

Quality of the student experience

Purpose

1. This paper:
 - Provides an overview of how SFC is developing our understanding of the quality of the student experience during the pandemic and how our approach to assuring and enhancing learning is responding to the changed operating environment.
 - Outlines how SFC is working with our quality agencies to develop an in-year approach to providing an overview of online learning.

Background

2. The pandemic has seen a major shift in the ways in which our colleges and universities deliver and assess learning and teaching, which in turn, has had a major impact on student learning experience.
3. Our quality frameworks for further and higher education have responded flexibly to the needs of colleges and universities during the pandemic. Working with our quality agencies, we have focused on a balance of flexibility and support to enable institutions to respond to the changing situation in terms of design and delivery of learning and teaching.
4. SFC has a statutory duty to secure provision for both assessing and enhancing the quality of fundable further and higher education. Since the reintroduction of lockdown in January, our work with the quality agencies has highlighted that we will need to further develop our approach to assurance during the emergency years in order to support this commitment.

How are we developing our understanding of the student experience?

5. SFC has a range of touch points for developing insight into the student experience. Our key tools are the quality frameworks for colleges and universities, our engagement with student representative groups - sparqs and NUS Scotland, outputs from national student satisfaction and engagement surveys and associated discussions with institutions, and shared membership of sector forums.
6. The evaluation of the quality of learning and teaching in FE and HE in Scotland relies on two frameworks – How Good is Our College (HGIOC) in the college

sector and the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in the university sector. While SFC retains oversight of these frameworks, and is responsible to Ministers for their effectiveness, Education Scotland (ES) and the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS), have been commissioned by SFC to deliver key aspects of these.

7. Student engagement is a key feature of both frameworks. NUS and sparqs are full partners in the delivery of the QEF, alongside SFC and QAA, and student engagement - the meaningful participation of students in quality assurance and enhancement processes - is one of the interconnecting five components of the framework that touches on all other themes. HGIOC includes indicators and challenge questions linking the process to the Student Engagement Framework for Scotland. Additionally, sparqs work with students' associations, colleges and Education Scotland to develop student engagement in HGIOC nationally and within colleges. In November 2020, sparqs and Education Scotland co-created a toolkit to support colleges in ensuring student engagement in the planning and delivery of quality arrangements during the pandemic.
8. Along with the other UK funders/regulators, SFC has secured access to a rich range of data on the student experience including: application; access; attainment; progression and retention; student satisfaction; and graduate employment, occupation, and skills level. We are able to analyse this data across a range of socio-economic characteristics. This data informs every aspect of our quality frameworks, and is used by SFC to inform our discussions with institutions and the development of our approach to enhancing the quality student experience.
9. As one of their statutory customers, HESA are required to provide SFC with the necessary data to fulfil our statutory obligation, including access to student data on progression, retention, attainment. We also have full access to data from: NSS (student feedback on their experience); Graduate Outcomes Survey (employment status, occupation, skills level); Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (earnings data); and UCAS (annual application cycle). Fully utilising this rich data resource as a tool for enhancing the student experience has been identified by SFC as an area for further development.

10. During the pandemic we have also :

- Established a Student Engagement Advisory Group (SEAG) which supports general engagement with students on issues during the pandemic and in the SFC Review.
- Delivered, with sparqs, an engagement event for National Education Officers Network (NEON) in November 2020.
- Asked students directly about their experience with digital learning. As part of SFC's Review we held a roundtable with students.
- In May 2020, SFC asked the Scottish Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP) to undertake a survey on the impact of Covid-19 on widening access and participation activities in order to inform and shape planning. The report was used to support the SFC Review Phase 1 Report and planning through the SFC Covid19 hub.
- Liaised with Scottish Government and with QAAS on the Scottish Student Concerns Scheme to monitor concerns and complaints raised by students in relation to their experience during the pandemic.

Impact of the pandemic

11. Insight from the above highlights a series of immediate impacts from the pandemic in relation to the quality of student experience that are for SFC's concern:

- As the pandemic and lockdown has extended, we need to further develop our approach to supporting quality of student experience and standards of awards in the emergency years.
- All colleges, highlighted through ES reporting to SFC, have identified significant number of deferred learners returning or planning on returning to complete practical work and assessments required for awarding body certification in 2020-21 and 2021-22. We have also heard from students their concerns and anxiety around disrupted learning journey, financial consideration and affordability and uncertainty around whether there will be a place for them to complete their course study if they need to defer.
- Students joining HEIs in academic session 2021-22 will be doing so after a period of intense disruption, meaning that they may be dealing with specific challenges in addition to those usually faced by new students. The Ministerial Task Force on Learner Journey, which SFC is a member of, has a specific action point to help prepare entrants from school and college and continuing

students whose learning has been disrupted for 2 years.

