Letter to all College Principals and COVID-19 Co-ordinators

6 April 2020

Dear Principal and COVID-19 Co-ordinator,

I am writing to update you following my letter of 19 March. At that time, I explained that our main priorities were to help maintain stability and continuity at a time of great uncertainty for your staff and students; to be flexible and pragmatic about our requirements, and to focus on what matters at a time of national crisis; and to make sure we keep channels of communication open.

Stability and continuity

Our Board met virtually on 2 April and has approved the funding allocations for AY2020-21. We plan to announce the final allocations this week, in order to assist you with your financial planning and to help sustain colleges at a very difficult time.

You will be aware that we have extended the deadline for the financial Mid-Year Return from 27 March to 16 April to enable us to work with colleges on the assumptions that might underpin these returns; and to provide additional time for colleges to consider the full financial implications of the change in the financial environment arising from the COVID-19 outbreak. We will be working closely with your finance directors and will test any further information requirements with them in the first instance. We will also be liaising closely with Colleges Scotland.

Our assessments will help us establish a national overview of issues facing the sector, and determine further engagement with individual colleges and strategic bodies. We will share our initial assessment, as appropriate, with the Scottish Government to help shape collective and collaborative responses to the challenges we face together.

Supporting students to succeed will remain a focus for us. We know you are striving to provide good quality learning and teaching in a way that enables students to complete their studies; to make fair assessments of progress; to make awards; and to support widening access. We are working closely with Education Scotland, SQA and the Scottish Government on these matters. You will also be aware that we have quickly taken steps to address some of the pressing concerns relating to student support, particularly for students in hardship. Further information is available from the student support documents on our COVID-19 webpage, which have been updated today.
Flexibility and reprioritisation

We committed to keep our returns and reporting requirements to an absolute minimum during this emergency situation. We have undertaken some rapid work to identify what can be postponed until a later date. While this exercise is not complete, here is an update on our reduced requirements.

You will already know that:

- we have now completed our review of near-final Outcome Agreements and will work from these versions for AY2020-21, including the important CoWA targets; and

- we have extended the deadline for submission of the Institutional Efficiency Return from 3 April 2020 until 30 September 2020.

We have also decided you do not need to make the following returns to the previously set deadlines:

- The Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey, which had been due to be returned at the end of April.

- The formal quarter three Further Education Statistics (FES) data return, which was due at the beginning of July. However, we ask you to continue, where you can, to provide FES data through the Dataportal.

- The submission of updated Institutional Gender Action Plans.

- The submission of the updated Access and Inclusion Strategies.

- In liaison with Education Scotland, some planned quality assurance activity, and we are in discussion with Education Scotland about quality arrangements for the sector in AY2020-21 and beyond.

We are keen to understand how colleges are providing mental health and wellbeing support to students at this difficult time. We will work closely with your mental health leads and the Scottish Government to consider how best to recognise the pressures in your teams and be proportionate in the quarterly reporting requirements established by the Scottish Government for this counsellor programme.
We are working closely, and at pace, with other bodies in the following areas:

- With the Scottish Government to establish whether the deadline for the completion of colleges’ Flexible Workforce Development Fund activity report for 2019-20 can be extended.

- We are working with the EHRC to streamline statutory equality reporting.

We will provide further updates when we have agreed requirements with our partners.

In the light of the current emergency, we will review all our strategic and non-core funded projects to understand the impact of COVID-19 on delivery plans. We expect funded bodies and project leads to inform us about significant shifts or adaptations that they may wish to make to agreed programmes to ensure continued effective delivery or to respond to current challenges. We may need to repurpose funding towards other priorities. We will engage with individual projects throughout our review and will be in contact with project leads about this process soon.

We are keen to strike the right balance between accountability and flexibility in terms of our current routine requirements at this time. If there are other areas of our routine requirements you would like us to consider during this national crisis, please do not hesitate to contact us. While we are postponing some requirements, we may need to request other information that is more relevant to the situation in hand.

Engagement

In this fast-moving environment I am grateful for your engagement, the response to requests for non-routine intelligence and information, and the on-going dialogue at all levels with key leads across both our organisations. Our Outcome Agreement Managers remain important contact points for institution-specific matters and our COVID-19 mailbox (covid19@sfc.ac.uk) helps us capture all COVID-related issues and get information to the right people.

Thank you, again, for everything you are doing for students, staff and the communities around us. Thank you for making your equipment and facilities available to the Scottish Government and the NHS. And thank you for being such an integral part of the response to this national and global emergency. We will continue to work closely with you on the immediate challenges we face and to ensure colleges can support the economy and society recover in the longer term.

Karen Watt
Chief Executive
Scottish Funding Council