Letter to all University 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, students and researchers; 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. While these allocations will not in themselves be sufficient to deal with the current crisis in all cases or where there are particular international exposures, they should assist with your financial planning and will form an important element in sustaining learning, research and institutions at a very difficult time.

Thank you for providing us with initial information about potential losses arising from student accommodation refunds and waived arrears, and from commercial activity in AY 2019-20; and from the potential loss of international students in the coming academic year. This has enabled us to provide some early advice to the Scottish Government about aspects of the COVID-19 impact.

Financial sustainability remains a critical priority. We know you will be exploring all possible options and measures to deal with immediate pressures and viability concerns. We plan to engage further to form a fuller assessment of the financial health of individual institutions and the sector overall. We are working closely with your finance directors and will test further information requirements with them in the first instance. We have greatly appreciated their help, candour and collaboration in these early weeks. We have also been liaising closely with Universities Scotland.

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 a fair admissions process that retains a focus on widening access. We are working closely with QAA, OfS, UCAS, SQA and the Scottish Government on these matters.
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;

- we agreed with UKRI and other funding bodies the suspension of the REF, to enable universities to focus on more pressing and immediate matters; 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 submission of updated Institutional Gender Action Plans.

- Reporting on the Upskilling Fund activity.

- In liaison with QAA, some planned quality assurance activity; and we have agreed an amended timeline for ELIRs.

You are no longer required to submit the Final Statistics Return to SFC for AY 2019-20.

We are also pausing our work on the following:

- Enhancing our in-year data collections and access threshold data.

- Our consultation on the University Innovation Fund.

We are keen to understand how institutions 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:

- Changes to the arrangements for: the Business and Community Interaction (HE-BCI) return; TRAC and TRAC(T); and the Student Return.
- We are considering with UK regulators and funding bodies the implications for the National Student Survey.
- We are working with the EHRC to streamline statutory equality reporting.
- We know that university research, technological, clinical and engineering expertise is critical to the national response. We are working closely with the other national funding bodies, and with UKRI, to decide how best to build our understanding of the immediate impacts on university research and researchers, and to consider the longer-term implications for Scottish and UK research excellence.

We will provide further updates when we have agreed requirements with our counterpart funders, regulators and statistical authorities.

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 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, researchers and the communities around us. Thank you for making your research, medical and nursing staff, 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 that universities can support the economy and society recover in the longer term.

Karen Watt
Chief Executive
Scottish Funding Council