College and university feedback from SFC COVID-19 surveys

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College and university feedback from SFC COVID-19 surveys

In this document we have summarised college and university feedback received from surveys issued by SFC to date during the COVID-19 period. We hope this information will be helpful to colleges and universities in shaping their own institutional responses to specific issues.

The summary information provided in this document reflects the position across colleges and universities generally. However, specific issues and arrangements will be different in individual institutions.

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Learning and Teaching

College sector

- Where possible, all colleges had shifted to online teaching by Monday 23 March.
- Key challenges for the sector were how to offer subjects which have a high practical or placement element and how to ensure that all students had the necessary IT equipment and training to undertake online work.
- Some colleges noted that for current students, assessment arrangements may need to be deferred due to practical competency or health and safety requirements, particularly in qualifications which lead to professional registration. However, all colleges are doing their best to minimise this, working through arrangements for completion/certification of awards within the current academic year as much as possible.
- Colleges are working on the basis of offering students the opportunity to return to complete only the parts of their course which they were unable to complete due to COVID-19. Part-time funding and the impact on benefits will need to be taken into account though.
- At this stage, institutions have not seen an increase in requests from current or prospective students to defer their studies to the next academic year.

University sector

- By Monday 23 March all teaching at HEIs was being delivered online where possible. The small, specialist institutions (SSIs) in particular noted the challenges of online-based delivery due to the applied and studio-based nature of their teaching.
- HEIs have stated that they have implemented No Detriment or Fair Assessment policies, meaning that no student will be disadvantaged in their outcome.
- Most 1st and 2nd year students will not be expected to sit end of year examinations and will be assessed on the basis of coursework and performance during the year. 3rd and 4th year students will complete remaining coursework assessment and exams online. SSIs have noted that they have quite specific challenges because their assessments are practically focused and this cannot be easily replicated online. This is also a challenge in other practical subjects.
- Overall, we are not seeing significant shifts in deferral patterns at this stage. However, some institutions have noted slight increases in requests to defer and/or an increase in requests for information about deferring studies. It was noted that it is still early in the recruitment cycle and it will be summer before we have a more accurate picture of deferral patterns.
Finance

The SFC briefing note on COVID-19 Further and Higher Education Financial Impacts analyses and summarises the information provided by institutions on financial sustainability. That briefing note quantifies the estimated impact on institutions and details what SFC is doing to help ensure the financial viability of the sector. Also relevant to this section is the announcement of additional funding for research programmes made on 6 May 2020.

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

- The majority of Scotland’s colleges and universities have either already applied to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), or are currently working on their application.
- Of those, all are working very closely with their unions in moving forward with applications to furlough. Unions, although not initially supportive, recognise the importance of working to secure the future financial health of the institutions.
- Institutions are all aware of the importance of providing a clear rationale for applying to the CJRS.
- Many institutions who have applied to the CJRS are topping up staff salaries to 100%.

FE Student support

Most of the issues flagged in early survey responses about student support have been covered in SFC’s Frequently Asked Questions on Student Support. Also relevant to this section is the announcement of additional funding for student support made on 8 April 2020. In terms of the management of student funding payments:

- College student funding payments are being made as normal and in line with the published timetable. As authorised by SFC, colleges have repurposed a range of student funding and redistributed to those most in need through hardship funds.
- Overall, it seems that colleges are able to administer student support payments well in the current situation. A few colleges acknowledged some practical difficulties (e.g. being unable to make emergency payments in cash).
- SFC’s student support FAQs have been updated to provide improved guidance on the following which were raised as issues in early surveys:
  - The desire for further clarification around policy on making retainer payments to childcare providers.
  - An increase in demand for discretionary funds as a result of COVID-related hardship.
  - The need to support students who are experiencing digital poverty.
  - The need for clarification if support can be offered to students who are still completing work but the course end date is not extended.
• Concern has been raised around students moving from being bursary funded into the welfare system at the end of their studies. Advice or guidance has been requested to support students who are transitioning from one funding stream into another. Discussions on this issue are currently underway.

