
Student Interests, Access & Pathways – Future Direction

Purpose

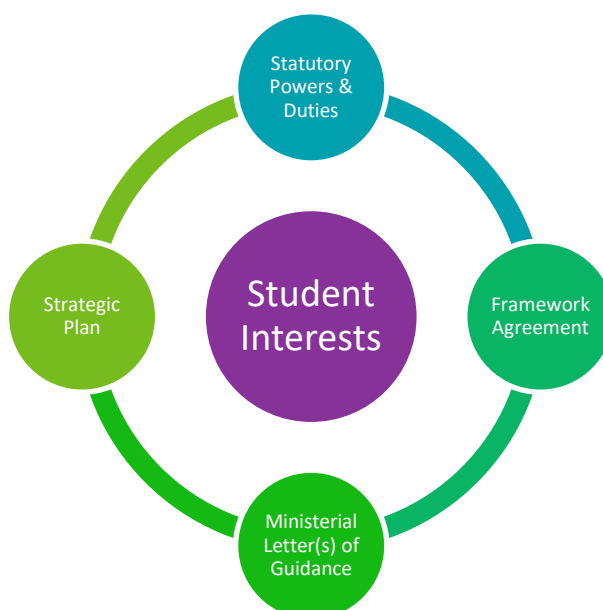
1. This paper, and associated presentation provides the SEAL Committee with an overview of how the recommendations of the Review and recently articulated Strategic Priorities in relation to student interests could be achieved.
2. The SEAL Committee is asked to consider the paper with a view to providing feedback to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to inform and support the next stages of development. The following questions are provided to support the discussion:
 - Does the proposed approach support the SFC to achieve its goals?
 - Do the [student interest principles](#) support collaboration and partnership?
 - Will the proposed [workstreams](#) support the protection of student interests?

Background

3. The work of the SFC in relation to student interests is rooted in its own [statutory framework](#), the outcomes of [Coherent Provision and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research](#) (2021) ‘the Review’ and the [SFC Strategic Plan 2022-27](#), ‘the Strategic Plan’. This framework provides the basis on which the SFC can develop its work in access and equalities, whilst building a portfolio of activities that focuses on student interests.
4. Following the appointment of a Deputy Director for Student Interests, Access and Pathways work has been undertaken to develop a plan for the future development of student interests activity. The first phase of this development has been one of ‘listening and learning’. This has included internal research and consultation about current and past activities, consideration of the Review outcomes and the Strategic Plan and the commissioning of legal advice in relation to our statutory framework. The Deputy Director has also engaged with a number of external stakeholders including NUS Scotland, sparqs, Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland.
5. It has also been necessary to consider existing commitments such as the Commission for Widening Access and the Memorandum of Understanding with the Equality & Human Rights Commission, the requirements for these activities will be incorporated into future plans.
6. In concluding this phase, discussions with the SFC Senior Leadership Group will take place, with final proposals developed in June 2023.

The Statutory Framework

7. The SFC's statutory framework is supported by four distinct but interrelated elements.



8. The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 (as amended) sets out the primary statutory duties and responsibilities and is the basis of the SFC's powers, responsibilities, obligations and limits, both in general and in some cases, in relation to students specifically. Whilst the act does not expressly give statutory authority to the SFC to 'protect the interests of students', it does set out that in exercising its functions the SFC must have regard to:
- social and cultural issues¹ in Scotland
 - educational and related needs (including support needs) of current and future students
 - encouraging equal opportunities, which is particularly relevant to student interests where an issue has discriminatory consequences
 - consulting with a body which represents students.
9. Alongside the Act the SFC's statutory framework includes Scottish Ministers, through the [Letter\(s\) of Guidance](#), the [Framework Agreement](#) and the Strategic Plan. These elements provide definition of scope, are more variable than the Act, and include links to the SFC's oversight of governance and other functions of fundable bodies.

¹ NB: 'issues' is defined as being issues which, following consultation with the Scottish Ministers, appear to the Council, (i) to exist for the time being or be likely to exist in the future; and (ii) to be capable of being addressed (wholly or partly) by the provision of fundable further education or fundable higher education;

10. This framework provides an important context for the future work of the SFC in relation to student interests and highlights the importance of its role in providing guidance to Scottish Government.

The Strategic Plan

11. The Strategic Plan commits the SFC to an approach that is centered on co-design and partnership working, an approach that will see the SFC work together and collaborate with stakeholders in both decision making and in identifying what works well and where improvement is required. This is encapsulated in one of the underpinning themes of the review;

“Protecting the interests of current and future students in relation to their education, support needs, access and participation will form a more central part in our development over the lifetime of this plan, working in partnership with students and representatives.”

