

Paper ADH2

Proposals for addressing the excess capacity and associated costs in our formation of accredited and recognised ministries

Business Committee, Education and Learning Committee, Ministries Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	John Bradbury john.bradbury@urc.org.uk Nicola Furley-Smith nicola.furley-smith@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Resolution 14 General Assembly determines to cease using at least one RCL for the delivery of EM1, meaning that from September 2026 EM1 students will only be sent to one or two RCLs.</p> <p>Resolution 15 General Assembly adopts the financial ‘envelope’ within which funding for EM1 and RCLs must be delivered from the M&M fund.</p> <p>Resolution 16 General Assembly adopts the criteria set out at 4.1 in the report as the criteria which are to be used in making determinations about which RCLs will continue to offer EM1.</p> <p>Resolution 17 General Assembly adopts the key aims for the future use of RCLs within the life of the United Reformed Church.</p> <p>Resolution 18 General Assembly adopts the timetable for decision making as set out in section 8 of the report.</p> <p>Resolution 19 General Assembly invites the Revd Dr Andrea Russell to serve as an external consultant in the engagement of the working group with the RCLs.</p>

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To bring proposals for addressing the excess capacity and associated costs in our formation of accredited and recognised ministries in light of the educational needs of the denomination.
Main points	<p>The current financing of provision through the Resource Centres for Learning for the Education and Learning needs of the denomination especially Education for Ministry 1 (EM1), is no longer sustainable. Equally, cohort sizes within RCLs of EM1 students are no longer educational sustainable.</p> <p>Discussion about future arrangements have been going on for too long. The pressure on the budget is too great. Therefore, change is needed sooner, rather than later.</p> <p>This paper sets out:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the educational principles and priorities for the denomination; 2. the key criteria by which proposals shall be made; 3. the process and timetable for decisions to come to Assembly Executive in February 2026.
Previous relevant documents	Paper AD1 Resource Centres for Learning, Assembly Executive 2025.
Consultation has taken place with...	The task group was set up according to Resolution X Assembly Executive February 2025.

Summary of impact

Financial	
External (eg ecumenical)	

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At its meeting in February 2025, Assembly Executive was invited to discuss a joint paper from the Education and Learning Committee and the Business Committee (www.urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/AD1-Resource-Centres-for-Learning-FINAL-AE-Feb-2025.pdf) clarifying the current position of Education and Learning funding of the Resource Centres for Learning (RCLs). No resolutions were formally proposed. The direction of travel proposed in the paper was not endorsed. Instead, a clear awareness of purpose emerged in the discussion that the current situation was unsustainable, that discussion about future arrangements had been going on for too long, that the pressure on the budget was too great and that change was needed sooner, rather than later.
- 1.2 The debate highlighted budget pressures, excess capacity, and concerns over insufficient cohort experience for EM1 students. These issues led to the conclusion that solutions likely required ceasing the use of at least one RCL for EM1 and potentially withdrawing Education and Learning entirely from one RCL. While the resolution did not explicitly state this, the implication was clear. Failing to directly address these proposals could reasonably lead the Assembly to believe it was not being presented with the full range of options it had requested.

Transparency in discussing these potential measures was therefore essential to maintain trust and informed decision-making.

