Redirection of Travel Cost support and Increased flexibility in the use of FE Discretionary Funds related to COVID-19 financial hardship

1. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) allocates Further Education (FE) Student Support funding to colleges to divide between Bursary, Childcare and Discretionary funds as meets their local requirements.

2. We are aware that the national COVID-19 changes to society and businesses may mean that many students are experiencing additional financial hardship, such as if they are no longer able to earn additional money through part-time employment.

3. SFC has already advised that due to national self-isolating guidance and in light of colleges ceasing face-to-face teaching, that students should no longer require travel costs support. For all FE student support payments going forward, there should no longer be an award for travel costs included. Instead, SFC is requesting that colleges look to redirect any funds previously set aside for travel costs to enhance their available Discretionary funds.

4. Currently colleges should allocate their Discretionary funds to those students experiencing financial hardship, as outlined in the FE Discretionary Fund 2019-20 Guidance. Currently there is a maximum limit of £4,000 per individual student in a single academic year, as detailed in paragraphs 20-21 of the 2019-20 Guidance. In light of the difficult circumstances students may be experiencing due to COVID-19 changes, SFC is temporarily removing this maximum limit.

5. This means that going forward, colleges should assess all Discretionary fund applications on the basis of current financial hardship need. Any previous Discretionary fund awards which the student has received in 2019-20, prior to 13 March 2020, should not be taken into account.

6. SFC expects colleges to continue to assess Discretionary funding applications within the limits of the financial resources that the college currently has available, and would encourage colleges to seek to maximise the number of students they can support with the funds they have available.

7. Colleges should note that SFC has already arranged for their April-July 2020 student support funding allocation to be paid in March 2020, so that colleges have access to funds to be able to make awards immediately to students facing increased financial hardship.
8. The National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland has raised concerns with regards to some students receiving support in the form of vouchers. Whilst all support is appreciated, in these current times, it may be that vouchers are more difficult to use, and do not allow the student the flexibility that they require to be able to access what they most need. Hence, SFC recommends that where possible, all student support awards going forward should be made on a cash basis (usually paid to the student by bank transfer).

24 March 2020