12. Alongside this commitment to partnership and engagement with students is the continued promotion of equality, diversity and inclusion with a view to addressing the [persistent inequalities](#) across the sector. The National Equality Outcomes have been identified and were published in January 2023 and will be addressed through the Public Sector Equality Duty.
13. The strategic objectives, “Enabling people to learn and flourish”, “Building a responsive, coherent, sustainable system” and “Making SFC an excellent organisation” each include priorities that will guide the development of student interests related activity across the organisation and throughout the sector. Whilst student interests is not explicit within the “Generating new ideas and diffusing knowledge” objective the work of student interest will encompass all students by they taught or research focused, studying within the FE or HE sectors, undertaking apprenticeships, full-time or part-time.

Student Interest Principles

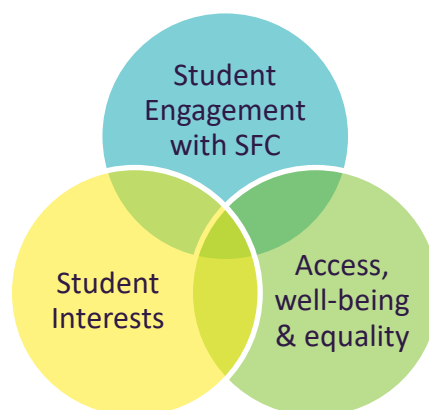
14. As outlined within the Strategic Plan the SFC will work collaboratively and in partnership with others, both internally and externally to achieve the goals outlined below. In doing so the SFC will:
 - **Ensure the work of the SFC is student centered:** this principle will shape how the SFC engages with, and learns from, the student experience and will impact how work is planned and developed. Colleagues, teams, and the organisation as a whole will be supported to adopt a student-centred approach.
 - **Learn from the latest research and the lived experience of students:** colleagues across SFC will work collaboratively to enhance how data and information is used.

An important aim will be to identify gaps in data and information and explore how these might be addressed, and will recognise that the student experience, and the student body itself, is ever changing and therefore research and knowledge needs to be updated regularly.

- **Take an open and equal approach:** engagement with students, graduates and those that work with them will respect the needs of the individuals, recognise the value of their time and contribution and avoid creating disadvantage or reinforcing inequality. For example, students will be paid for their time and out of pocket expenses will be covered.
- **A system level approach:** The SFC does not engage in, or work on, individual cases and this will remain our position. The SFC does consider it important to learn from individual student cases and experiences, and case-studies or identification of outcomes across cases may support a broader understanding of the lived experience and influence areas of activity.

Student Interest Workstreams

15. In considering the commitments made throughout the Review and the Strategic Plan and building on the foundation of the SFC's statutory framework three workstreams are proposed.



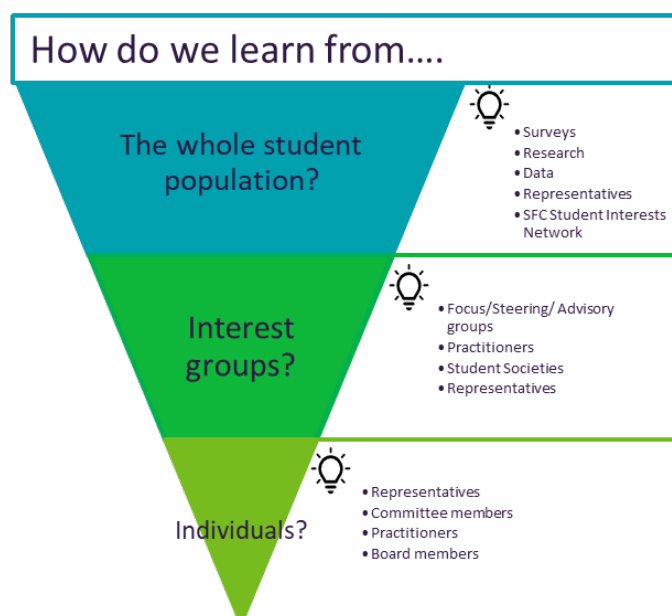
16. Each of these workstreams would be composed of overarching goals and annual aims and objectives. They would provide a structure to the work for the SFC and support effective prioritisation:
- **Student Engagement with SFC:** developing opportunities for students to **engage** with, and **participate** in, the work of the SFC
 - **Access, Well-being & Equality:** enabling students to **access** tertiary education and to receive the **services** and **support** that they require to **flourish** and **succeed**
 - **Student Interests:** identification of **student interests** and direct meaningful action in priority areas

Student Engagement with SFC

Developing opportunities for student to **engage** with, and **participate** in, the work of the SFC

Goals

17. Whilst the SFC has experience of working with students directly, most recently during the Review and through the inclusion of a student observer on the Board as well as the Postgraduate Research Advisory Group; student engagement is, on the whole, limited.
18. There has been a commitment across the tertiary sector in Scotland for more than 20 years to ensure that the student experience is valued and enhanced and that institutions work in partnership with students to achieve this.



