

Introduction

Scottish Wider Access Programme is an SFC strategic funded programme. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the call for evidence. We do appreciate our privileged position as a funded body and the opportunity we have to input to the SFC through our lead officer Anna Wallace. We trust the SFC have found the input beneficial during the COVID 19 crisis. Alerting to specific issues effecting the adult learners we work with. Especially highlighting their roles as key workers as well as students, issues over digital poverty and the particular issues over childcare. We have highlighted as a college-based programme, the work of the college teaching teams in ensuring SWAP students have been able to complete and progress during the crisis. Our partnership work with universities has enabled students to engage in a wide range of transition work to ensure they will be amongst our most successful SWAP students. Full evidence will of course be reported to SFC on the programme outcomes. We have though taken the opportunity in our response to consider how SWAP can respond further to the crisis and the impact on the people and communities we serve.

As an organisation we were forged in the 1980's recession and created to assist adults facing unemployment. We have an institutional history that we use to develop strategy to better meet the needs of adult students. We are more than happy to share that expertise of our team and our approach.

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?

In order to ensure an inclusive social and economic recovery there is a responsibility to develop and progress rapidly **fair access to education opportunities**. The pandemic will highlight and bring forward many of the challenges already facing education. Those challenges highlighted by the SFC and SDS in respect of the vision for Scotland in the 2030's will now occur at pace as we try and develop a "human future". We would suggest that even for education provision that "works well" there is a challenge to change during a public health emergency. We would reflect that our programme has made significant changes already due to the pandemic. The challenge for all of us involved in education is to strengthen that work so it prioritises an inclusive social and economic recovery.

In order to meet those challenges, SWAP partners have committed to the following 3 priorities, which we would highlight as building on areas of education that work well:

- 1. A focus on student learning and guidance.** Ensuring we learn what worked well from handling the crisis and ensuring students enrolled in 2020 are as successful as those we spent so much energy on completing at conclusion of 2019 – 2020. Moving from the short term to longer term we will commence a re-purpose of our programme model, called **curriculum for fair access**. Developing what has worked well with students during our response to the covid crisis to provide a socially just curriculum highlighting the need for robust academic standards, combined with tailored guidance and wellbeing. Using the considerable experience of our network of tutors, lecturers and widening access teams.

2. Meeting the increased demand from adults and communities we serve, due to the recession. With SFC support we have been developing community-based access models. The work highlighted as **partnerships for education**, has looked at how to develop a whole systems approach to specific local solutions. Initially looking at working with SHEP on work with parents we have extended it to consider specific community-based aspects. One example is our work in Girvan with Ayrshire College and South Ayrshire Council which has led to a community delivered access programme. Using “place” and a whole systems approach to ensure what was a unique opportunity for Girvan. Developing education opportunities close to local communities is key to providing a pipeline both for fair access and for opportunities to develop fair work. We were pleased to note the development of “place” policies in the Scottish Government response to the Advisory group on economic recovery. We will consider more examples of our community-based work, throughout our response. These are cost effective utilising local expertise and partnerships with purpose, sharing resource across organisations, both education and local authority.

3. Strengthening our partnership especially with our network of tutors, student support and widening access teams. The way we work needs to encapsulate those aims and values of an organisation focussed on social justice. The central SWAP office teams supporting and growing our teaching teams to meet considerable challenges. Outcomes are important but if we are to meet aims then the way we work is going to be just as important. Developing a wellbeing economy will require a focus on a human future and the latent human capital of our more economically deprived communities.

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.)

We would perhaps reflect that this question is best answered by considering the immediate needs of those made unemployed by COVID, and in the longer term how education can be seen as a key element to the solution for communities. Not only how education is viewed by government and employers but perhaps more importantly by those residing in communities where COVID 19 will continue to cause disadvantage. Responsibility on all of us involved in education to consider how we can work to make an impact on that priority.

SWAP has a strong partnership model in terms of our work with adults returning to education. It is work where each of our partners prioritise what they do best. Colleges closer to their communities, provide a supportive environment for those wanting to return to education. Universities by providing transformative development of adults, providing an opportunity for students to progress to degree employment opportunities. Due to the impact of austerity economics on communities we serve, there is already high demand from adults for health-related degrees, teaching, and science. We anticipate that will continue. A

challenge for SWAP will be to ensure we can broaden these opportunities so that adults faced with unemployment can be inspired to consider a broader range of education opportunities. That will be particularly the case for adults with no or few qualifications. Reflecting on previous recessions, adults with high level of education tend to be those who make the most of returning to education. The SWAP model specifically focusses on students with few qualifications. To meet the objective of an inclusive economy then it is important that there is a priority for fair access for these adults who are already disadvantaged.