Wellbeing and Duty of Care / Vulnerable Students

• Both sectors are supporting their vulnerable students in a variety of ways. For example, information is being made available through social media, websites, intranet, and direct phone and email contact.
• With regard to mental health and wellbeing, counselling services are continuing by telephone and video call, and online resources are being utilised. For example, some universities and colleges noted the use of Big White Wall, while others highlighted the use of Silver Cloud.
• Student Associations have also been playing an important role in supporting students.
• A detailed summary on actions being taken to support students is set out at Annex A. This includes examples of good practice taken from the surveys.

Accommodation

Colleges and universities do not record details of the number of students still residing in privately rented term-time accommodation, so their survey responses to us have focused on students remaining in campus accommodation.

Annex A sets out examples of good practice in managing student accommodation. It also provides an update on recent legislative changes in this area. The summary position on students still in campus accommodation is as follows:

College sector

• A number of colleges which have student accommodation have kept the accommodation open and arrangements have been put in place to ensure that there is continuity and support for students who remain within the halls.
• Other colleges have closed accommodation, with all remaining students relocated locally or supported to return home.
• Overall, the number of students remaining in college accommodation is very low.

University sector

• Across the sector there are approximately 10,500 students remaining on university campuses. Of these, approximately 63% are estimated to be international students (including EU). All universities are involving students in decision making regarding student accommodation. Equality considerations are also being taken into account.
• Some universities have opened up accommodation for key workers or people experiencing homelessness. In all cases the accommodation is separate to that of students. Official guidance and student safety are being taken into consideration.

International

• There was early concern that students and staff, who have to overstay their immigration visas because they cannot travel, may suffer penalties for the individuals concerned, or for the universities as sponsor bodies. However UK Government confirmation of flexibility on visa arrangements has assuaged these concerns.
• Universities have flagged that English language testing for international students due to come to Scotland in academic year 2020-21 may be delayed, leading to delays in the admissions process for these students.
• Universities have made hardship or discretionary funds available for international students to apply to for financial assistance.

Staff on campus

• Only essential staff are still accessing campus buildings. These essential roles include: staff supporting students in halls of residence; security; animal care; nursery workers to support key staff; essential maintenance and cleaning; and core IT staff.
• Across these services many are on rotas to minimise the number of people on campus at once.
• Universities with medical schools or significant life sciences resource do have some staff on campus to directly support activity which is responding to COVID-19 or to maintain essential laboratory functions (e.g. clinical trials).

Term start dates

College sector

Colleges are making contingency plans in case restrictions are still in place at the start of term. Examples of planning include:

• Potentially delaying the start of the new term.
• Consideration of staggering start dates for different courses, creating smaller class sizes.
• Consideration of a priority based approach to clearing the backlog of AY 19/20 units where there has been no viable alternative assessment mechanism.
• Consideration of online delivery and potential resequencing of units to run the more practical/hands-on learning and assessment elements in semester 2.
• Being flexible around course content to facilitate additional learning for students that may not have been able to complete elements of knowledge/skill that they need as part of their progression.
• Examination of delivery mechanisms that would maintain social distancing to protect students and staff as well as adhering to guidance from Awarding Bodies.
• Online virtual open days and induction sessions.

**University sector**

• Universities are planning for the start of the forthcoming academic year with some universities delaying the start of term by up to two weeks and others maintaining the normal term start date.
• Contingencies are also being planned. These include the use of online learning to start programmes as close to the normal start date as possible, and staggering start dates for different groups to maintain social distancing.

**Exchange participation**

**College sector**

• A small number of outgoing students are still overseas, and most incoming students have been supported to return to their home country.
• Many colleges have suspended outgoing and incoming exchanges until further notice. Predicted numbers are smaller than for the university sector.