- 1.3 From the discussion, two resolutions emerged which Assembly Executive adopted unanimously. This paper deals with Resolution X, although it is acknowledged that Resolution Y informs Resolution X. Resolution X stated: *Assembly Executive instructs the Education and Learning and Business Committee Working Group to bring back to July General Assembly 2025 proposals for addressing the excess capacity and associated costs in our formation of accredited and recognised ministries.*
- 1.4 This paper is brought jointly by Business Committee, Education and Learning Committee, and Ministries Committee, with input from Resources Committee through the working group. The brief of the group expanded because it was realized that the issues were greater than Education and Learning.
- 1.5 A working group was formed to respond to Resolutions X and Y, consisting of the Revd Dr John Bradbury (General Secretary), the Revd Nicola Furley-Smith (Secretary for Ministries), Ms Pippa Hodgson (Convenor of the Education and Learning Committee), the Revd Michael Hopkins (Convenor of the Resources Committee), Ms Victoria James (COO), the Revd Jenny Mills (Deputy General Secretary Discipleship), and Mr Alan Yates (Treasurer). The Church Life Review Programme Manager also attended meetings of the working group following the Education and Learning Consultation, to provide support and 'external' input.
- 1.6 It is also vital that the process leading to the proposals that Resolution X seek, are conducted fairly, transparently, and that decisions made are made against clear criteria, that reflect the needs of the United Reformed Church as a whole.
- 1.7 This paper aims to set out a clear process and should be read alongside Paper ADH1 which responds to Resolution Y from Assembly Executive in February 2025, and relates to the task group designing and implementing a review of the learning needs of the denomination, with facilitation and external support and to bring back a needs analysis to July General Assembly 2025.

2. Principles and priorities

- 2.1 In addressing the excess capacity and associated costs in the denomination's formation of accredited and recognised ministries, the key principles for what the URC needs from its Education and Learning provision, particularly with reference to EM1, need to be set out.
- 2.2 As a denomination, the URC has long held a commitment to equipping the whole people of God for mission through an integrated and contextually sensitive approach to Education and Learning. Education and Learning is delivered across the whole life of the denomination and is embedded in all of its councils. The 2005 Education and Learning framework identified four core principles:
 - **Integrated education for Mission.** Training should equip all God's people for mission, in line with Equipping the Saints and Catch the Vision reports.
 - **Ecumenical engagement.** There should be active participation across the different traditions.
 - **Reformed identity.** There is the need to maintain a distinctive Reformed identity within this ecumenical setting.

- **Contextual delivery.** There needs to be a responsiveness to the unique contexts of a church in England, Scotland, and Wales ensuring that education is relevant, inclusive, and effective.

- 2.3 To this end, the Education and Learning Committee agenda is always headed with a summary of the aspirations the committee: The Education and Learning Committee aims to endorse, inspire and encourage lifelong learning for all God's people. Our aspiration is that learning opportunities are accessible, inclusive, integrated and involve cooperation and collaboration across the whole URC. In other words, education is not just for the beginning of ministry or for ministers alone, but for the ongoing spiritual growth and leadership development of the entire Church.
- 2.4 With this framework in mind, in 2024 the Education and Learning Committee, Ministries Committee and the RCLs have developed expectations for ministerial formation of candidates for ordained ministry as outlined document URC Requirements for EM1. It is clear any future arrangements must be able to deliver these. These are broadly summarised as:
- Learning in the range of traditional theological disciplines (Old and New Testament, Systematic Theology and Church History, Ethics, Pastoral and Practical Theology).
 - A range of skills related to the practice of ministry, and skills in reflective practice.
 - A range of experiences of the breadth of the ministerial context and demands.
 - Appropriate placement hours.

Any future arrangements must be able to deliver these expectations.

- 2.5 This holistic vision is mirrored in the Church's Discipleship Development Strategy, which aspires to create opportunities for all people to encounter God, to deepen their prayer lives, and to grow as disciples. Lifelong learning is intended to meet people where they are in their journey, providing meaningful and appropriate opportunities for learning and growth.
- 2.6 The Learning Needs conference held on 29-30 April 2025 identified that team ministry and teamwork, pastoral skills, conflict and crisis management, time management, and ongoing development (spiritual resilience, cross-cultural competence, and ecumenical/interfaith collaboration) should be developed for today's ministry throughout EM1-3.
- 2.7 Other specific areas where educational support is required include the discipleship journey around baptism and public profession of faith, systematic discipleship development programme(s) currently in the form of Stepwise, and resources to support and deepen the knowledge, experience and skills of Elders and Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers, Assembly Accredited Lay Pioneers and Locally Recognised Worship Leaders and those who undertake the Church Leadership Programme.
- 2.8 The Learning Needs consultation highlighted that the needs of the Church are not static. Educational provision must be scalable and sustainable, capable of evolving in response to both the expansion and contraction of ministries.

