forward to how we will try to make best use of this hub structure over the next two years.

### Hub Structure

In 2008, we were given funding by the sigma CETL to set up the hub, the purpose of which was to run sigma meetings and workshops locally and to establish a network of practitioners in the region. The region 'sw' covers the south-west and South Wales. The regional nature of the hub has several advantages:

- smaller distances to meetings should mean that more people can attend regularly than would be able to attend national meetings;
- the meetings can be focussed around local interests and concerns; and,
- the network of practitioners provides an easy forum for discussion of ideas and a core group of colleagues who can collaborate in developmental work.

Our hub fairly quickly developed a core group of higher education institutions (HEIs): Bath, Bristol, Cardiff, Exeter (including Falmouth), Gloucestershire, Portsmouth, Plymouth and University of the West of England (UWE). Within this group, colleagues have a range of institutional roles in mathematics and statistics departments, in the academic support services and in maths/stats support centres. In the next phase of development, we have been given a list of further HEIs to liaise with and we look forward to welcoming colleagues from these institutions. We also have links with further education (FE) colleges, typically those linked in with foundation programmes for HE.

### Hub meetings

In our preliminary meeting, we discussed how we might make use of the hub structure to best effect. We decided to hold 3 meetings per year; two of these are hosted in HEIs other than Bath and the final meeting of the year, which includes the annual forum,

is held in Bath. Our experience with this structure is that it seems to be robust:

- three meetings is enough to keep the group ethos alive without putting impossible demands on individual's time;
- hosting meetings in different HEIs allows colleagues from the respective institutions to attend these meetings when they might not be able to spend the time/money to travel to the meeting; and,
- hosting meetings in different HEIs also facilitates the focus on regional issues - we try to make best use of local talent and choose topics for meetings which play to the strength of the different institutions.

The money which we received from sigma has been used to pay travel expenses and refreshment costs for the meetings as well as paying invited speakers to attend.

To advertise the meetings more widely we have taken advantage of the sigma and MSOR Network contact lists; it is common for each meeting to welcome at least one participant from outside of the region.

Here is how the list of meetings ran:

- 2008/09: Peer tutoring in mathematics (Bath); Evaluating maths and stats support (Cardiff); Effective technologies/ annual forum (Bath);
- 2009/10: Diagnostic testing (Portsmouth); Supporting mathematics learners effectively (Exeter); HE STEM initiative/Annual forum (Bath); and,
- provisionally for 2010/11 we will meet to discuss statistics support in Plymouth (home to the RSS) and to discuss undergraduate projects in UWE.

Colleagues were also very keen to develop some mechanism to share resources/good practice ideas; we have been less effective in facilitating this potentially very useful activity. We have tried a discussion board linked from our website to no real effect; we are hopefully however, that the mathematics community resource which will be developed by sigma with some HE STEM funding may provide exactly this resource and at a national level. Having said that, the informality of our lunch gatherings during the meetings has certainly led to ad hoc transfer of ideas between hub members.

## The future

With funding provided over the next two years we are full of enthusiasm to continue the work of sigma-sw to act as a regional hub and support for sigma activities. The funding will require that we keep the national community abreast of our activities and developments and we are delighted to do so – through presentations at the annual CETL-MSOR conference and through regular input to the e-newsletter being developed by sigma. We have taken the initiative to discuss how we might expand our collaborative efforts in light of this continuation funding whilst maintaining the meeting structure that has worked so well for us to date. In

particular, we are exploring ways in which the hub structure could provide input into research projects set up in member HEIs; research which we hope would inform the provision of maths and stats support both nationally and internationally.

More generally, the future sees an expansion of the regional hub network to cover all of England and Wales. The hubs will be based in Brunel (South-east; Martin Greenhow); Suffolk (East; David Bowers); Coventry and Loughborough (Midlands; Duncan Lawson and Tony Croft); Sheffield and Leeds (North-east; Chetna Patel and Liz Meenan); Liverpool (North-west and North Wales; Janet Strivens); we look forward to working with all of these hubs. It is quite likely that each will develop its own effective working structure but that diversity will allow each hub to develop new ideas and to become stronger. The CETL-MSOR conference will provide an excellent forum where we can come together and learn from each other. And so it is likely that the next two years will fly past even more rapidly!

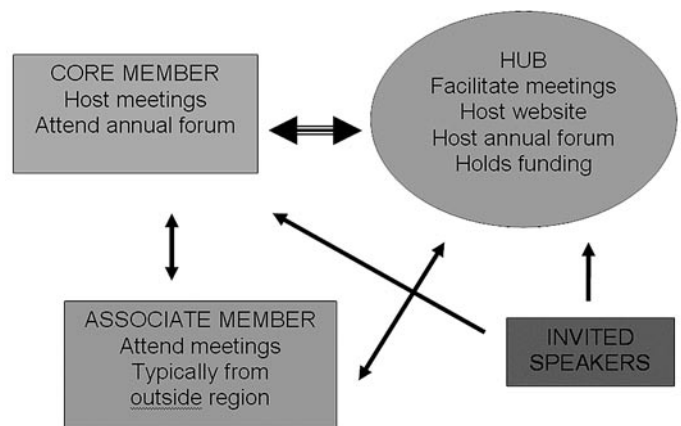


Fig 1 – Schematic of the hub structure

Further details about sigma-sw can be found on our website: <http://www.bath.ac.uk/study/sigma-sw>

Please do get in touch if you have any suggestions or questions:

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## List of core members actively involved with sigma-sw 2008-10

Bath: Emma Cliffe, Christine Venney, Jane White  
Cardiff: Jonathan Gillard, Rob Wilson  
Exeter: Rachel Canter, Barrie Cooper  
Falmouth: Lynne Parry  
Gloucestershire: Ray Huntley  
Plymouth: David Graham  
Portsmouth: Lynne Pevy, Alison White  
UWE: Tim Swift