**University sector**

• Across the sector, there are approximately 770 students/staff from Scottish institutions estimated to be abroad on placements. It should be noted that some of these individuals may have returned from overseas but not yet informed their Scottish institution that they have done so.
• There are approximately 250 incoming exchange students/staff still with institutions. In most institutions all or a large majority of exchange students have returned home and are completing their courses online.
• Approximately 2,000 exchanges would be expected to commence next term. Of these, just fewer than 750 are compulsory elements of students’ courses. Some institutions have already taken the decision to cancel their planned exchanges for the autumn term.

**Research**

• Some university research activity is continuing to be maintained by core research staff, to ensure the continuity of long-term projects and experiments. However, where research projects can be safely paused, this is being done.
• There are requests for clarity from research funders on arrangements to take account of suspension of research activity, including reporting and application timetables, and approval to retain funds so that current work can be continued in safer times.
Annex A: Supporting Students during the COVID-19 Crisis

Key actions the sector can take

Institutions have acted swiftly to put measures in place to support the health and wellbeing of students in these unprecedented times. This Annex highlights the actions taken by different institutions and aims to highlight examples of good practice and the breadth of areas that institutions are providing support.

Key actions for universities and colleges are:

- **Active Signposting** to relevant advice and information is vital. It is essential that the students understand the range of support that is available and how to access such support. Whilst many university students will have moved out of Scotland during the pandemic, many remain, and therefore clear messaging about institutional first points of contact for students is important.

- **Understanding the student demographic.** Equality considerations are key to making sure that students are properly supported. Advance HE has issued briefing materials which provide further information on how equality considerations impact on COVID-19 policy and practical responses.

Good practice examples

The sections below summarise examples of good practice as highlighted in institutions’ survey responses, under the headings of Financial Support, Health and Wellbeing and Accommodation.

**Financial support**

The response to halt the transmission of Coronavirus and the limit the number of people contracting COVID-19 has resulted in a significant reduction of employment opportunities for students and their families. Further, travel restrictions mean that many students who may otherwise have left student accommodation to ‘lockdown’ with family groups remain isolated away from home.

Each institution has put in place measures to support students. Some examples of good practice include:

- Allowing students to break their university and college accommodation contracts early and refunding of unused portions of rent to students who have returned home.\(^1\)
- Allowing students who cannot return home to remain living in campus accommodation rent free.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) It has not been possible to offer these flexibilities to all students, specifically those locked into rental contracts with private landlords for their term time accommodation. However, the introduction of emergency legislation in this area will give greater rights to students in private accommodation in future (see below).
• Extension of core hardship funds so that students who are unable to work and are experiencing financial difficulties are supported through this challenging time.
• The creation of additional hardship funds for students who are not eligible for the core (SAAS) HE and (SFC) FE Discretionary Funds, such as international students.
• Provision of advice services and appropriate signposting so that students are aware of and supported to apply for the financial support that they require.
• Streamlining of application processes and requirement for evidence, so that students do not experience long waits without support.
• Provision of food packs delivered to students (and their families) where they have signalled they are experiencing hardship.
• Provision of IT equipment to students who do not have appropriate IT access so that they can continue their studies, either through loans of equipment or allocation of funding to allow students to purchase their own equipment.
• Access to free sanitary products via ‘Hey Girl’ or other means.

Health and Wellbeing

Due to the diversity of the student body, and specifically the diversity of students still resident in student accommodation, institutions recognise the need to ensure that they are providing an appropriate duty of care. This applies particularly to those students to whom they have legal obligations, including:

• Disabled students and other protected groups (Equality Act 2010).
• Care experienced students (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014).
• British Sign Language users (British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015).
• Vulnerable children, young people and adults (safeguarding obligations).

But it can also include other groups not currently protected in law, such as estranged students. In addition, some institutions have reached out to those students who are furthest away from their home addresses – both those who have had to remain in their term time accommodation and those who have returned home, but continue to require support whilst distanced from their institution.

