Changes since the previous version issued on 11 December 2020 are highlighted in yellow. The main changes are:

- Re-inclusion of FAQ section on the payment of childcare providers when they are obliged to close

Further Education (FE) Student Support AY 2020-21: COVID-19 FAQs

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Introduction and purpose

This document provides advice on and answers to ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ from across the college sector in relation to FE student support funding during the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic. This document is a continuation of our previously published COVID-19 FAQ AY 2019-20, and provides information and guidance in relation to the new Academic Year (AY) 2020-21. This is a live document and will continue to be updated to reflect the current climate, as well as any national and/or local measures set out by the Scottish Government.
Information for 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 funding application continues to be assessed and payments arranged 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, students 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 set up a Coronavirus food fund which can be accessed via local authorities.

I need to repeat a proportion of my Academic Year (AY) 2019-20 course as a result of COVID-19; will I be funded to repeat?

Yes, where you are applying for financial support to complete a portion of your AY 2019-20 studies which were disrupted due to COVID-19 reasons (either personal, or academic), the period of disruption should be disregarded from your cumulative previous support total by the college.
Information for colleges

Funding application and award administration

**Should non-completed AY 2019-20 students returning in AY 2020-21 complete a new student support application?**

If students are returning in AY 2020-21 to complete their AY 2019-20 studies, colleges should give them the option as to whether their previous 2019-20 funding information should be used, or whether the student wishes to submit new information. It may be that their current financial circumstances are not fully reflected in the information provided in the original application.

**Should colleges award travel and childcare costs to students if/when there is no teaching on campus?**

For travel costs: colleges should only include travel costs in the student’s funding award for the weeks that the college expects to be providing teaching on campus.

For childcare costs: If childcare providers are open, and a student wishes to use them, colleges should award childcare costs as usual for all of the weeks that the student is due to be enrolled at college (for either remote or on-campus learning). If students choose not to use childcare providers whilst they are studying remotely, they should inform the college that they do not require childcare costs for that time.

**Can colleges pay bursary costs to non-completed 2019-20 students returning to complete their studies on a part-time basis?**

Although students studying part-time are not usually eligible for bursary maintenance, they are eligible for travel and study costs. Colleges, at their discretion, are also able to utilise FE Discretionary funding as a means of providing support to students who are not able to access alternative funds. Please refer to page 13 of SFC’s ‘Advisors Notes 2020-21’ for further guidance.

It is important for colleges to take into consideration the impact of providing financial support to part-time students who are also in receipt of benefits.
Student attendance and participation

Should students continue to receive financial support 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 their usual student support funding, 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 them know once they are well enough to begin engagement again. They should continue to receive student support funding throughout.

Do colleges require evidence that students have been advised to self-isolate because they are experiencing some symptoms or they have been contacted by NHS contact tracers?

For student support funding purposes, students do not need to provide evidence with regards to self-isolation if they are able to continue to engage in their studies remotely (see FAQ re engagement below). If students have symptoms and are too unwell to study, or the self-isolation will prevent them for being able to attend an in-person course requirement such as a placement, then they should inform the college in the usual way. If the student has been on campus and is experiencing symptoms or has been asked to self-isolate, they should follow the college’s procedures for this situation, which will be in line with the Scottish Government’s guidance.

Do students still have to show engagement in their studies?

Yes, if students are self-isolating with no symptoms and have the access to be able to engage remotely/digitally. If students have symptoms that make them too unwell to study, then they should inform the college and 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 without evidence of engagement.
Should bursary payments be stopped for students who are not showing continued engagement in their remote learning if they do not have digital access?

Where students have applied for digital support through their college, but there is a delay in this being provided, students should not be penalised for digital non-engagement in the meantime.

Equipment costs

Can colleges use Study Cost funds to purchase necessary equipment for students to meet health and safety standards in light of COVID-19?

Due to the impact of COVID-19, and the required social distancing and hygiene measures set out by the Scottish Government, SFC recognises that there may be additional or new types of learning materials or equipment that are provided to the individual student and which become the student’s personal property. Colleges can charge these items to the Study Expense Allowance, applying the usual principles and guidance as set out in paragraphs 65-71 of the Award Assessment document. This type of spending will be taken into consideration when 2020-21 Study Cost returns are provided to SFC, as we are aware that this may take some colleges over the current Study Costs 5% average spend expectation. Any other COVID-19 related health and safety expenses should not be attributed to student support Study Costs.

