



Scottish Funding Council  
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

## Call for Evidence: A Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education

**SFC Call for Information**

Issue Date: 20 July 2020

## A Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education: Call for Evidence

1. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is the national, strategic body that funds further and higher education, and research, in Scotland. We have been asked by Scottish Ministers to review how best we can fulfil our mission of securing coherent provision by post-16 education bodies, and the undertaking of research, in these changing times. A [briefing note on the review](#) can be found on the SFC website.
2. We invite all interested individuals and organisations to submit evidence to help inform and shape our review. We particularly welcome responses from colleges and universities, students and learners, graduates, industry and employers, local government, equalities interests, unions, quality assessors, other SFC funded bodies, professional representative bodies and academies. Annex A lists the key stakeholders we anticipate will be interested in responding to this call for evidence.
3. It would be helpful if you could provide succinct submissions by **10 August 2020**. We would welcome evidence and data that supports your view. You may choose to respond to any aspect of this review; and any or all of the specific questions we pose, as we recognise the inter-connectedness of many of the themes. Please complete the attached respondent information form (Annex B) when submitting your response.
4. This will not be your only opportunity to contribute to our review. We are planning to undertake the review in a number of phases and to elicit views in different ways, including further calls for evidence. We anticipate that responding organisations will wish to provide additional input and evolving views as the review progresses.
5. In this first phase of our review we are interested in your views on these six areas in particular:
  - 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?

Scotland as a country benefits from a diverse range of excellent higher education institutions, and the review should consider how to protect and build on the strength of this diversity and the high quality teaching and research they offer. The challenges and opportunities we face as a nation, and the eleven National Outcomes of the National Performance Framework, require a wide range of responses, and a rich

ecosystem of well-connected institutions with different strengths and specialisms will serve that well.<sup>1</sup> The Scottish Higher Education landscape must continue to be characterised by a diverse range of disciplines, and the review must ensure that HE continues to support the nation's democracy, wellbeing, and the capacity for each of us to best and fully play a productive role in civic society in a way that includes, but is not limited to, the development of high level skills and employability.<sup>2</sup>

We fully support the idea that FE and HE should be free at the point of delivery and that access to finance should never be a barrier to someone pursuing their education. Notwithstanding the gap between the current levels of funding and the cost of delivering the activities they fund, the current SFC funding and reporting arrangements largely succeed in supporting the excellence of the Scottish HE sector, and any change to the current arrangements must strengthen rather than threaten that position. The review should therefore ensure that the funding and accountability regime creates incentives to do the things that best promote higher education's contribution, and remove the rules and restrictions in the accountability and funding regime that inhibit agility and collaboration in delivering the best outcomes.

Especially as we enter the pandemic recovery phase, we must not overcomplicate funding and reporting arrangements as it will simply hamper recovery work. The current funding landscape can seem cluttered, some strategic funding decisions slightly opaque, and reporting requirements are often not proportionate to the actual levels of funding allocated, placing a reporting burden on smaller HE institutions that draws resources away from core activities. The review should make such arrangements leaner and more transparent.

The allocation of SFC research funding should continue to recognise and support research excellence in the HE sector wherever it occurs and at whatever scale it occurs.<sup>3</sup> For smaller institutions this is essential to maintain an infrastructure that supports translational research and innovation activity, already highly efficient in relation to the levels of public funding received. Further, any changes to current research funding arrangements must ensure that every Higher Education institution is sufficiently resourced to produce graduates who are equipped with the necessary research skills for them to play a key role in Scotland's inclusive social and economic recovery from the pandemic and their country's future development. The review

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, QMU is ranked the top modern university in Scotland in the [Times Good University Guide 2020](#).

<sup>2</sup> We are in the top three in Scotland for employment of undergraduate leavers: 97.1% are in employment or further study six months after graduation, placing us third in Scotland on this measure (HESA, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> In the 2014 Research Excellence Framework, over 58% of QMU's overall research was rated as world leading or internationally excellent, e.g. 92% of our research in In Speech and Language Sciences was classed as internationally excellent or world leading; 77%+ of our research publications in Media and Communications are classed as internationally excellent or world leading; and 50%+ of our research profile in Global Health and Development is classed as internationally excellent or world leading.

must recognise that appropriately supported research across the sector is integral to innovation, teaching and tackling Government priorities.

