

SFC Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education

We have restricted our comments to those bearing directly on our areas of operational expertise, and from the student-centred perspective we therefore take.

- 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?*

We would firmly support retaining the principle that access to education should be based on the ability to learn and not the ability to pay.

We also hope that support will be continued - and expanded where favourable evidence is available - for the provision of flexible and part-time provision to enable those already in work to maintain and or upgrade their existing skills to support productivity and continuing employability.

- 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.)*

Providers should accelerate their efforts to ensure that the student population more fairly represents the community at large, and removes any structural barriers to participation. That might involve continued innovation in the range of learning opportunities offered.

We would support equitable access by ensuring there is no financial detriment through reduction or withdrawal of state benefits to those accessing education or skills training. This should include provision of both child and other caring responsibilities.

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

Students from a low socio-economic background, black and minority ethnic students, students with a disability and students who are care leavers are underrepresented in outward mobility programmes: financing study or work abroad can be particularly challenging for disadvantaged groups. Students often finance their mobility through loans, as grants do not cover all costs. Greater mobility bursaries and grants should be considered to support disadvantaged students.

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?

n/a

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

Students are best served by close working between and across the different bodies in the tertiary education system, with the skills agencies and across community learning and development. That should include curriculum development, co-ordination of provision, the sharing of specialist resources and taking opportunities for user-led digital service design and transformation. SAAS has worked closely with SFC and other partners in recent months to consider issues facing students across tertiary education as a result of COVID-19 and hope these close working relationships will continue in the future.

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:

- *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*

As noted above, SAAS and Further and Higher Education policy officials within Scottish Government have worked closely with a wide range of stakeholders including SFC, colleges, universities, other providers, student representative groups and skills agencies to consider student support issues as a result of COVID-19 and had the opportunity to implement emergency support measures across tertiary education.

Further consideration should be given to the continuation of user-led digital solutions that were first implemented as a measure to support students during the height of lockdown—such as digital submission of documentation, acceptance of electronic signatures, digital outreach techniques etc. There may be other opportunities to drive service improvement and innovation through the shared, safe use of data.

Outwith the good work that SAAS and SFC have been collaborating on in regards to COVID-19, we will continue to strengthen our links for care experienced students in tertiary education especially those who are seeking to progress from Further into Higher Education. We are working together alongside key partners to review support available for students with disabilities or those with additional learning needs across both sectors.

Students from marginalised groups experience distinctive forms of harassment and discrimination, affecting the progression of their studies and leading to interruption or withdrawal from the course. Consideration should be given to the implications on tuition fees paid to institution and future funding for the student.

Taking account of students who will continue to be at risk of being infected with COVID-19 once on-campus learning resumes, continued financial support should be considered to facilitate home learning for example, buying a laptop, printer or other devices, printer ink and better Wi-Fi access.