

Chair's Update: Learning, Quality and Skills

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to inform members of ongoing or recent developments relevant to the remit of this Committee. There are no recommendations; the paper is for noting.

Skills Funding

Funding for upskilling for universities

2. On 10 July 2019 SFC published guidance on its new Upskilling Fund for AY 2019-20¹. The aim of this new stream of funding is to develop the capacity of universities to offer more agile support for short, flexible provision to employees and employers to upskill or reskill.
3. Funding available for AY 2019-20 will be used to encourage the sector to explore a range of models of working with employers, either building on existing models or developing entirely new ones. SFC has allocated £6.1m through the repurposing of funding previously used for additional Taught Postgraduate skills places for this purpose. SFC intends to continue to fund this initiative in future years, subject to a review of progress and availability of funds. Universities have been asked to report to SFC by 13 September 2019 detailing their intended use of this funding.

Flexible Workforce Development Funding for colleges

4. The Flexible Workforce Development Fund (FWDF) guidance and allocations for 2019-20 will be published in the next few weeks. The current guidance is available on the SFC website². AY 2019-20 will be the third year of the Fund which provides UK Apprenticeship Levy-paying employers in Scotland with flexible workforce development training opportunities to support economic growth through up-skilling and/or re-skilling their existing employee workforce. The FWDF for AY 2019-20 will amount to £10 million and this funding will be allocated across the college sector.
5. Eligible employers can access up to £15k in 2019-20 through an application process, working with the college in their region (or of their choice if that is not applicable) to identify the training they require to meet skills gaps and increase productivity.

¹ <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/guidance/2019/SFCGD152019.aspx>

² <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/guidance/guidance-2018/SFCGD162018.aspx>

Updates from the sectors

Universities

6. The recently published Universities Scotland report, *Tomorrow's People: Universities Building Scotland's Future*³, highlights the role of universities as engines of economic growth, and in leading innovation, nurturing entrepreneurship and enabling thousands of graduates each year to develop the skills they will need for careers in a changing workplace.
7. The report identifies a number of key requirements if Scotland's economy is to compete internationally, including:
 - A flexible skills system that recognises the higher-level skills and attributes Scotland's graduates will need to enable them to thrive in diverse roles in a changing economy.
 - Discussions on skills needs with employers, providers and agencies to understand emerging needs.
 - Flexible incentives for institutions to develop new approaches to upskilling and to lifelong learning. For example, developing 'micro-credentials' that can be stand-alone skills driven modules or be part of a postgraduate qualification.
 - Explicit commitment from the Scottish Government to fund lifelong learning opportunities so that people can upskill and reskill as they navigate through their evolving careers.
 - Scottish Government incentives for employers to invest in developing their staff, particularly in leadership and management skills and capabilities and for staff in SMEs.
 - Further development of Graduate Apprenticeships to address implementation issues highlighted by institutions and increase responsiveness to both employer and learner needs, with a particular focus on SMEs.
 - Work with partners to tackle equality issues and create sustainable and inclusive growth.
 - Strong university involvement in the further development of metaskills to join up with existing work on graduate attributes.

Colleges

8. The College Development Network (CDN) is working with the college sector to convene a national conference, *Enhancing the Student Experience: Enabling Attainment*. The conference will focus on enhancing the student experience and improving attainment and will be held at City of Glasgow College on 6 November 2019. The conference will be addressed by the Minister for Further Education, Higher

³ <https://www.universities.scotland.ac.uk/publications/tomorrows-people/>

Education and Science, Richard Lochhead. Details of the conference will be released shortly.

