SFC Gender Action Plan Consultation

1. At the request of SFC a series of confidential interviews were conducted to explore aspects of the Gender Action Plan initiative notably around the effectiveness and challenges of the current reporting regime. An email request was sent to institutional contacts asking for co-operation and highlighting three particular topics which have been raised by institutions in discussions with SFC.

   - The Gender Action Plan’s focus on one protected characteristic compared to equalities legislation which defines and covers nine protected characteristics.
   - The lack of join up across widening access and equality initiatives.
   - The lack of coordination in reporting requirements across the Public Sector Equality Duties, Athena Swan, Outcome Agreements, and the Gender Action Plan.

2. Thirteen institutional responses were received from six colleges and seven universities (see Annex 1) and 30-minute interviews were conducted.

3. Nearly all institutions confirmed their genuine commitment to this agenda and volunteered examples of innovative initiatives. A few institutional contacts reported some ongoing challenges embedding the GAP approach in all academic areas and the need to continue work on culture change.

4. All respondents raised concerns about the current reporting regime and the disproportionate burden of the annual reporting cycle to SFC. Even the largest institutions find that the effort of SFC GAP reporting, in addition to other reporting requirements, distracts attention from other protected characteristics and indeed on resources available to take forward the actions in the GAP. This is compounded by the lack of alignment to the reporting cycle of Public Sector Equalities.

5. On deep-seated societal challenges such as encouraging more males into traditionally female occupations, progress is also likely to take time so annual reporting is not seen as particularly useful. There was widespread support for aligning GAP reporting to the two-year Public Sector Equality reporting. This would also address concerns over the perceived privileging of gender over other protected characteristics. Many institutions asserted that they believe that the SFC GAP requirements could be incorporated into these reports.
Recommendations

6. **Recommendation 1:** SFC to explore the feasibility of adapting the GAP reporting into the two-year Public Sector Equalities report.

   Respondents reported some challenges and tensions between the long-standing commitments to Widening Participation and GAP. Indeed, given the work in progress in several institutions, notably in FE to address the underrepresentation of males from MD20 and MD40 backgrounds, there may in the short term be a deterioration in gender balance in some areas. Several respondents suggested that SFC could do more to assist the alignment of WP and GAP in its outcome agreement approach and discussions with institutions.

7. **Recommendation 2:** SFC to consider how to embed GAP more effectively in its WP outcome agreement processes.

   All respondents highlighted the fact that FE and HE are only one stage in an extended educational and career journey. Encouraging and achieving better gender balance across subjects and careers requires concerted efforts from early years provision, schools and employers, as well as colleges and universities. It was suggested that SFC could use its convening power to engage a broader set of stakeholders with the GAP agenda rather than focusing exclusively on FE and HE.

8. **Recommendation 3:** SFC to explore how to build a broader coalition of stakeholders to support achieving GAP objectives.

   Some respondents commented upon the effectiveness of the current long term and aspirational nature of the GAP process [75: 25 by 2030]. The very long timeline, while understandable given the challenges in this area, was not always seen as effective in engaging institutional commitment. There was some support for encouraging interim targets against which progress could be monitored.

9. **Recommendation 4:** SFC to explore the value of interim GAP targets.

   The gender equality agenda is an area where institutions are very willing to learn from one another. There is also an appetite for GAP actions to be informed by evidence from the FE HE sector in Scotland or elsewhere on what works and what doesn’t work. Several respondents recommended GAP reporting should encourage this evidence-based approach and an openness to report and acknowledge activities which haven’t been effective.

10. **Recommendation 5:** SFC to explore how to encourage developing an evidence base for closing gender gaps and sharing of good practice across institutions.
Further Information

11. Contact: Anne Anderson, Gender Governance Group member
Annex 1

**Colleges:**
Ayrshire College  
City of Glasgow College  
Dumfries and Galloway College  
Fife College  
Forth Valley College  
South Lanarkshire College

**Universities:**
Edinburgh Napier University  
Glasgow Caledonian University  
Heriot-Watt University  
The Open University  
University of Dundee  
University of Glasgow  
University of the West of Scotland