- 2.9 If the denomination is serious about growing disciples, empowering ministers, and nurture a community of lifelong learners – people equipped for mission, service, and witness then the means and mode of delivery of our training will need to respond to such a changing landscape. This will require consideration being given to the long-term sustainability of our current methods of delivery including the place of the RCLs in providing training.
- 3. EM1 and cohort size**
- 3.1 At Assembly Executive in February 2025, we heard clear concerns about the experience of EM1 students and the importance of cohort size. There are various concerns about cohort size:
- 3.1.1 The pedagogical reality of an effective learning environment. This is both about formal learning, and peer group size in the classroom being effective, and the seminal importance of informal peer-group learning through the education experience. It must be noted that formal classroom learning peer group learning is most significantly affected in URC specific parts of programmes, in all RCLs in many parts of award programmes students are learning with peers from other denominational traditions which offers the peer group context.
- 3.1.2 The reality is that it is far easier to have clear expectations of a cohort of students. The lived experience would appear to be that once cohort reduces to a level at which everyone is essentially on an individually tailored programme, universal expectations upon students become difficult to uphold and the discipline of formation becomes weakened.
- 3.1.3 There is also a concern for identity formation – what is it to become a minister of the United Reformed Church. Whilst hard to quantify, being part of a peer group on the journey towards inhabiting that identity is experienced as seminal by those who've benefitted from it and can at times be perceived as a lack on occasions when, for whatever reason, students follow a fairly isolated pathway through their studies.
- 3.1.4 Cohort is also difficult to immediately quantify. Across our RCLs it will be experienced within an RCL differently by different students. Some are on weekend pathways, some weekday block week pathways, some come together for URC specific formation in multi-year group cohorts and so on. Whilst the URC may send four students to an institution in an academic year, there is no guarantee their lived reality will be as a cohort, depending on their specific programmes.
- 3.2 We have in initial consultation on this process with RCLs heard some representation that cohort size must not be understood simply as URC students in any one institution, as the reality is students form cohort with ecumenical colleagues, and also that it would be possible to develop cohort experience across the three RCLs by closer working together. Whilst this is so, the working group still believes that there is significant benefit in there being a reasonable working cohort of URC students in EM1 in an institution, and that it is not possible any longer to maintain this across three institutions. This, coupled with the financial implications (see below) means we believe it is right to test the mind of General Assembly about this assumption, so that the working group has a clear

mandate to bring back a recommendation that at least one RCL cease being used for EM1.

4. Key criteria to be used in determining which institution(s) should continue to offer EM1. These are the key criteria that RCLs will be asked to respond to as they engage with the working group.

- 4.1 From the principles and priorities, the task group distilled the following overarching criteria to be adopted in decision making about the future provision of Education and Learning through RCLs in response to Resolution X. There are nine key criteria:

Theological and ministerial formation for Ministries of Word and Sacrament and Church Related Community Work

Education must provide a strong foundation in biblical studies, theology, church history, ethics, pastoral care, and reflective ministry practice.

Mission-focused and integrated learning

Education and Learning for the whole people of God should equip the whole church for mission, and integrate theological study with practical ministry skills, effective placement work, and skills in reflective practice.

Ecumenical and reformed identity

Engagement with other denominations is essential while maintaining a distinctive Reformed ethos in theology and practice.

Discipleship and leadership development

Learning opportunities must support lifelong discipleship, leadership training for Elders, provision must be able to resource structured programs like Stepwise and the Church Leadership Programme.

Accessibility and contextual relevance

Education should be accessible, inclusive, adaptable, and delivered in ways that meet the diverse needs of URC members across different nations and ministry settings.

Financial sustainability

Any future model must significantly reduce the £800,000 RCL block grant budget while ensuring both operational and long-term financial viability, including capital investment needs.

Efficient use of Church resources

Training provision should align with Synod-funded learning initiatives, ensuring that overall church spending on education (currently over £1.7M) is used effectively and strategically.