This section highlights examples of some of the actions being taken and services in place to support the whole student population maintain their health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Emphasis is placed on examples of support aimed at students remaining in student accommodation and vulnerable students.

2 It has not been possible to offer these flexibilities to all students, specifically those locked into rental contracts with private landlords for their term time accommodation. However, the introduction of emergency legislation in this area will give greater rights to students in private accommodation in future (see below).
• Reach out to vulnerable groups of students with offers of support (including learning, practical issues and psychological matters). Institutions have described well developed safe-guarding procedures which identify and monitor vulnerable individuals so that further help can be offered where students are not engaging. Some institutions note that they have expanded their criteria for identifying students at risk, to give more weight to factors such as isolation.
• Provision of dedicated contacts for vulnerable students.
• Provision of online and telephone counselling and one-to-one advice services, with students sign-posted to the relevant support for mental health and well-being services.
• Use of wellbeing apps to improve student mental health.
• Use of student mentors and student associations to maintain regular contact through phone calls, skype and face time.
• Provision of online activities to ensure that students are kept connected, with activities such as virtual yoga, online quizzes and regular, cookery lessons, and virtual tea and coffee breaks.
• Regular online group meetings for key groups, for example a weekly group for students with autism.
• Use of social media channels to encourage students experiencing gender based violence or other forms of hate, bullying or harassment.
• Dedicated support and resources for BSL students.
• Loans of IT equipment and assistive technology for those who require it.
• Support for ESOL students with regard to English language needs for benefits claims and asylum applications.
• Introduction of fast track systems for processing vulnerable students’ applications for hardship funding and other support.
• Continued virtual one-to-one mentor or study skills support for students who need it.
• Provision of overnight support to students via video meetings and phone calls
• Provision of in-person support in emergency situations, with appropriate PPE and protocols in place.

Accommodation

Colleges and universities have responded flexibly and swiftly to make arrangements for their students in student accommodation. The key flexibility that has been offered has been to allow students to break their accommodation contracts and provision of free accommodation for those students remaining in campus accommodation, as described in the above section on Financial Support.

Many students left their student accommodation for visits home prior to the introduction of lockdown and as a result institutions report that, although students may no longer be on campus, the accommodation is not vacant. Institutions have
agreed to safeguard belongings that students have been unable to collect from their term-time residences and are doing so without financial charge. Steps are being put in place to enable people to return for belongings once safe to do so. It should be noted that the current Scottish Government advice remains that students should not return to their term-time addresses to collect belongings and that accommodation providers should not pressurise students to do so until it is safe.

Other examples of good practice include:

- Introduction of social distancing measures within student accommodation.
- Additional cleaning resources and food packs for students in self-isolation.
- Delivery of meals to students who are isolating.
- Allocating vacated rooms as additional study rooms for students remaining in accommodation.
- Recognition of duty of care to all students across all accommodation types – institution-managed, privately managed and private rentals.
- Dedicated wardens and security staff on campuses.

**Emergency legislation on accommodation**

To provide students in purpose build student accommodation parity with the private rental sector and security for the remainder of the current academic year, the Scottish Parliament has passed emergency legislation ([Coronavirus (Scotland) (No.2) Act 2020](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/acts/2020/68)) which includes the following provisions on student accommodation:

- A seven day notice to leave period for those currently in an accommodation agreement, for COVID-19 related reasons; and
- A 28 day notice to leave period for new accommodation contracts, for COVID-19 related reasons. This is intended to support students who may take contracts in advance of knowing whether they will use the accommodation at the start of the next academic year.

This legislation applies from 27 May 2020 and is not retrospective. Its provisions are active while the Corona Virus Scotland Act is in force but could be extended by Parliament. The Scottish Government is preparing guidance to support the Act. SFC will notify colleges and universities when the guidance is ready.