

**Changes since the previous version issued on 7 July 2020 are highlighted in yellow.
The main changes are:**

- New FAQ on EMA internal audit spot-check requirements

FE Student Support in Colleges - COVID-19 FAQs: 16 July 2020

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Information for Further Education (FE) Students

If you are a student studying a FE course (below HNC level) at a college in Scotland, please be reassured that colleges are working hard to ensure that your bursary maintenance payments continue to be made as normal.

Who should students contact if they have COVID-19 related questions about their student support?

In relation to any COVID-19 related health concerns, individuals must engage directly with the health authorities (see [NHS Inform](#)).

If students have questions about their FE student support funding, they should contact their college's own student funding office.

Who else can students contact if they need financial help during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The following websites have support and advice:

- [Scottish Welfare Fund](#) helps families and people in Scotland who are on low incomes through Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants.
- [Child Poverty Action Group \(CPAG\)](#) provides guidance on potential sources of support that may be available when clients are without money because of benefit delays, sanctions or some other crisis.
- [Coronavirus and claiming benefits](#) has help relating to Universal Credit.
- The UK Government has provided [guidance and support for those affected by Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#).
- The Scottish Government has announced a [Coronavirus food fund](#) which can be accessed via local authorities.

Information for Colleges

General arrangements

Has SFC put in place any contingencies regarding potential COVID-19-related student support funding implications for colleges?

We are working with colleges and the NUS to consider how best to support students, particularly those in hardship. We expect colleges to explore their overall capacity to support students within existing resources. In order to help colleges support students, SFC arranged for some of the April-July 2020 student support funding allocation to be paid in March 2020 where requested, so that colleges have access to funds to be able to make awards immediately to students facing increased financial hardship.

Individual colleges should continue to liaise with their Outcome Agreement Manager (Regional Strategic Body for assigned colleges) on specific student support issues. We are keeping our collective support for students under review at this difficult time.

Should colleges redirect any available HE Childcare funds into Discretionary funds for HE students?

Whilst HE Childcare funds come from an SFC budget, HE Discretionary funds come from a Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) budget. At the moment, it is not possible to move from one to the other. We request that colleges hold aside any HE Childcare funds saved for now, and colleges should continue to use the HE Discretionary funds from SAAS in the first instance. SFC engaged with colleges at the end of May to obtain up-to-date information on this, and is considering the position on these funds further.

Funding for extended courses

Will student support funding be available for those students who need to re-enrol after the summer to finish their course and achieve their qualification?

Yes, where the student is applying for support to complete a portion of their Academic Year (AY) 2019-20 studies which was disrupted due to COVID-19 reasons (either personal or academic), the period of disruption should be disregarded from their cumulative previous support total. The details of this are included in the [Award Assessment document](#) of SFC's AY 2020-21 Student Support Guidance.

Student attendance and participation

Should colleges still be paying out student support funding if the student is not meeting the usual attendance criteria?

Where possible, colleges should still try to monitor engagement in the local digital/remote learning activities that have been put in place. If the student reports that they are unable to engage due to illness and if the illness is not related to COVID-19, then this should be treated by the college in the usual way. If the illness is considered to be related to COVID-19 (for example, if the student is reporting symptoms in line with the NHS Scotland national guidance), then this absence should be considered as out with the college's usual student absence/sickness absence allowances, and student support funding (except travel costs and childcare costs, as detailed below) should be paid throughout.

Will students continue to be paid if they advise the college that they are self-isolating? If yes, how long can this continue for?

Yes, students should continue to receive all student support funding (except travel costs and childcare costs, see below) when they are self-isolating in accordance with NHS Scotland COVID-19 guidance.

Where colleges are providing online teaching, if the student is well enough to do so, and they have access to the appropriate equipment, then they should continue to engage with the local remote/digital learning provided by the college throughout their self-isolation and afterwards. If the student is not well enough to engage in any remote learning, they should advise their college appropriately and subsequently let their college know once they are well enough to begin engagement again. They should continue to receive student support funding throughout.

Do colleges require evidence students have been advised to self-isolate because they are experiencing some symptoms?

No.

Do students still have to show engagement in their studies?