Scalability and future-proofing

Education and Learning provision must be flexible, allowing for expansion or contraction in response to changing church needs and ministerial demands and the ability to respond to external changes in context, for example changes in validation arrangements.

Ability to contribute to the evolving learning needs of the denomination as set out in Paper ADH1

The learning needs of the denomination are coming into focus, as is a direction of travel about greater joined-up design of learning resources, to support delivery, much of which might be locked in terms of lay and Elder training. The ability of an RCL to contribute to this process, and take a formative role within such a strategy is significant.

5. Determining the financial ‘envelope’

5.1 General Assembly cannot continue to spend as it has done on its work, and continue to rely on shrinking ministerial numbers to balance the budget. This pulls resources away from the front line of the local church to the General Assembly. There must be clear-sighted realism about the situation we find ourselves in which is not one of scarcity, but is one which requires very difficult decisions about where resource is prioritised. The General Assembly has been very clear in its decision making around the CLR that it wishes to prioritise resourcing local churches more effectively, and on emerging new communities of worship and supporting existing churches with the administrative and compliance burdens which weight them down.

5.2 It is therefore clear that there is also a financial reality to what can be provided in terms of education provision. Currently the RCLs are funded by the Church through M&M contributions and the New College fund by about £800,000 PA. This figure needs to significantly reduce. A key piece of work is for the Resources Committee to determine a realistic financial envelope with which this process must work and that work is in progress. We will present the final working of the Resources Committee at the General Assembly.

6. Models for consideration

6.1 Assembly Executive heard clearly that the denomination can no longer sustain three RCLs, the result being the likely withdrawal from training for EM1 at one of the RCLs.

6.2 The following list of models is not exhaustive. These models are included both for transparency, and so that Assembly can understand the shape of options currently under consideration. These models should be viewed as different examples of what the future might resemble, rather than a series of aspirational visions. The RCLs have had a chance to comment on these models. As conversations continue and thinking evolves, other models may emerge.

A single RCL in England and continued use of the Scottish College.

This model would look to continue using either Northern or Westminster College as a single RCL in England that would be able to offer the full range of Education and Learning needs required by the denomination, and work in close partnership with Synods and the Assembly where appropriate. The College that the URC withdrew from actively supporting would need to determine its future in accordance with its charitable purposes and any resource available to it internally. The Scottish College might continue to offer its existing provision, allowing continued use of funded Scottish degrees for ordinands who candidate out of Scotland through continued use of awards from the Scottish Divinity Faculties.

Two English RCLs, only one of which delivers EM1 and continued use of the Scottish College. This model would see EM1 continue to be delivered in only one English College. The other would, with considerable reduced resource available to it, continue to offer elements of the wider Education and Learning provision of the United Reformed Church. The Scottish College would continue as it is.

One RCL. This model would see one RCL be used for all the Education and Learning needs of the United Reformed Church. The URC would cease to use and fund two of the RCLs. The other two current RCLs would determine their future in accordance with their charitable purposes and the internal resources available to them. It would be expected that one training pathway that the RCL would offer would involve Scottish students matriculating in a Scottish faculty of Divinity for an award, which would be supplemented by a programme of URC formation, thus enabling us to provide a Scottish context for education, and benefit from Higher Education funding arrangements in Scotland.

Ecumenical model. This would see the United Reformed Church come to an agreement with another provider, in all likelihood Queens Birmingham, to meet the Education and Learning needs of the Church. It might, following the Methodist model, require the URC to fund URC specific staff positions within the college.

Joined-up provision. Three RCLs would remain, but only one or two would offer EM1. However, from three 'hubs', they would become the source of all Training and Development needs for the Assembly and the 13 Synods, jointly funded by all 14 entities, offering dispersed, blended, virtual and gathered in-person Education and Learning to meet the needs of the whole United Reformed Church.