The allocation of SFC teaching funding must also continue to recognise the additional skills and experience which students will garner from undertaking a university degree in comparison to those who undertake a higher national programme, as the focus on nurturing the ability of graduates to engage in independent and innovative thinking will, through its cumulative effect, form the basis for the future strength of Scotland's economic, social and cultural development.

In short, it is imperative that any changes to the current funding arrangements continue to enable Queen Margaret University to continue to occupy its distinctive role as an institution that produces highly skilled graduates for the health,<sup>4</sup> education, hospitality and creative industries sectors in Scotland, and to continue to do so in an inclusive and supportive environment.<sup>5</sup>

- 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.)

Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council are readily accessible, but universities need to work with SFC and Government to manage the approach to addressing Government priorities more effectively and efficiently. The size of the Scottish University sector means that it is relatively easy to gather and coordinate a Scotland wide stance, particularly through the support of Universities Scotland. However, we must also recognise the diversity of the sector and that that diversity itself is a key driver of innovation and inclusion. There needs to be recognition, through the Outcome Agreement process, that every university should not be expected to address every Government priority. However, the OA process should also ensure that all those priorities are addressed cumulatively by the sector as a whole.

Outcome Agreement guidance therefore has to be more nuanced. At present it appears to be a repository for Government policies with little consideration of prioritisation or focus in relation to the nature and strengths of individual institutions. It needs to be a carefully thought through set of mutual priorities for the

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<sup>4</sup> QMU offers the broadest range of allied health professional degrees in Scotland including nursing, dietetics, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, podiatry, radiography, audiology, art psychotherapy, music therapy, and speech and language therapy.

<sup>5</sup> In the National Student Survey 2020, this particularly strong sense of community within QMU is reflected in the positive responses to the statement 'I feel part of a community of staff and students', with results that are above both the Scottish and UK average.

sector and the Government that recognise the diversity of the sector and the relative strengths within it.

There is clear alignment between Government and much of the University sector in the desire to engage with people, businesses and other organisations that may be on the margins of higher education to ensure a joined up approach across the economy. The Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board has a key role to play here. There should be a fresh, co-ordinated look by Government and the school, college and university sectors at how the widening access challenges and opportunities have been changed in the post-pandemic environment.

The Government's focus on fair access is correct but measures can be fairly broad brush and there must be a more nuanced approach to how we define and measure access. Along with other universities, QMU has set challenging targets for the proportion of students from the 20% most deprived postcodes. However, we also take an individualistic approach to access, regardless of background to ensure that all students are not lost in the mix, have appropriate support and feel part of the QMU community.

What we should not do is give in to economic pressure and/or follow the models south of the border that downgrade the value of the health professions by moving away from honours degrees in Nursing and other allied health subjects.

While the health Apprenticeships and Associates introduced in England may have their place, it must not be at the expense of producing highly skilled practitioners through four year honours degree pre-registration health programmes. The particular timing of the SFC review with vacancies in the CEO of NHS Scotland post, as well as the CMO, and CNO posts make for a very uncertain future for health education. While funding for health based programmes has to be reviewed, we must learn from our experience of Covid-19 the high stakes risks of any funding deficiencies in this area of 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?

Scotland's international outlook will be increasingly important in both the post Brexit and post pandemic environment. We must continue to partner with other countries to ensure that Scotland remains a key international player. <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Of the University's 7601 students, including 2462 studying via our partners overseas, 36.8% are from Europe, and 13.4% are from outside Europe, with 8.8% are from the UK outside of Scotland (academic year 18/19).

