

Changes since the previous version issued on 21 January 2021 are highlighted in yellow. The main changes are:

- Updates to the Information for FE students and Information for colleges confirming that students who need to attend college for additional periods to repeat or complete study as a result of COVID disruption can continue to be funded beyond the normal course duration in 2020-21 and into 2021-22 if required.
- Further clarifications on using student support funds to provide IT equipment for students.
- Further clarifications on supporting students during the summer months.

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 Academic Year (AY) 2019-20, and provides information and guidance in relation to both AY 2020-21 and AY 2021-22. This is a live document and will continue to be updated to reflect policy changes as SFC’s COVID response evolves, 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 I contact if I have a COVID-19 related question about my student support?

If you have questions about your student support funding, you should contact your college's own student funding office.

Who else can I contact if I 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 course as a result of COVID-19; will I be funded to repeat?

If you previously received funding then, yes, this funding should continue.

If you did not previously receive funding, but your financial circumstances have changed and your household income has reduced, then you can ask your college to reassess you based on your new circumstances.

If my course has been affected by COVID disruption, is there a limit on the duration of support funding I can access?

No. If your studies have been disrupted as a result of the COVID pandemic, you can access funding whether you need to repeat or complete some of your Academic Year (AY) 2019-20 or AY 2020-21 studies.

You should continue to receive the same level of weekly funding support for the additional weeks you need to study at college. If you only need to undertake an additional couple of weeks of study to complete final assessments or practical work, you will therefore only receive funding for these weeks. However, if you need to repeat the entire AY, you can be funded for the full AY.

The amount of additional time each student needs to take will vary depending on their circumstances. It may be that everyone on your course needs to undertake practical units which they could not complete because of COVID restrictions. Or you may have been unable to complete your course for other COVID-related reasons – for example, if you have been ill, or have had to care for someone who was ill, have had to look after dependants because nurseries/schools were closed, or have had time off for a bereavement. The amount of additional study you need to undertake will be based on the academic judgement of your college.

I want to carry on my studies in future years, will this affect my eligibility for funding in future?

No. If you need extra financial support to complete a portion of your studies which were disrupted due to COVID-19 reasons, the period of disruption should be disregarded from your cumulative previous support total by the college.

I have previously received DWP Benefits during the summer holidays, can I still do this?

If you are on an FE course of less than one year's duration, you may be able to access benefits over the summer for the weeks where you are not enrolled on a course and are no longer receiving student support funding from the college. But the interplay between student support funding and benefits varies between students. You should ask your college to advise you according to your own circumstances.

An application for Universal Credit (UC) cannot be made until after your course has ended, and it can then take a minimum of 5 weeks before the first payment is issued (although an advance may be requested). If you are without support over this period, you can ask your college if they are able to offer Discretionary (Hardship) funding.

Information for colleges

Funding application and award administration

Should non-completed AY 2019-20 or AY 2020-21 students returning in AY 2021-22 complete a new student support application?

If students whose academic progress has been disrupted as a result of the pandemic are returning in AY 2021-22 to complete or repeat their studies, colleges should give them the option as to whether their previous 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.

Can students be funded for more than the standard duration of 43 weeks in one academic year?

Students can receive student support where their academic year has had to be extended beyond 43 weeks, as a result of COVID disruption. Colleges do not need to seek permission from SFC for individual cases or courses.

Additional weeks' support can be offered to students on courses where students required to undertake practical units which they could not complete because of COVID restrictions. It can also be offered to students unable to complete their course for other COVID-related reasons – for example, if they have been ill, or have had to care for someone who was ill, have had to look after dependants because nurseries/schools were closed, or have had time off for a bereavement. The amount of additional study students need to undertake should be based on the academic judgement of the college.

Should periods of repeat or deferred study count towards students' cumulative support total?

Students who receive additional support to complete or repeat a portion of their studies because their studies were disrupted due to COVID-19, should have the additional period of support disregarded from their cumulative previous support total by the college.

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 or 2020-21 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 from 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 future 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.

In addition to the above allocation, colleges received a further [£5m uplift in FE Discretionary Funding as part of the in-year redistribution](#). Colleges may also wish to use this part of this allocation to tackle digital poverty and provide more students with the necessary IT equipment and technology they need to succeed in their current online learning environment.

Overall, 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. [The cost of any IT equipment that is purchased for or loaned to students needs to be assigned to individual students in the FES data return.](#)

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 2020-21 and 2021-22, 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 and AY 2021-22 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 and AY 2021-22?

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](#). 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. The policy for AY 2021-22 will be confirmed in the coming months, taking account of the progress of the pandemic.

What do colleges need to take into account when allocating Discretionary funding to students on benefits?

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.

SFC has discussed the potential impact of the payment of Discretionary funding on Universal Credit (UC) applications with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). DWP have advised that:

- If **students are currently enrolled on a course**, payments of Discretionary funding should be made as a lump sum, rather than as regular payments. This would be treated as capital and would have no impact upon the student's UC award unless this takes their existing capital to over £6,000.
- Any payment made from college Discretionary funds **after a student has officially finished their FE course** (the official end date has passed) is not classified as student income for UC. (A person can only be treated as having student income whilst they are undertaking a course of education/study/training.) Such a payment, whether made periodically or in a lump sum, would not be treated as un-earned income in UC and so would be ignored.

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 (£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.