- The response of institutions, quality agencies, staff and students to the challenges of the pandemic has accelerated existing trends, forced a rethink of established processes and practices, and a reprioritization of key outcomes and deliverables. Through our review, sector and institutional enhancement activities, and our engagement with students we will seek to ensure that lessons learned from the pandemic inform the development of our quality frameworks so that it remains fit-for-purpose.

How are we responding?

Assuring the quality of the student experience and the standards of awards in the emergency years

12. At its meeting in October 2020 the Committee received an update on how the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS) and Education Scotland (ES) have supported institutions during the pandemic.
13. In the case of the college sector, it was agreed the priority was to support colleges to pivot into online learning. This decision reflected the limited experience which exists within the college sector around online learning and the complexity of shifting hands-on, skills based, education into an online learning format. This resulted in an agreement with Education Scotland (ES) agreed to cease formal quality assurance work and focus on supporting the shift to online provision.
14. In the case of the university sector, it was acknowledged institutions had a stronger history of delivering learning wholly online. After an initial pause of its assurance and enhancement activities during the early part of the pandemic, QAA were able to move all of its assurance enhancement activities wholly online, including ELIR visits; enhancement events; and its concern scheme enquiries. All ELIR visits schedule for 2020 have now taken place. However, the delay to the visits, and subsequent delay in the publication of outcome reports (most now due in Spring 2021) reduced the evidence base available to SFC during 2020 and the early part of 2021 to fully establish a comprehensive picture of the sector at that time. The pandemic also impacted on institutions own Institution-led Review (ILR) schedules, with a number of institutions seeking extensions to the six-year maximum cycle for reviewing all their provision.
15. SFC is working with ES and QAAS to provide an in-year overview of the experience of online learning to support quality assurance.
 - SFC has commissioned Education Scotland to produce an in-year national overview of the quality of remote and online learning in colleges. The national overview will be based on information collected through

engagement with all colleges. This work will understand better the following aspects of remote learning in colleges:

- Learner engagement in their learning.
 - Approaches to learning, teaching and assessment during remote delivery.
 - Approaches to assuring the quality of remote learning.
 - Approaches to supporting the wellbeing of learners and staff.
- SFC are developing a commission with QAAS to produce an in-year overview of the quality of remote and online learning in universities. The engagement work with universities this year will be reflected in this approach.
 - Our Review commitment to explore the development of new, Scottish level, quality standards for blended and online learning will be taken forward in Phase 3. This will be informed by insight from the work to develop in-year approaches to assurance of the online learning experience with ES and QAAS. It will also be informed by the Phase 3 stakeholder engagement within the Digital workstream.

Enabling students complete disrupted programmes of learning

16. We have undertaken work to establish likely volumes and associated subject areas where students will need additional time or the opportunity to defer. Whilst the years affected are not directly comparable, we are able to learn lessons from information we have already collected from 2019-20 and the first quarter of 2020-21.
17. Feedback from colleges shows that they face many challenges but that they are taking proactive decisions to prioritise final year students and practical courses that are more impacted by the reduction in face to face learning.
18. SFC will offer new flexibilities and will work with the college sector to overcome the challenges and find creative and supportive solutions to enable students to successfully complete and progress. We will utilise existing budgets and make additional funding available for AY 2020-21 to help fund additional staff costs, until the end of the year including over holiday periods, and to provide additional student support, if required. We will continue to engage with the Ministerial Learner Journey Taskforce to ensure a coordinated and joined-up approach. We will also continue to discuss with colleges the potential policy interventions that could help reduce the number of deferrals into 2021-22.

What are our next steps?

19. In Phase three of our Review we plan to develop our thinking around our quality frameworks. Our key next steps include widening of the discussion to engage key senior stakeholders within SFC. We will also work with other

workstreams, in particularly the accountability framework and tertiary system, to embed our evolving vision for quality assurance and enhancement.

20. This process will enable us to develop our priorities and ambitions for developing our approach to quality assurance and enhancement. It will also enable us to be clear on what our ask is of the quality agencies we commission and of institutions we fund to enable us to deliver our vision for a high quality student experience.

Recommendations

21. The Committee is asked to note the issues raised in the paper and advise the executive of its views on the further development of its work to assure and enhance the quality of the student experience in a high performing education system.

Publication

22. This paper will be published on the Council website following the meeting.

Further information

23. Contact: Kathryn O'Loan, Assistant Director, koloan@sfc.ac.uk.