Can colleges use FE student support funds to cover the necessary equipment/infrastructure costs for students to be able to study 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. In order for colleges to provide the required technology for students to access their learning remotely, SFC has now announced the allocation of additional capital funding to support digital provision in AY 2020-21 and to tackle digital poverty. Colleges should be looking to utilise this funding stream in the first instance to cover equipment and infrastructure costs for students that require financial support to meet their digital equipment needs to study remotely in the current environment.

It is up to colleges to manage their student support budgets effectively. Colleges should use their discretion when assessing student needs, and, if taking all other likely student support funding needs into account, a college thinks that it will have sufficient funds available to cover the purchase of digital equipment for students who do not qualify for the digital poverty funding but are in need, then it may do so. The purchase of digital equipment out of student support funds should always be under a lending/borrowing scheme, and in line with our student support guidance, the college should try to retain items that can be reused.
Travel

Should colleges continue to pay travel costs to students if there is no teaching on campus?

If there is no teaching taking place on campus, the student does not need to travel to the college. In these circumstances, the student should not require any financial support for study-related travel costs. Colleges should provide travel funds, where eligible, as part of student support funding awards from the point when teaching on campus is due to resume and/or for the weeks when teaching on campus is due to take place.

If the college has to change access to buildings and facilities due to COVID-19, is it still able to pay direct third-party providers, such as transport companies?

When arranging contracts for AY 2020-21, colleges should be mindful of the changes in service needs which may be required due to COVID-19 effects.

Payment of third-party providers

Should colleges continue to pay childcare costs when teaching is taking place remotely?

Yes, where childcare providers are open and the student’s child/ren are attending then colleges should continue to pay these childcare costs.

Should colleges continue to pay childcare costs when providers are closed or not available to the student?

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 saved amount to Discretionary funds instead.

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

**Can colleges support the cost of third-party providers in AY 2020-21 from student support funds?**

In line with SFC’s published guidance, student support funds may **only** be used for student support purposes. This includes allowances that cover a student’s maintenance, travel and study costs, and assistance with the cost of formal registered childcare. Colleges need to be able to attribute their student support expenses directly to a specific student.

Student support funding should be allocated to students to financially support them during their studies, particularly those who find themselves in hardship due to the pandemic. Student support funds should not be used to pay for third-party providers’ expenses such as topping-up salaries of contracted staff or to cover any other running costs associated with these services, including costs related to college-owned nurseries. If the expenses/costs are directly linked to a student’s personal support needs; for example, nursery fees for timetabled college activities or a bus for students to travel to attend college, then they can be paid out of student support funds. However, if these services are no longer running or no longer required for the students, then it would not be appropriate to continue to pay for these from student support funds.

**Information on Discretionary funds**

**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.

**Does the removal of the maximum cap still apply to Discretionary fund awards in AY 2020-21?**

There is normally a maximum limit of £4,000 per individual student in a single Academic Year, as detailed in paragraph 21 of SFC’s [FE Discretionary Fund guidance for AY 2020-21](https://www.gov.scot/publications/fe-discretionary-fund-guidance-2020-21/). This maximum limit was removed at the end of AY 2019-20 (from 13 March 2020) due to COVID-19 circumstances. The removal of this limit will continue in AY 2020-21.
SFC expects colleges to continue to assess Discretionary funding applications within the limits of the financial resources that the college has available, and encourages colleges to seek to maximise the number of students they can support with the funds they have available. Colleges should continue to consider when making any Discretionary funding awards to students on benefits, how such an award may affect students’ benefits payments.

Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)

*If the college student support office is working remotely, will SFC accept an electronic copy of a claim authorisation instead of a signature?*

Yes, in these exceptional times, with many staff still being advised to work from home, SFC will continue to 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 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 to SFC: *I approve the EMA claim made by (college name) for the amount of (£XX).*
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.

22 January 2021