Seeking out partnership and collaboration is a core goal in QMU's strategy. A major part of this is our Transnational Education Partnerships, such that in 2017-18 QMU had the highest number of Scottish HE TNE students in the EU<sup>7</sup>. Our approach is to create resilient partnerships that allow students to access the QMU experience in their own countries. This enriches both cultures, enables those students in countries such as Nepal, India and Egypt who would not be able to afford to study in Scotland to benefit from a Scottish education, and looks to manage the environmental impact of international students by removing the requirement for large scale student mobility across continents.

We will capitalise on the capacity of technology for learning, assessment and day-to-day work to bring international teaching and research partners closer in a virtual environment, both increasing our international profile while managing the environmental impact.

Although Universities will have their individual approaches, there needs to be, as far as possible, a Scotland wide message about the attractiveness of Scotland as an education destination and a welcoming message to EU countries. Universities' ability to attract international staff and student talent will be essential to Scotland's openness to the world and its ideas, to the internationalisation of the experience of our own students and staff and to individual universities' regional economies.<sup>8</sup> Universities should be a core part of Scotland's export and foreign direct investment propositions and that should be reflected in the support of key public agencies.

- 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?

QMU is a distinctive university because of our particular academic portfolio, strongly aligned to Scottish Government economic and socio-cultural priorities, and our person-centred approach to learning, innovation and collaboration.

Opportunities include greater use of on-line resources, opening up learning to more of the home and international population. That said, part of the University experience that attracts many students is the on campus vibrancy and interaction, their presence has a positive net impact on the local economy, and our international alumni can be a key asset in developing Scotland's international trade. It is vital that all of this is retained.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2020/scale-UK-HE-TNE-Scottish-providers-2017-18.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Students from outside Scotland who come to study at QMU generate an estimated £11m of economic output each year.

Nonetheless, going forward we will look to maintain and develop a blended approach to learning allowing students to access learning in a way that suits them, ranging from a fully on-line experience to campus based learning. We recognise that the nature of learning itself is changing and this will be influenced further by adaptations as a consequence of the pandemic. We are committed to developing the way we teach and research to be flexible and responsive both to the needs of our students and the communities we serve. Our approach to blended learning is predicated on quality and effectiveness.

As demonstrated by comments on other sections of this response, partnership and collaboration will become more prevalent, especially with greater use of on-line communications. Scotland has an opportunity to become a lynch pin in this collaborative environment.

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

There must be clear (and promoted) paths for students through school, college and university with well-defined exit points and interaction with employers. Part of this will involve proper articulation with colleges. Unless there is a specific professional requirement, we should work towards all HNC allowing access to degree level 2 and HND to degree level 3.

Healthy competition can be a good thing but we need to do more to build genuine collaboration between universities that is beneficial to the economy and wider society. Competition that limits choice and/or access should be avoided. At a strategic level, we are increasingly looking to build stronger partnerships, in particular, with the other universities and with colleges in our region (The joint submission from the four Edinburgh university principals explains this in a bit more detail).

QMU partners with many colleges to promote and support access to education. This can take the form of formal articulation agreements, associate students and validation of qualifications. Some examples are given below.

We have recently refreshed our College Engagement Plan and new articulation agreements have been signed with Glasgow Clyde College and Ayrshire College. We offer Associate Student places to students on programmes at Edinburgh College, West Lothian College and Newbattle Abbey College which allow students to enrol on a degree while studying at college. We also work with colleges to enable their students to pursue a degree in their own region, rather than moving to the Central Belt, through innovative validation arrangements that also support inclusive growth by developing highly skilled talent where those graduates are domiciled.

We have established formal next level articulation agreements with Borders College and West Lothian College that present students undertaking HNC Care and Administrative Practice with the opportunity to articulate to Level 2 BSc (Hons) Nursing. The focus during the lifetime of this agreement will continue to be on outreach work with Schools and Colleges.

The review should consider funding mechanisms that explicitly encourage collaborations across existing silos (ancients and moderns, universities and colleges etc.). An exemplar of such an approach is the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities collaborative PhD studentships, part funded by the SFC, which require doctoral collaborative projects to include partners from specific institutions as well as external organisations based in Scotland (<https://www.sgsah.ac.uk/partners/arcs/>). This approach offers greater value than requiring institutions to 'collaborate more', which often simply strengthens pre-existing connections and cliques; we need to do more to encourage new and less 'obvious' collaborations.

