

HISA response to SFC on Phase 1 of the Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability

Thank you for the opportunity to submit evidence to this review. This is our initial response to phase one. We are very happy to follow up on any of the matters we raise here and looking forward to engaging with the later stages of the review.

In response to the specific questions:

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?

Despite the financial uncertainty caused by UHI's bloated, complicated and unnecessary structures the tertiary vision of education that UHI believes in is a positive and progressive step for the Scottish Education Sector.

Supporting higher education in rural environments ensuring young people can stay locally to study degrees is essential for the future of the region.

UHI is a great model for articulation that the rest of Scotland should be following. Many of its campuses do a fantastic job of both serving their local communities and delivering sector leading HE courses in subjects as diverse as Archaeology, Adventure Tourism, Golf Management and Marine Science.

UHI has also had great success in the research in fields like environmental science, culture, tourism and Gaelic language to name but a few. It is vital that universities are allowed to focus on both teaching and research, follow their own path and not be siloed into one or the other.

All of the above bring significant investment and jobs to the local economy and the importance of this cannot be overstated.

Funding in UHI is complex but it is vital that UHI remain the regional body in charge of all funding streams. Related to this the SFC needs to ensure that pay rises negotiated via national collective bargaining are always fully funded.

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.)

UHI is exceptionally skilled in pointless duplication and division of responsibilities and processes. This needs to end before hundreds of staff lose their jobs and the student experience is permanently damaged.

A truly integrated approach across UHI would reduce bureaucratic processes and would allow for the alignment and sharing of services. UHI's academic partners all provide numerous services that could and should be merged. Nowhere is this more apparent than at management level, where UHI spends between £4.5-£5million on senior management pay for approximately 30,000 students, or £150+ per student.

Where Universities and college are required to make savings in order to balance the budget, they currently have the complete freedom to cut staff at any level rather than proportionally across all pay bands. We see this with the numerous VSS schemes being planned within UHI.

SFC should therefore consider whether UHI really needs 14 sets of senior managers and how this represents value for money at a time of financial crises across the sector.

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

HISA believes the Scottish Government should continue to heavily lobby the UK Government to permit universities, colleges and specialist institutions to have Erasmus+ membership, which allows students from Scotland and students from the EU to study on an exchange programme.

Benefits to students from all countries involved are substantive as they allow students not only to diversify their education, but also to enrich themselves with the culture of another European country.

UHI have been delivering online and blended courses for over twenty years. Online learning offers a huge level of opportunities and potential to the higher education environment in Scotland. UHI and other institutions could deliver high quality education to students around the world and thereby attracting online international

students as well as physical international students, with low affordable fees bringing significant income to the sector as well as diversifying the student body.

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?

One of the largest threats to the post-pandemic educational environment in Scotland is the ability of institutions to teach in an online world with the same level of effectiveness as they previously did in physical classes or lectures. Staff will need to be trained and willing to update their methods. Students, who have picked practical courses may also be unwilling to switch to theory classes online.

This has the potential to weaken education levels relative to previous generations of students, and thus risk attainment levels, graduate attributes, and employment success. Qualifications and degrees obtained during Covid may be seen as “less good” than qualifications obtained beforehand.

Another significant threat is student recruitment. If student recruitment falls then the level of income institutions receive will also fall. This would require them to make cuts which would almost certainly affect the student experience. If students are to be attracted to studying then they must believe the education they will be receiving is of a high level.

All this should be used as an opportunity to upskill staff and make students more employable in an online world.

HISA believes the SFC should develop a Scotland-level standard for blended and online learning to ensure that education levels do not slip but instead are enhanced. UHI is the sector leader for blended and online learning in Scotland and much could be learned from it.

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

A strengthened relationship between Students’ Associations and their institutions is more vital than ever.

Students’ Associations are the experts in representing students, and the most effective way to enhance the education sector’s understanding of the needs of students is to ensure that the organisations that represent them are fully resourced, supported and funded.

Given the underfunding of Student Associations, especially in the College sector, setting a minimum benchmark of funding per student head at every institution would have a significant impact. The SFC should work with NUS and Student Association to work out what an appropriate formula would be. College Students' Associations, in particular, now more than ever need this to ensure effective delivery of the student voice.

The second significant way that collaboration could positively affect the sector is through the delivery of a truly tertiary education system. The terms "further education" and "higher education" are historic and not based on the progressive levels of the SCQF. They mean nothing whatsoever to students and don't reflect how UHI, and how the rest of the sector should, work

UHI delivers tertiary education, allowing students to declutter their minds from such outdated and confusing terminology. From the way that our members engage with us and with UHI, they enjoy the freedom of simply being a student. This is a significant strength of UHI's unique nature and is therefore one to be preserved and used as an example of best practice for Scotland.