Yes, if they are self-isolating with no symptoms, and have the access to be able to engage remotely/digitally. If they have symptoms that make them too unwell to study, or indeed receive a positive diagnosis for COVID-19, then they would not be expected to show engagement throughout the duration of their illness.

For the duration of online teaching, where possible, colleges should still try to monitor engagement in the local digital/remote learning activities that have been put in place. However, we understand that this may not always be possible. In these

circumstances, colleges should continue to pay students (minus travel costs and childcare costs, as detailed below) without evidence of engagement.

Equipment costs

Can colleges use FE student support funds to cover the necessary equipment / infrastructure costs for students to be able to continue their studies remotely, for example laptops?

Colleges should be looking to ensure that no students are disadvantaged in their studies due to the lack of access to the appropriate technology required for them to be able to continue their engagement in the current remote learning environment. It is up to colleges to manage the costs associated with this across their budgets accordingly. If, taking all other likely student support funding needs into account, a college thinks that it will have funds available to cover these aspects for students most in need, then it may do so. This may include the provision of a laptop on a loan basis. Or, if this is too difficult logistically and would cause too much of a time delay in the current environment, the college may wish to consider using Discretionary funds to reimburse FE students for increased or additional costs where they have had to purchase a laptop, or pay for broadband, etc. to be able to engage with remote learning since the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown. Alternatively, if a college's student support funds are already limited, the college may wish support remote learning provision with their Teaching Grant.

Can colleges use unspent AY 2019-20 student support funds to purchase digital kit in preparation for incoming AY 2020-21 students?

Colleges should not use unspent AY 2019-20 student support funds to purchase digital kit in preparation for the 2020-21 AY. Our FES returns require that any student support funding expenditure is attributed back to an AY 2019-20 student, and bulk spending is not compatible with how we process our return data, nor how we expect student support funding to be used.

However, in the recent [Financial Forecast Return \(FFR\)](#) assumptions, SFC has agreed that for Financial Year (FY) 2020-21 only, institutions may choose to use some of their lifecycle maintenance budget for other priority needs, for example ICT/digital needs, to support students' learning in different ways. Therefore, this may provide some further flexibility of funding in this area, outside of student support funds.

Student support over summer

Can FE students access student support funding from their college over the summer?

To date, no college has requested an extension to its standard Academic Year (AY) duration. Therefore SFC currently expects FE bursary maintenance to only be paid up until a student's usual end of course date (which would be up to a maximum of 43 weeks of funding)

As FE courses are not usually more than one AY's duration, FE students are not usually classed as 'continuing' students between the end of one AY and the start of the next AY, even if they intend to return to further studies. Hence in current COVID-19 circumstances, as is the case in normal circumstances, if FE students are not able to access employment when their course ends and then over the summer, then they have the option to apply for benefits. College support and advice services will be able to assist students with the benefits application process, and advise them of any other financial assistance which may be available.

An application for Universal Credit (UC) cannot be made until after the course end date, and it can then take a minimum of 5 weeks before the first payment is issued (although an advance may be requested). Colleges may therefore wish to provide some FE Discretionary funding to those students they have identified to be most in need of further financial support to cover this period. **If colleges have sufficient funds available, they can continue to make FE Discretionary funding payments to students up until 31 July 2020, at their discretion.**

SFC has discussed any potential impact on a UC application with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) which has advised that any payment made from college Discretionary funds **after** a person has officially finished their FE course (the official end date has passed) is not classified as student income. (A person can only be treated as having student income whilst they are undertaking a course of education/study/training.) Such a payment, if made periodically rather than in a lump sum, would not fall to be treated as un-earned income in UC and so would be ignored. If such a payment is made as a lump sum, it would be treated as capital. However, this would have no impact upon the person's UC award unless this takes their existing capital to over £6,000.

Travel costs

Should colleges continue to pay travel costs to students if they are off sick/self-isolating/there is no teaching on campus?

No, if the student is self-isolating either with or without symptoms, the student should not be travelling anywhere outside of their home. If there is no longer any

teaching taking place on campus, the student does not need to travel to the college. In either of these circumstances, the student should not require any travel costs. This is also in line with recent national guidance that all unnecessary travel should be kept to a minimum. Colleges may be in a position to redirect some of the student support funding that they had earmarked to support student travel needs.

Please see our separate [guidance](#) with regards to the redirection of travel cost funds to Discretionary funds.

