

A Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education

Response from Borders College Students' Association

- a) What do you think works well in the current further and higher education arrangements that we should keep in order to secure Scotland's inclusive social and economic recovery from the current pandemic? How can we best preserve and strengthen those features of education, research and innovation in Scotland that we most prize, in a very challenging funding environment?**

Students' Associations

Students' Associations provide an essential role in advocating for students and influencing decision-making. Particularly during the pandemic, Borders College Students' Association (BCSA) played a crucial role in representing and supporting our most vulnerable students. Examples below.

- Day-to-day advocacy for students experiencing digital and food poverty
- Established Borders College as a referring agency for foodbanks across the Scottish Borders
- Worked with Student Services to establish home delivery system for free sanitary provision
- Worked with various college departments to drive improvements to student support (e.g. IT support, welfare, funding, learning and teaching)
- Regular communications sent to students to ensure they were well informed throughout the pandemic.
- Providing vital wellbeing opportunities for students to remain connected with each other throughout lockdown

Pre-pandemic, BCSA supported a number of partnership projects with the college –

- A range of initiatives to tackle food poverty (free breakfast and meal packs, food banks, clothing banks, breakfast clubs)
- Opportunities to meet directly with senior college managers
- Coordination and ongoing development of effective student representative systems
- Delivering a range of Mental Health and wellbeing campaigns
- Making a positive impact on the quality of induction at Borders College through the introduction of the BCSA 'Welcome Week' and associated events
- Consistently driving forward partnership projects including Student Partnership Agreement and Student Mental Health Agreement

Hardship Funding

The £16m for emergency hardship funds and summer support, along with the £5m package of support to address digital poverty Scottish Governments provision of £16m has been welcome. In the short term, the Scottish Government must continue to make emergency funds available to Scotland's students as necessary to ensure no student faces destitution.

- b) What do you think colleges, universities and specialist institutions should stop doing, or do differently, in order to contribute effectively to an inclusive social and economic recovery? (You may wish to comment on teaching and skills development, sectoral and employer needs and employability, research, innovation and knowledge exchange, widening access and equalities issues.)**

Online Learning

Advances in technology mean that a blended learning model is now possible. However, institutions should be mindful that this is not suitable for all learners where independent learning skills are not sufficiently developed, or where an individual requires the structure and holistic support provided by attending a college campus. When trying to close the attainment gap, it is of paramount importance to pay careful consideration to the inequality that may reveal itself when transitioning to an online or blended learning model.

Student Consultation

Colleges should involve students' associations in all conversations on financial sustainability and recognise the crucial role they have in supporting students through the Covid-19 outbreak. It is also vital that Students' Associations are properly resourced in order that they continue to function effectively and are able to consistently deliver their core purposes. For example, there is significant disparity both in terms of the level of funding and funding streams for Students' Associations. This should be reviewed to ensure students across Scotland are receiving parity of student representation, and that all Students' Associations are sustainable in the longer-term.

Access to Local Support Services

In the Scottish Borders access to local support services is poor which means that our most vulnerable students are unable to access the vital support they require, when they require it. The pandemic has revealed many hidden inequalities amongst our student groups (e.g. digital poverty and food poverty), and we are confident that many more students are struggling with a range of issues that remain unaddressed and have a direct impact on their overall wellbeing and ability to engage in education. The Scottish Government must invest in more support for third sector organisations to provide the vital support required by so many vulnerable students.

Appropriate Resources to Tackle Poverty

Rural poverty is as acute as that of urban but because of the way it is measured through SIMD Borders College often misses out on additional

funding. Through BCSA initiatives it is evidence that hidden poverty exists all through the Borders. For example, between October 2019 – March 2020 BCSA have provided over 750 free breakfasts, 1,000 meal packs and 650 kilos of surplus food to Borders College students.

Equalities Focus

A strong equalities focus is required to ensure that institutions are able to embed equality and diversity within their practices. This includes having a senior equalities lead, effective equalities monitoring processes, and the ability to work collaboratively with staff, students and partners to develop more inclusive approaches to curriculum delivery and support provision.

c) How can colleges, universities and specialist institutions best support Scotland's international connectedness and competitiveness in the post-pandemic, post-EU membership environment?

Borders College students have benefitted from Erasmus programmes - making them better equipped for global citizenship. The Scottish Government should invest in a replacement for this programme for College students.

d) What opportunities and threats does the post-pandemic environment hold for colleges, universities and specialist institutions? For institutional leaders, how are you planning to address these challenges and opportunities?

Financial Support for Institutions

It is estimated that Scottish Colleges could lose £70m in income next year. This puts FE and HE systems at risk, which will have a direct impact on Scottish students. It is therefore vital that Scottish and UK governments make appropriate investment to support institutions facing financial hardship. Investment in Borders College is important to ensure equity of access is provided regardless of where you live in Scotland.

Employment

Students entering the job market this year are going to experience reduced opportunity for employment. This is exacerbated in the Borders where academic progression from Borders College is challenging, and for some is an impossible option. With no local HE provision and poor transport links, rural students experience significant barriers to further learning.

Responding to Redundancy

For Borders College there is an opportunity to provide additional learning opportunities for individuals looking to re-train, upskill, build new business or change career as a result of redundancy or wishes to re-enter/change employment.

Inclusive Employers

Post-pandemic, colleges have an opportunity to re-imagine their approach as an employer. For example, since March staff have adopted new remote ways of working, utilised flexible working patterns, and for those with a long

commutes, have reduced the length of their working day and their outgoings. For many this has contributed to an improved work-life balance, reduction in work-related stress, and contributed to more productive and inclusive practices. It would be positive to see college's consider these new working arrangements in the longer term.

Increased Demand for Evening Classes

Following the publication of Scottish exam results, it is likely that we will see an increase in the number of students looking to resit SQA courses. College's therefore have an opportunity to run additional evening classes to support this demand. In addition to this, the provision of grant support or subsidisation for those who were downgraded from predicted grades would support students to progress in their learner journey.

e) **What forms of collaboration within the tertiary education eco-system would best enable a coherent and effective response to these challenges and opportunities?**

Making opportunities for students to progress and move within institutions is important to ensure student attainment and success is a priority. Schools, colleges and universities should work together to ensure the learning experience is supported seamlessly from school through to the end of study. It is important that we continue to measure the quality of experience for those who enter and exit education at different points.