Augar review

9. The UK Government's Augar review of post-18 education in England was published in May 2019. The report contained 53 recommendations on the future structure and funding of the sector. Key recommendations include:
 - The reduction of the maximum higher education tuition fee to £7,500 per year (currently £9,250), with the UK Government replacing lost fee income by increasing the teaching grant.
 - The extension of the loan repayment period from 30 to 40 years and the reintroduction of maintenance grants for disadvantaged students.
 - Improving the quality and funding of technical skills at all levels.
 - Significantly enhanced funding for further education colleges, and greater equity between college and UG levels of provision to make it easier for students to navigate the learning landscape. The Office of Students would regulate all non-apprenticeship provision.
10. The review does not anticipate any major changes to cross-border student flows as a result of our proposals, but its implementation could have a significant impact on Scotland nevertheless.
11. A reduction of fees to £7,500 could cost the Scottish sector an estimated c£30m in lost income, as Scottish HEIs cannot exceed the maximum amount of tuition fees for rUK students charged elsewhere in the UK. 'Top-up' funding from the UK Government to English HEIs for the loss of fee income would increase the budget allocation of the Scottish Government through the Barnett formula. While the Scottish Government has discretion on how this additional funding might be used, there would be significant pressure from the sector to pass this funding to HEIs to ensure the sustainability and competitiveness of the sector.
12. The review's recommendations around equity of funding between college and undergraduate levels of provision in England could also lead to calls from within Scotland for a review of the current levels of funding of HE provision across the college and university sectors.
13. It will be for the UK Government to decide which, if any, of the recommendations it chooses to progress. It is likely, however, that under the new Prime Minister, many recommendations in the review may not be taken forward.

UK exit from the EU

14. On 31 October 2019, the UK is due to exit the European Union (EU). Depending on negotiations over the next few weeks, the impact of Brexit on Scotland's colleges and universities could be significant, particularly if there is a 'no-deal Brexit'.
15. The SFC's EU Exit's team have met with individual institutions, and are working alongside Scottish Government, Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland to identify and address the possible impacts of Brexit. SFC has published 'no-deal' guidance on our Brexit micro website⁴ which summarises the current position on issues such as fees for EU students, immigration, Erasmus+ and the guarantees on ESF and Horizon underwrites in the event of a 'no-deal'.
16. Aside from the immediate impacts of Brexit and ensuring business continuity for the sector, our priorities are to ensure the continued roll out of policy responses to deal with legislative and funding changes, such as immigration legislation, EU student fee policies, and replacements for EU funds. We will also continue our work to meet Scotland's post-Brexit skills needs.

Quality in the college sector

Overview report 2018-19

17. This report was commissioned by SFC to provide a national overview of the work of the college sector and to inform inter-agency approaches to support improvement.
18. Colleges are continuing to respond positively to the quality arrangements for Scottish colleges. Overall, they have applied *How good is our college? (HGIOC?)*⁵ and direction from SFC and Education Scotland well to produce their Evaluation Report (ER) and Enhancement Plan (EP). During the process of collating the key messages from the 27 ERs, the following three themes became particularly apparent:
19. **Creativity** is a key feature of the approaches taken by colleges to shift their quality culture from evaluation for *compliance*, to evaluation for *improvement*. Many colleges have revised their quality processes to provide staff with continuous access to data to support on-going evaluation. The use of 'live dashboards' is becoming increasingly prevalent, allowing access and use of real-time information to improve outcomes for learners. These developments are increasing staff ownership of the quality of provision and services at strategic and operational levels.
20. **Collaboration** features prominently in almost all college reports and many colleges comment positively on increased collaboration between services to support learning and curriculum teams to improve outcomes for learners; closer partnership working with the Students' Association; and increased collaborative working with schools to

⁴ <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/eu-exit/eu-exit.aspx>

⁵ [How good is our college?](#)

plan and coordinate senior phase opportunities. Collaboration with employers and industry is reported as highly important by all colleges most are seeking to strengthen and enhance this engagement, particularly at curriculum team level, to guide and direct the curriculum, learning and teaching approaches and resources, to best meet current and projected industry needs.

21. **Consistency** of approach by staff and teams is reported variously by many colleges as an area for development. Frequently this refers to the complexities of staff and teams working in or across multi-site campuses though many colleges highlight the variation between highly performing teams in comparison to teams which are performing below college expectations. They cite a need to increase or improve opportunities for staff and teams to share and adopt effective practice to reduce the gap between highest and lowest performing areas.
22. Going forward, future quality assurance requirements will take account of the findings from this Overview Report and feedback from formal, tripartite evaluation by colleges, HMIs and OAMs. These will be incorporated within SFC's forthcoming guidance for colleges.