In the event of the college having to change access to buildings and facilities due to COVID-19, would it still be able to pay direct third-party providers, such as transport companies?

As the contracts and arrangements with third-party providers will vary, colleges which still have outstanding queries in this regard should liaise with their Outcome Agreement Manager (Regional Strategic Body for assigned colleges) to discuss this further.

Are the funds from redirected Travel Costs open to all FE students or just those who are already in receipt of FE Discretionary Funds (FEDF)?

The redirected funds should be treated as part of an enhanced FE Discretionary Fund, which is available to all students undertaking SFC-fundable non-advanced courses who meet the eligibility criteria set out in the [2019-20 Discretionary Fund Policy](#).

Information on financial hardship

How much information should colleges be asking students to provide in respect of any financial hardship they are experiencing?

There is a balance to be struck between not requiring too much supporting evidence, which may be difficult for students to provide, whilst also ensuring that a minimum level of information from students is available for colleges to be able to assess who is in the greatest financial need. Colleges should consider the acceptance of electronic signatures and digital copies of any evidence when administering the funds.

SFC encourages colleges to take account of the current COVID-19 pandemic and for the student funding teams to work together with their advice/support services colleagues to be able to identify those most in need at this time. Colleges should take into account the personal circumstances of students when it comes to providing supporting evidence and be as flexible as possible. The 2019-20 Student Support Audit guidance will take full account of this exceptional set of circumstances.

Are there certain kinds of financial hardship or certain groups of students that colleges should be prioritising for immediate Discretionary funds?

This is at the college's discretion, as colleges are best placed to know at a local level who is in greatest need, especially if funding teams work closely with advice/support team colleagues. However, as a general guide, it is suggested that aspects such as these should be kept in mind:

- Need for funding for basic essential requirements such as food, heating, lighting.
- The vulnerability of the student.
- Whether the student has access to other sources of funding or financial assistance from schemes outside of the college, such as referenced in the 'Information for Further Education (FE) Students' section at the start of this document.

Can colleges relax the means-testing of Discretionary fund awards under the current circumstances?

Under the current circumstances, colleges can be flexible with regards to a needs assessment having to be based on evidence showing the student's net financial position.

Should colleges take into account monies to which the student may be entitled from other sources of funding, such as UK Government assistance, when determining Discretionary fund awards?

As student support funds are a cash-limited budget, colleges should target Discretionary fund awards to those that are most in immediate financial need. Since most of the planned UK Government assistance is not immediately available, we would expect colleges to meet any short-term financial needs that they can (with reference to the prioritising considerations in the response above). However, when making any longer-term assessments, colleges should keep in mind the potential wider funding sources that may be available. Students who are in employment should be able to advise if their employer has been able to place them on furlough¹.

Payment management

Should the payments be sent on a scheduled basis or a one-off pay out?

This should be decided on a case-by-case basis, and taking account of the college's payment systems and resources. For example, it may be that a student only requires

¹ Furloughed workers are those whose employers cannot cover staff costs due to coronavirus, and as such they have been asked to stop working, but have not been made redundant. Employers can apply to HMRC to pay up to 80% of the wages of people who are furloughed, under the [Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#).

short-term financial aid to tide them over until one of the forms of UK Government assistance is available to them. For other students, they may have no other source of financial support for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis and may require payments on a scheduled basis.

The monies available may not be enough to meet all requests. If that occurs, what will be the position?

Student support funds are cash-limited. Colleges should also direct students to other agencies and funding sources which are available for COVID-19 pandemic financial assistance, as detailed in the 'Information for Further Education (FE) Students' section at the start of this document.

Is this assistance based on a first come first served basis depending on the college's availability of funds for the remainder of the academic year?

Colleges should manage their available funds, enhancing them where possible with funds from travel and childcare funding no longer required. SFC has already worked with colleges to provide an advance of funding in March for those that requested it, and has received an update of the position of student support funds remaining available across all the colleges as at the end of 31 May 2020. Colleges should continue to alert SFC if they anticipate that they are not able to meet all of the student needs they have identified, after other COVID-19 funding sources have also been taken into account.

Can FE funds be used for HE students in these current circumstances?