As mentioned above, as we recover from the pandemic there will be a call for lessons learned research and work to mitigate against further severe impacts. Such work is above competitive research contract tenders and Scotland could lead the way in a coordinated and fully supported research programme into this. We must also recognise the research and innovation strengths throughout the sector when working in partnership.

- 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

Agile and collaborative action by the sectors to build Scotland's recovery and inclusive economic growth requires HE (and FE) to be given the freedom to use their core funding in more flexible and innovative ways. For instance, the model of credits



(in FE) and funded places (in HE) can be an accounting based barrier to innovative new collaboration. SFC should be as open in its funding and reporting arrangements as it is in its rhetoric, in encouraging and supporting innovation in the models by which a degree can be studied if that further widens participation. For all the HEIs do to support innovation elsewhere, when it comes to degree structure and delivery there is arguably very little innovation. Could the SFC repurpose strategic funds to support what would essentially be action research to explore new models and approaches that are less about incremental change and more about a paradigm shift in what could be done? For instance, could there be 4 or 5, five year funded projects - across a range of subjects and institutions/collaborations - to design and trial new ways of structuring and delivering degree provision? Without incentives to innovate, we will never have the case studies of how things can be done differently that are needed to persuade people to follow.

Similar flexibility should be developed by SFC and SAAS to support universities to offer, and learners to access, short flexible post-graduate skills provision, such as credit or non-credit bearing 'micro-credentials', recognising that the higher skills development that learners and businesses require may not necessitate either the standard 200 hours of learning of a University module or the credit recognition that involves formal assessment. Such flexibility would also enable access to initial undergraduate and postgraduate provision for learners with 'non-standard' qualifications.

With limited resources, SFC funding has to take into account the ability of Universities to generate income from other areas.<sup>9</sup> Clearly universities have to act competitively and adopt innovative approaches to securing income from non-Government sources, but the diversity within the sector that is part of its strength means that this is not a level playing field. Universities must not be forced so far down the commercial route that generation of income takes priority over all teaching, learning and research work and addressing Government priorities. Indeed, many of the universities that are more reliant on Government funding are the very ones at the forefront on addressing such priorities.

As mentioned above, a focused set of Government priorities that allow individual Universities to play to their strengths (rather than having to be seen to address all priorities) would be a significant step forward.

In addition to the comments we have already made on collaboration it is important to note that the key beneficiaries must be students' access to education and employment and further the society's knowledge through research and innovation. Collaborations can achieve financial efficiencies, and we should not lose sight of this, but it should not be the key driver.

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<sup>9</sup> 40.9% of the University's income comes from the SFC.

6. Please send your response or any queries to [reviewsecretariat@sfc.ac.uk](mailto:reviewsecretariat@sfc.ac.uk) by **10 August 2020**. We look forward to receiving your views.

SFC Review Secretariat  
July 2020

## Stakeholders likely to be interested in responding

- Colleges, universities, specialist institutions (and their representative bodies) and other funded bodies
- UK counterparts
- Audit Scotland, Education Scotland and QAA
- Enterprise & Skills Strategic Board and agencies
- NUS, sparqs, student bodies, learners, SAAS
- Employers and industry
- NHS
- RSE
- Cultural bodies
- Trade Unions
- EHRC and equality interests
- Local Authorities and Scottish Cities Alliance
- Expert advisers, e.g. Chief Scientific Adviser
- Development bodies, e.g. College Development Network (CDN), Advance HE
- Community and adult learning

## Call for Evidence: A Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education

Issue date: 20 July 2020

Deadline: 10 August 2020

Reference: SFC/CE/01/2020

Summary: This publication invites all interested individuals and organisations to submit evidences to help inform the SFC review of coherent provision and sustainability in Further and Higher Education.

FAO: Colleges and universities, students and learners, graduates, industry and employers, local government, equalities interest groups, unions, quality assessors, other SFC funded bodies, professional representative bodies and academies

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