Summary of tripartite evaluations: August 2019

23. In June, College HMI and SFC Outcome Agreement Managers were asked to work with their colleges to carry out a tripartite evaluation of the arrangements over the preceding year. Out of the 27 colleges in Scotland, 22 evaluations were completed, and the findings are summarised in Annex A.
24. Generally, there was overwhelming support for the arrangements as a tool that encourages open, productive and cross-college dialogue and the arrangements were also seen as an enabler for effective collaboration and partnership working – internally and externally – ensuring that engagement activities are well aligned with colleges' operational and strategic contexts. Colleges were mostly positive about the support received from ES and SFC, with the role of the HMI seen as critical. Colleges also noted that the involvement of learners in evaluative activities is improving and better use is being made of learner feedback. Collaborative working with ES and SFC was welcomed and the challenge and prompt questions were highlighted as useful prompts for constructive dialogue.
25. More negative aspects highlighted by the evaluation included college dissatisfaction with the timings of when arrangements guidance was issued and PI data was available. Colleges also wanted guidance that was more prescriptive. Colleges also felt that the outcome agreement and quality arrangement processes were not yet integrated and that there was some misalignment between OA measures and QA QIs. Colleges also highlighted the negative impact of grades on open dialogue and noted that the role and requirement of AAs and STM were still unclear.

26. The full findings, including the qualitative feedback provided by colleges, will be used by SFC and Education Scotland to improve and enhance the current arrangements for colleges, and to direct and inform internal processes and protocols.

Quality in universities

The changing UK quality landscape

27. Since the establishment of the Office for Students (OfS) in England, there has been greater divergence among the four nations in relation to approaches to quality assurance; and as the OfS continues to evolve fully as a regulator, it is driving change – and change at a pace – to those areas of quality infrastructure shared across the UK. SFC and Scottish Government want to protect the reputation of Scottish HE both nationally and internationally and have concerns that changes brought about by the OfS could impact negatively on Scotland, e.g. the Teaching Excellence and Outcomes Framework (TEF).
28. In a recent Ministerial Letter of Guidance (July 2019), SFC has been instructed to protect Scottish higher education:

In the context of the changing regulatory framework in England, the SFC should continue to work to protect, as far as possible, the interests of the Scottish university sector. In respect of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, the existing Quality Enhancement Framework approach to quality assurance in Scotland remains the key determinant of assessing the provision of quality learning in Scottish universities. The SFC should therefore work with us and sector partners to mitigate the impact on quality assurance in Scotland of changes implemented in other parts of the United Kingdom.

National Student Survey (NSS)

29. The 2019 National Student Survey (NSS) results were published in August. The results show that 84% of students at Scottish HEIs were satisfied with the overall quality of their programmes of study, the same as the UK average and an increase of 1% on the previous year. The 2019 results show that 11 institutions were on or above their benchmarks⁶, while eight institutions sat below. Question 22 of the survey (overall satisfaction) is used as a key measure in the Outcome Agreements process, and SFC will discuss each institutions' plans for enhancing the student experience as part of the annual OA negotiations.
30. The NSS is managed by the Office for Students (OfS) on behalf of the UK funding and regulatory bodies. The current contract, delivered by Ipsos MORI, ends after the 2020 survey. It is intended that an invitation to tender for the NSS 2021 and 2022 surveys

⁶ To make comparisons more reliable, each institution has a benchmark based on the sector average satisfaction levels adjusted to reflect their mix of students.

will be published in December 2019. OfS will review the scope of the current contract, and consider expanding the survey to include all undergraduates, and the inclusion of new questions for graduate apprentices. Any changes to the survey will be made in consultation with, and the agreement of, all the UK bodies to ensure NSS remains relevant to all 4 nations.