19. It is a goal of this workstream to take a more ambitious and far-reaching approach to student engagement in the SFCs work. The Student Interests, Access and Pathways team in particular would be a source of connection, knowledge and expertise; supporting colleagues to engage with students and learn from their experience.
20. In developing the SFCs approach to student engagement how best to approach working with individuals (students, graduates and practitioners,) groups (students' associations, professional networks/membership bodies, interest groups), as well as the whole student population would be identified. This may include exploration of how teams and the SFC more widely, can learn more from work already done, and how information is shared and used to support decision-making and identification of gaps that need to be addressed.

Access, Well-being & Equality

Enabling student to **access** tertiary education and to receive the **services** and **support** that they require to **flourish** and **succeed**.

Goals

21. This workstream is one that is relatively well established in the work of the SFC. However, opportunities to develop new, as well as review and enhance existing, activities have been identified. The access, well-being and equality workstream would encompass longer term activities and those priorities which seek to address systemic and societal challenges evident in the tertiary system.
22. The SFC would continue to lead and manage activities that support the sectors approach to widening access. They would seek to develop a broader understanding of admissions practices to ensure that an informed and comprehensive approach is taken to widening access and to maximise the impact of any interventions.
23. The SFC would continue to lead and inform future investment and guidance in access and support, through research, enquiry, engagement and discussion. Colleagues will work collaboratively to support student centered approach to decision making in relation to the funding of activities across the tertiary sector.
24. The SFC would continue to enable, encourage and improve participation of under-represented groups through the promotion of the sharing of practice and developing opportunities for engagement. Existing activities would be reviewed and evaluated to ensure they are contributing to the achievement of SFC's statutory duties and are delivering best value.
25. An area of new activity could see the use of information about the student experience to identify opportunities for development and enhancement in relation to student well-being and support at a system level. Using existing data and information to inform decisions, as well as the identification of any knowledge gaps will provide a starting point for this work.

Student Interests

Identification of **student interests** and direct meaningful action in priority areas

Goals

26. This workstream would be entirely new and would rely heavily on the development of the SFC's own approach to student engagement. The overarching goal would be to

identify and focus development and activity on student interest priorities that are in the public interest, rooted in the 'system' and that can be changed, influenced or impacted through funding, policy or regulatory activities. Engagement with SFC's statutory framework would be a key component of this activity.

27. These activities would typically be shorter-term as compared to those in the access, well-being and equalities workstream, (i.e. 2-3 years maximum,) although some may transition into longer-term activities if this would continue to support meaningful action.
28. **Student Interests Identification & Prioritisation:** a rolling programme for the identification and prioritisation of student interests would be developed in such a way that both the identification and prioritisation is built upon the student experience, using a wide range of evidence sources, for example, student surveys, rankings/league tables, data from HESA, UCAS and others, review of student complaints etc.
29. The model would require consideration of a number of factors to support effective prioritisation and may include how particular interests intersect or align with other sectors or policy priorities, for example with health or justice.
30. **Project or Activity Instigation:** SFC would develop a standard, but flexible, approach to managing projects and activities that result from the identification and prioritisation process. Some projects may take the shape of thematic reviews or active research, or working groups convened to support improved communication or sharing of best practice. Whatever the priority or activity the planning approach would ensure key milestones are identified and met and impact is measured and reported.
31. **Student Interests Reporting:** to inform the future work of the SFC more broadly, as well as that of the sector, it would be the intention to ensure a transparent and accountable reporting approach is taken. This would enable reporting on the individual projects as well the collective impact of student interests activity and importantly the approach would encourage engagement with students, recent graduates and practitioners.

Conclusion

32. As outlined above it is the intention to finalise the goals for the student interests activities in June 2023, with an internal launch of the programme to SFC to ensure colleagues are aware of the agreed plans and are supported to engage with this work. As part of this internal focus a Student Interests Action Group (name tbc) will be convened to support intra-directorate communication and engagement.
33. It would be the intention to launch this activity externally in Autumn 2023, with a primary goal of raising awareness and understanding amongst key stakeholders so as to support engagement in later stages of implementation.

Recommendation

34. The SEAL Committee is asked to note the update, provide and feedback and ask questions to support the development of this work. The following questions may support that discussion:

- Does the proposed approach support the SFC to achieve its goals?
- Do the [student interest principles](#) support collaboration and partnership?
- Will the proposed [workstreams](#) support the protection of student interests?

Further information

35. Contact: Erica Russell-Hensens, Deputy Director, Student Interests, Access & Pathways, telephone: 0131 313 6618, email: erussellhensens@sfc.ac.uk.