7. **Key aims in the delivery of an approach to the future RCL provision for the United Reformed Church**

7.1 To ensure that decisions are principled, purposeful, and aligned with our core values, the following strategic framework has been established:

- **A strategic imperative underpinned by theological, educational and financial need.** Every educational decision must begin with a clearly articulated strategic imperative. This imperative is not merely a reaction to opportunity or demand, but a thoughtful response to our deepest convictions that we are responding to God's mission. Funding should be prioritised where theological significance, educational importance, and financial prudence intersect.
- **What is funded is funded well.** One of the most significant challenges in institutional funding is the under-resourcing of good initiatives. This strategic principle affirms our commitment to excellence: if we choose to fund a project, course etc, we will fund it well. Focused and substantial investment in carefully chosen priorities will yield far greater long-term benefits.
- **Future funding will be driven by educational need.** As we look to the future, our funding must be driven by emerging and evolving educational needs. The educational context is not static; it continues to develop in response to cultural shifts, technological advancement, denominational expectations, and global realities. Strategic foresight will be critical identifying areas of growth, innovation, and renewal. This includes investment in

curriculum development, new modes of delivery (including digital and hybrid learning), and community engagement. By maintaining a close connection between training and funding, we ensure that our resources remain relevant, targeted, and impactful.

- **Funding details are followed through.** Commitment to funding is not complete without accountability. Once funding has been approved, there must be diligent follow-through to ensure that it is delivered, applied appropriately, and monitored for effectiveness. This includes the clear documentation of funding decisions, timelines for disbursement, and ongoing oversight. Reporting mechanisms must be in place to evaluate the outcomes of funded initiatives, including both financial and qualitative performance.

8. **Process towards final proposals**

8.1 There is clearly more work to be done. However, the working group would like to suggest the following timetable for determining the future direction. The timetable for decision is as follows:

8.2 **Stage 1.** The task group will ask the RCLs to submit data for consideration by 29 September 2025. The data shall include:

- Details of training pathways through validated awards for EM1 students along with details of the URC specific areas of formation and how they meet the expectations formation as set out by the Education and Learning and Ministries Committees in 2024.
- Details of their existing wider URC Education and Learning provision.
- Details of the wider ecumenical and academic context of the institutions, and the impact of that on student experience.
- An account of how the theological and academic resources of the institution enable the key criteria agree by Assembly in paragraph 4.1 of Paper ADH2 are delivered within the institution.
- Annual Financial and Charity Commission Reporting reports for the last three years.
- Up to date management accounts.
- Any business plans.
- A brief response to the proposed models in 6.2 (recognising they are not exhaustive).

This list will be finalised after General Assembly. RCLs are to be encouraged, where it is helpful, to utilise material they have already generated in engagement with the Education and Learning Committee over the last few years.

8.3 **October 2025.** Each RCL to be visited by representatives of the working group. The working group believe that some externality in the process is helpful, and suggests that the Revd Dr Andrea Russell, warden of Gladstone's library, and experienced theological educator, to act as consultant to the group. Andrea, having acted as a facilitator at the Education and Learning consultation is well briefed in the Education and Learning needs of the denomination. Visits will enable the ability to talk through RCL submissions, further clarify anything necessary, and to give full chance for personal engagement in the process by staff and governors of the RCLs.

- 8.4 **Stage 2, 28 November 2025.** A draft final report and recommended resolutions for General Assembly to be sent to RCLs for fact checking. Responses to be received by 12 December.
- 8.5 **19 December 2025.** The task group, will finalise the report to Assembly Executive in the light of any factual amendments necessary.
- 8.6 **6-8 February 2026.** Assembly Executive is invited to determine, in principle, which RCLs it wishes to continue to use to deliver EM1, and recommendations for the future shape of overall RCL provision within the life of the United Reformed Church. It is expected that this decision will shape which RCLs EM1 students will be sent to in September 2026.
- 8.7 **Stage 3. February-May 2026.** Working with the RCLs with which the Church will continue to work, the full feasibility of the proposals will be tested.
- 8.8 **3-6 July 2026.** General Assembly is asked to adopt resolutions effecting the results of the process in the light of the detailed feasibility work undertaken.