Statement of Intent on Degree Classification

31. In May this year Universities UK published *Degree Classification: Transparency, Reliability and Fairness – A Statement of Intent*⁷, which was signed by representative groups from across the nations and endorsed by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment.
32. This piece of work was generated in response to Ministers in England who have repeatedly expressed concerns about the rise in the number of first degrees awarded in English higher education institutions. In March Damian Hinds told universities in England that they ‘must end the steep-rise of ‘unjustifiable’ first class degrees to maintain the UK university sector’s world class reputation’.⁸
33. The situation is rather different in Scotland, because, although there has been an increase in the number of firsts awarded in Scottish universities, the increase is not nearly as pronounced as it is in England. Also, the context in Scotland is different as the capped system means there is greater competition for places leading to an increase in entry tariffs – which *may* be leading to an increase in first degrees. More work is required to understand fully the situation in Scotland.
34. The Statement of Intent has been contextualised for each of the four nations, with a marked difference in tone between England and Scotland.

DiscoverUni

35. On behalf of the UK HE funding and regulatory bodies, the OfS has been developing a replacement for Unistats, the official website for comparing UK HE course data. A beta version of the new resource, DiscoverUni, will be made public during September 2019, but will continue to be developed over the following year to accommodate changes and respond to feedback.
36. DiscoverUni is designed to help prospective students navigate the complex HE information landscape to better inform decisions about whether, where and what to study. OfS are keen to ensure that the development is genuinely UK-wide, and has worked with SFC, and held usability sessions with representative groups of students in Scotland, to ensure that the new resource is relevant, accurate and helpful for Scottish domiciled students.

⁷ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/degree-classification-soi.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-told-to-end-grade-inflation>

37. The resource covers programmes at all of the UK's HEIs. Scottish colleges are not currently within the scope of the collection. However, the resource (website and app) will link to relevant and trusted external resources, including *My World of Work*. No significant changes to the data are planned over the coming year.

Risk assessment

38. There are no risks associated with this paper.

Equality and diversity assessment

39. An equality and diversity assessment has not been carried out for this paper.

Financial implications

40. This paper is for noting only. There are no financial implications.

Recommendations

41. The Committee is invited to note the paper and raise any questions accordingly.

Publication

42. This paper will be published on the Council website.

Summary of Tripartite Evaluations

Planning	Not well	Well	Very well	Well + very well
1.1 How well are the quality arrangements establishing openness and productive dialogue in supporting improvement?	None	12 (54%)	10 (46%)	100%
1.2 How well did the process of planning engagement activities support collaboration?	1 (4%)	8 (36%)	13 (60%)	96%
1.3 How well did guidelines on the scale and scope of the ER and EP assist the production of these documents?	9 (40%)	9 (40%)	4 (20%)	60%
Activities	Not well	Well	Very well	Well + very well
2.1 How well did engagement activities involve staff at all levels across the college?	1 (4%)	14 (64%)	7 (32%)	96%
2.2 How well did engagement activities help college staff to reflect on and evaluate the quality of provision and services?	None	15 (68%)	7 (32%)	100%
2.3 How well did engagement activities help to support discussion and planning of actions for improvement?	2 (9%)	12 (55%)	8 (36%)	91%
2.4 How well did engagement activities support the production of the ER and EP?	None	15 (68%)	7 (32%)	100%
Impact	Not well	Well	Very well	Well + very well
3.1 How well are the quality arrangements helping staff to use corporate data to evaluate and plan for improvement?	4 (18%)	13 (59%)	5 (23%)	82%
3.2 How well are the quality arrangements helping staff to gain and use feedback from learners to plan improvements?	2 (9%)	13 (59%)	7 (32%)	91%
3.3 How well are the quality arrangements helping staff to gain and use feedback from employers to plan improvements?	2 (9%)	18 (82%)	2 (9%)	91%
3.4 How well are the quality arrangements supporting cross-college collaboration to improve retention and attainment?	2 (9%)	7 (32%)	13 (59%)	91%
3.5 How well are the quality arrangements developing collaboration with partners in evaluation and planning for improvement?	3 (13%)	15 (69%)	4 (18%)	87%