SFC should implement a long-term strategy to do away with these terms and introduce a funding and application system that is fair and equitable. It should be based on level of study rather than these outdated terms which hold UHI, and arguably the whole sector back, from progress and collaboration.

Differentiating Colleges from Universities is regressive and helps entrench outdated stigma regarding who studies where. UHI, SCRUC and others prove that such thinking is backward and unnecessary.

The separation, (to which UHI bucks the trend) results in a significant overspend on an already financially challenged sector. Lack of collaboration will cause more financial harm in the long term, than merger and integration do in the short term.

The greatest resulting opportunity lies in the answer of one question: if education can be effectively delivered online, overcoming all geographic barriers of the past, does Scotland need so many Universities and colleges?

Finally combining research and teaching together within each institution is a tried and tested recipe for successful learning. Separating the two out into different silos is a recipe for weakness. There is value in having research divisions and teaching divisions in every department within every college, university and specialist institution in Scotland so that the experts in research can directly support the experts in educational delivery.

F) *How can SFC, alongside government and other enterprise, skills and education-focused agencies, best support colleges, universities and specialist institutions to make their full contribution to Scotland's inclusive, green and education-led recovery? In particular, you may wish to draw out:*

- *How scarce public resources should be prioritised to drive recovery*
- *Particular areas of collaboration between agencies that would best support the sectors' contributions*
- *Adaptations to SFC's funding and accountability frameworks to promote agile and collaborative action by the sectors to build Scotland's recovery*
- *How SFC's funding and accountability frameworks should ensure that equality and wide access to educational opportunity are promoted as key elements of the recovery for younger people and adults*
- *What support SFC and government could give institutions to adapt to a changed environment*

UHI

The student experience should be central to all funding decisions. A great place to start saving money would be to look at UHI's structures, duplication, lack of accountability and swollen bureaucracy and see if there was any structure that would better deliver value for money than the current system. An independent review of the whole of the UHI Partnership could kick start this process.

Student Support

The Scottish education sector needs to view students as collaborative educators rather than customers of an education product, and the best way to achieve this is to fully understand the financial challenges that students face compared to their levels of funding support.

Access to funding for part time students needs to be widened. Part-time students have the same life expenses as a full-time student, and should have access to fair levels of student support.

Further education students also face big challenges because bursaries/EMA do not match the cost of living, let alone the cost of education. Furthermore, the expectation that parents will provide financial support to students who are under the age of 25 is not something that exists for students across all socio-economic backgrounds.

One of the areas of where the financial support by age is most contrasting, is with apprenticeships. The starting hourly wage for apprenticeships is £4.15. After one year, an apprentice over the age of 25 will more than double their wage to £8.72, whereas an under 18 may receive an increase of as little as 40p per hour to £4.55,

not accounting for any increases made each tax year. This highlights clear ageism within the apprentice wage system.

Lower cost of living in student residencies. The price of student accommodation should reflect the students' ability to afford the space provided rather than its commercial value. All agencies of education should recognise that on site or near site accommodation is an investment in bringing students closer to the heart of the education provision, rather than its commercial potential.

Institutional Funding

HISA calls on SFC and the Scottish Government to deliver sustainable investment in the education sector, to ensure stabilised funding for the future with checks and balances to ensure appropriate management of spending by universities and colleges to deliver clear growth and enhancement of Scotland's graduates into society. This should be delivered through investment in green and sustainable industries to ensure that a prosperous education sector for Scotland, is one routed in environmental security.

Fully fund promised increases in lecturer pay in Colleges, and encourage senior management teams to invest in front line services that directly and positively impact upon students' lives.

Student Challenges

As the Coronavirus crisis has highlighted, there is a distinct section of society that suffers from digital poverty. This is more than a matter of simply supplying laptops and headsets to students who are unable to afford their own or to receive them as part of ASN packages (although this is still very important). This is also about fibre optic broadband access to every community in Scotland, from Annan to Unst. SFC may find it beneficial to collaborate with HIE's project on bringing fibre optic broadband to every community in Scotland.

Provide graduate support in economic crisis through employment opportunities and program interns for College leavers. Here the SFC and the Scottish government has a prime opportunity to utilise a mass pool of graduates and create a series of intern programmes designed to enhance the Scottish education sector. Graduates' fresh experience and enthusiasm for the education sector that they have recently left as students can be harnessed to operationally deliver research and development programmes that transform Scottish further and higher education for the better.