No, FE funds cannot be used to pay Discretionary awards for HE students. SAAS provides Discretionary funding for HE students in colleges and universities. SAAS has enhanced the HE Discretionary funds available, and has already communicated directly with institutions about this on 8 April 2020 and with further information on AY 2020-21 HE Discretionary funds on 11 June 2020.

Childcare costs

Should colleges continue to pay childcare costs?

Where childcare providers are still open and the student's child/ren are continuing to attend (they may meet the Government's criteria for being able to continue to do so), then, yes, colleges should continue to pay these childcare costs.

Where childcare providers are closed, or not available to the student's child/ren any more (if they do not meet the Government's criteria for being able to continue to do so), but the student has provided evidence to the college that the providers are requesting that all or some of the fees are still due as part of their COVID-19 fees policy then, yes, colleges should continue to pay these childcare costs.

Where childcare providers are closed, and there is no longer a requirement for fees, college should stop paying childcare costs. Colleges are then able to redirect these childcare funds to Discretionary funds instead.

Where childcare providers are closed, but there is still a requirement to pay a certain amount of fees, students should provide evidence of the provider's COVID-19 fees policy in this regard to the college. The college should then continue to pay the reduced level of fees required whilst redirecting any remaining amount to Discretionary funds instead.

SFC does not expect colleges to recover any funding for childcare costs already paid.

Some of our childcare (or travel) costs have already been paid in advance, should these funds be recovered?

No, SFC is not expecting colleges to recover any funds already paid out. The new guidance to stop paying childcare providers is effective from this point (6 April 2020) forwards and should be considered as applying to any payments from now on.

If a childminder closes and cannot take the children of the student and then the children go to another childminder, is the college expected to pay for both costs?

No, only the fees for a maximum of one childcare provider per child should be paid at one time.

Does the college have to check insurance claims by childcare providers or self-employed claims being made to Government, to cover loss of income?

No, the requirement to pay fees should be determined according to the above guidance only.

Should colleges continue to pay costs to the college's own nursery?

As the circumstances with regards to college-owned nurseries will vary, colleges which still have outstanding queries in this regard should liaise with their Outcome Agreement Manager (Regional Strategic Body for assigned colleges) to discuss this further.

Education Maintenance Allowance

If schools/colleges close, will EMA continue to be paid?

The guidance states that an authorised absence includes a scenario where the learning centre is closed due to unforeseen circumstances. This would apply in this instance.

Will students who are in self-isolation because of COVID-19 receive their EMA payments?

Yes. The guidance states that an authorised absence includes ill health and additionally the breakdown of a student's method of transport to and from the institution. This also applies to those who have self-isolated due to their parents/carers having health issues which put them at risk.

Will everyone whose application has been authorised on the system continue to receive EMA during any self-imposed isolation and/or complete shutdown of the college?

Yes. As stated above, the guidance allows for absence for unforeseen circumstances, which is applicable in this current situation. It is appreciated that many doctors' surgeries will not be in a position to issue medical certificates and SFC urges colleges to view such cases sympathetically and follow the discretion which the guidance allows.

Do colleges require evidence that students have been advised to self-isolate because they are experiencing some symptoms?

No.

If the college office closes, will SFC accept an electronic copy of a claim authorisation instead of a signature?

Yes, in these exceptional times, with many people being advised to work from home, SFC will accept an email authorisation, from one of the college's authorised signatories.

The college should complete the EMA return information as required on EMA online and then download the document, which would under normal circumstances be passed to an authorised signatory for signing before being emailed to SFC.

In the current environment, the alternative process to follow is:

1. The EMA return document should then be emailed to one of the college's authorised signatories for an electronic authorisation.
2. The authorised signatory should include the following text in their email:

I approve the EMA claim made by (College Name) for the amount of (£XXX).

3. The EMA claim should then be forwarded by the authorised signatory, including the above text and the downloaded EMA claim, to EMAreturns@sfc.ac.uk by the usual monthly deadline.

Are colleges still required to carry out the EMA internal in-year audit spot-checks during COVID-19 campus closures?

No, the requirement for a 5% spot-check throughout the academic year for AY 2019-20 will be relaxed for the period where it was not possible for such spot-checks to be undertaken as a result of the current circumstances which has seen the closure of learning establishments from March 2020. Upon the reopening of campuses, this requirement will be expected to resume.