We would also note the strength of Scotland already in terms of the levels of adult students from SIDM20 participating in education. That work is based on the aims of widening access and equalities. We can learn and adapt that promptly and in an agile manner to meet the needs of those most affected by the pandemic.

The widening access profession and those of us working in the area are conscious of how we can develop and ensure we deliver even in the most challenging of times. Across the board universities and college teams have more than stepped up to the mark. Further developing the widening access profession will be a statement of faith in terms of the future.

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

One of the most depressing pieces of work we have been involved in recently is providing evidence to the UK dept of education on how they are considering replacing Erasmus. SWAP as an organisation, our students, and staff have benefited greatly from our involvement with european partners. Our successful student peer network with over 1400 members was developed with European funding. We would perhaps note and would certainly be happy to participate in a Scotland specific replacement if the UK government is unable to make suitable arrangements.

We merely note that we are currently working with an organisation in Norway who have a national organisation called Norwegian Centre for International cooperation in education.

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?

We are looking to address the challenge by considering the evidence we already have from students completing their 2019 – 2020 programmes. Utilising fully what we have learned from covid crisis in terms of how students and partners have reacted. We intend to continue that learning with our new cohort of students and utilise that learning to re-purpose the programme. A key pillar of our work during the crisis is that we would maintain flexibility throughout our work, to ensure that we can support all of our students. Maintaining that

flexibility of approach will be useful in navigating the threats and opportunities, while continuing to work through the pandemic.

In terms of opportunities, as we stated in section 1, learning is the key foundation of our work. We will look to develop a **curriculum for fair access**. Providing flexibility, enhanced guidance, thought on how students develop competencies they require for progression to degree study. Focussing the work on those adults with no or few qualifications who will be most affected by the consequences of covid.

For our partnership working we will be looking to work closely with our regional colleges. Ensuring that programmes are as closely aligned to local communities as possible. For example, our recent developments of access programmes across UHI. And our development of using the access programme model with New College Lanarkshire, Strathclyde University engineering academy and South Lanarkshire Council in an initiative aimed at senior school SIMD 20 students.

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

We are conscious that we are a long-standing partnership that has worked through a number of changes to tertiary education and the education landscape more broadly. We have a specific purpose as a partnership, meeting a specific need for adults wanting to return to education. Ensuring that we maintain a focus on those adults residing in areas of economic disadvantage and who have few qualifications. There are of course many good strategic partnerships across Scottish education.

We would reflect that partnerships are successful where there is a strong focus on a curriculum area. Where they grow and develop and have the space and time to do so. We have benefitted recently from our partnership work with NHS NES Scotland and College Development Network. Highlighting widening access in health-related activity as well as more effective progression our partnership work with NES Scotland has been looking at how colleges, universities and health boards can work closer together. This is quiet but effective work, looking at pipeline of qualifications, equality, and diversity of the nursing professions and RPL. We believe similar partnership work can be done across different partnerships, professions, and businesses.

Just as procurement is highlighted as a way to create social change in an economy, the pipeline of qualifications is just as important. The focus on fair access through that pipeline will ensure Scotland benefits from the full potential of those who live here.

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

The challenges facing us will be immense over the coming years. As a key principle ensuring resources are delivered in learning and are prioritised for those communities that are most in need is a useful starting point. Using resources respectfully and understanding the benefits of a multiple partnership approach will be beneficial. If the SFC can facilitate these approaches we believe that will be positive. In terms of being an organisation focussed on implementation, we feel central government agencies can add value to our work by doing the following:

(i) Providing and sharing evidence and useful information.

(ii) Listening to organisations delivering and implementing policy. Awareness in developing strategies that implementation is key to success.

(iii) Guidance for students looking towards education as a solution. Sharing of guidance resources and approaches across education and employment agencies. Highlighting the opportunities for adults in specific sector areas for example science, breadth of health provision.

In terms of SFC funding, the following is complex, and we appreciate that fully. The delivery of access programmes benefits considerably from being a programme fully embedded within College funding. Both in terms of sustainability for the programme but also in terms of student support. In addition, education benefits such as lone parent funding have been particularly helpful and allowed students to engage earlier in their return to education. Flexibility in how colleges are funded for learning and teaching can assist development and innovation, meeting needs of students. Especially those who may struggle to access education in our conventional "scottish term time model". We would suggest that the work we have done previously with SFC, for example explaining why SWAP programmes require more credits than other programmes may be a useful model for SFC to have accountability in providing colleges with flexibility. That worked well and cost effectively in the past. As SFC look at college funding and changes to credits we would be happy to engage in implications on programmes such as SWAP.

Beneficial for organisations like SWAP to have an opportunity to engage across different sectors to learn. Awareness that while education is important that we can learn from developments in other government areas. For example, impact of policies on benefits, community, and employability development. Space and time can be given to organisations to learn. SFC can be a facilitator of this learning approach as well as being a funder.