

Chief Executive Report

Purpose

1. This paper provides the Board with an update on current issues, for noting. I will provide a further update on the day.

Current Operational Issues

Our People

2. We have been working through with colleagues the internal changes we are making as a result of people leaving us through the voluntary exit programme, and our need to evolve in line with our strategy. We are now making progress on recruitment for the new posts identified in the structure. A high level structure chart is attached as an appendix to this paper.
3. Our Investors in People programme has now completed. We will publish the outcome once we have received the formal report. At this stage we can confirm that we have progressed from being accredited to achieving a Silver IiP award. We are really pleased because it recognises progress and our plans for the future.

COVID-19 – as background relevant to the budget allocation process

4. As you will know, the Scottish Government published its Strategic Framework on Tuesday 23 February. This provides the initial priorities and indicative timeframe on restarting the economy as well as outlining indicative stages for education. The priority remains the return of schools. However, colleges and universities are permitted to bring back a small number of students where in-person learning and teaching is critical. For both universities and colleges the vast majority of learning will continue to be online, with the number of students on campus to be kept as low as possible. No more than 5% of students should be on campus at any one time for in-person learning and teaching. Students should only be on campus for the duration of the practical work and should continue to learn remotely for those course elements where this is possible.
5. The First Minister provided a further update to Parliament on Tuesday 2 March which outlined the Government's intention that all secondary school pupils will return to spend some time in school before the Easter break, with priority being given to the senior phase. For colleges this means that more senior phase

pupils will be able to return to college beyond the 425 pupils studying Level 6 Foundation Apprenticeships in Engineering and Scientific Technologies. While any additional pupils returning to college must remain within the 5% limit, this gives colleges flexibility to prioritise those students who require in-person provision now in order to complete or progress.

6. The Ministerial Learner Journey Task Force has now met on two occasions. It was set up to address the immediate challenges in this academic year and then consider the longer term consequences of potential non-completion, on students and on institutions, in the coming academic year but also on business and the economy, e.g. on the future pipeline of suitably qualified talent. SFC is providing data intelligence to support the work of the Task Force and to advise the Minister.
7. Alongside the Ministerial Learner Journey Task Force, a short-life Student Hardship Task Force has been set up to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student hardship and to determine if the mechanisms and measures currently in place are sufficient to mitigate against student hardship in Further (FE) and Higher Education (HE). SFC is represented on this Task Force which is expected to meet approximately every three weeks. Further to the February Board meeting, SFC has published the allocations for the £3 million of additional student support discretionary funding for colleges in FY 2020-21; and the in-year redistribution of student support funds for academic year 2020-21.
8. On 16 February the Finance Secretary, Kate Forbes, announced an additional £60 million of funding for further and higher education: £20 million capital for research and knowledge exchange and £40 million revenue to be allocated across colleges and universities to help them maintain research activity, protect jobs and support students. Allocation of this additional funding is covered under agenda item 5.

Skills Alignment

9. The first meeting of the Skills Alignment Assurance Group met on 23 February. Chaired by Nora Senior and David Wilson, the purpose of the group is to agree a new implementation plan for skills alignment. It will provide assurance to SG Ministers and the Strategic Board that effective progress is being made in developing and delivering the plan. It will also agree how progress on the implementation of skills alignment will be monitored, reported and evaluated.
10. We continue to work closely with Skills Development Scotland, colleges and universities to deliver skills alignment, most recently through our collective, evolving work at a regional level to identify skills priorities that will meet employer needs and stimulate economic recovery.

SFC Review

11. The Review Programme Board (comprising the senior leadership group and external stakeholders) had a constructive meeting on 25 February. The Board discussed progress during Phase 2, particularly the development of internal work on key workstreams, and the challenges of the renewed Covid-19 restrictions, stakeholder capacity to engage, and priorities for future development and ongoing engagement. I will update SFC Board further at this meeting.

Sector Issues

Shetland College

12. SFC has been supporting the project towards the merger of Shetland Islands College with NAFC Marine Centre UHI and Train Scotland to form a single tertiary education entity. We have been doing so for several years in partnership with the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), the Regional Strategic Body (RSB), providing both advice and financial support.
13. The project is working towards a vesting date of 1st August 2021. Partners expect the benefits of this project to be a more cohesive and improved tertiary education offer to the communities on the Shetland Islands and a college which is financially sustainable into the future. The intention after the vesting date is to undertake the necessary processes and assessments so that the college will be assigned to UHI.

EIS-FELA Strike Action

14. The EIS has advised Colleges Scotland and colleges of a programme of discontinuous strike action on the following dates:
 - Tuesday 16 March 2021.
 - Thursday 25 March 2021.
 - Wednesday 31 March, Thursday 1 April 2021.
 - Tuesday 20 April, Wednesday 21 April 2021.
 - Tuesday 27 April, Wednesday 28 April, Thursday 29 April 2021.
 - Tuesday 4 May, Wednesday 5 May, Thursday 6 May 2021.
 - Tuesday 11 May, Wednesday 12 May, Thursday 13 May 2021.
15. The dispute is centred on concerns from EIS-FELA that lecturer roles are being replaced with tutor / instructor / assessor roles in colleges. It had been hoped that strike action would be avoided as discussions seemed to be moving in a positive direction. However, EIS-FELA took the decision to ballot its members and on a 61% turnout, 90% voted in favour of strike action. Discussions are

continuing.

QS Rankings

16. The QS world university rankings for 2021 have now been published. Scotland has three universities in the top 100 – Edinburgh (20), Glasgow (77) and St Andrews (96). Other notable rankings include the University of Edinburgh being ranked third in the world for Veterinary Science and the Royal Scottish Conservatoire third in the world for Performing Arts.

UK Developments

UK Budget

17. The UK Spring Budget for 2021 was announced on 3 March. It focused on continued support to businesses and individuals throughout the global pandemic. The Job Retention Scheme (JRS) will be extended until the end of September, with employees experiencing no change to the terms. Businesses will be asked to contribute alongside the tax payer, with a 10% contribution in July and 20% in August and September. The continuation of the JRS may impact on the number of individuals seeking upskilling or reskilling opportunities, although employees on furlough are permitted to take up.
18. In science and research, £1.6 billion will be provided to continue the vaccine rollout and to improve future preparedness. Two consultations will be launched on the research and development tax relief and enterprise management incentives. Visa reforms will be aimed at attracting highly skilled migrants, including an unsponsored points-based visa for science, research and technology.
19. In skills, a new incentive payment of £3,000 will be provided for businesses hiring apprentices at any age. An additional £126 million will be provided to triple the number of traineeships.
20. It was also confirmed Scotland would receive an additional £1.2 billion via the Barnett formula.

Office of the Independent Adjudicator

21. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) is an independent body that reviews student complaints about universities and other HE providers in England and Wales under the Higher Education Act 2004. While it does not have a locus in Scotland, it is interesting to note the decisions it has taken.
22. The OIA has released a number of case studies of complaints students have made about the impact of COVID-19 on their studies. They include concerns over disrupted learning, accommodation and missed practical elements of

courses. Among the complainants was an international medical student who had been studying at an undisclosed university and paying course fees of £38,000. The student was awarded £5,000 after the university stopped all clinical placements as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, meaning the individual had lost out on practical experience.

Recommendations

23. The Council is invited to note this paper.

Further information

24. Contact: Karen Watt, Chief Executive (tel: 0131 313 6646, email: kwatt@sfc.ac.uk).

Appendix: High level structure chart

