

## **UWS Response to SFC Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in FE and HE**

### **Background**

University of the West of Scotland is keen to play an active role in supporting the SFC in the conduct of its review into the coherent provision and sustainability in further and higher education. Scottish higher education has a justifiably global reputation and UWS is proud to be a national leader and global player in a number of dimensions:

- as Scotland's most successful widening access university;
- through its provision of authentic and efficient learning journeys in embedded partnerships - particularly with schools, colleges and the NHS across the region it serves;
- as one of Scotland's most effective drivers of innovation.

UWS is a key contributor to the economic and social wellbeing of Scotland – particularly across the South and West of Scotland. Our values-based approach outlined in our UWS Strategy 2025 align closely with the ambitions of the Scottish government national performance framework.

We operate across a broad geographical footprint and are the anchor university for Renfrewshire, Ayrshire, Dumfries and Galloway and Lanarkshire – as well as serving the needs of a significant number of students from the greater Glasgow conurbation. UWS and its partners already plan at regional level to ensure we meet differing regional needs. From curriculum planning with partner colleges, to working with the NHS to provide the largest cohorts of nurses and midwives across Scotland, regional provision of Social Work graduates, the number one provider of teacher education in Scotland, a significant provider of graduate apprenticeships across multiple disciplines and educating other key workers whilst partnering with businesses large and small to upskill and reskill, we are keen to do more and have significant experience of what works, and what does not work, when doing this.

UWS' regional approach already sees us work in very close partnership with colleges across our geography – and we are Scotland's leading institution for articulation with advanced standing. We are proud of our partner colleges and the work we do with them – recent discussions have extended to include consideration of more integrated academic delivery, pathways from HN qualifications to honours degree, sharing of facilities, joint academic planning, and sharing of key services. Our partnerships with colleges help support the local skills demands from business and industry across our regions and through successive reviews by Biggar Economics have shown the regional GVA made by UWS increased to around £7 per £1 invested.

As Scotland's leading institution for widening access to higher education for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, UWS provides opportunities for learning and development for communities across Scotland. We have highly-developed expertise in supporting students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in post-secondary education and we commend to the SFC review the experience and evidence of UWS in this domain.

UWS' work in applied research and innovation is a driver of enterprise and growth regionally and globally. With 33 live projects, UWS is Scotland's leading provider of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships and as of 1 August 2020 is among the top 3 in the UK. The University carries out research with international impact across a broad range of disciplines; driving changes in criminal justice, the rights of women, dementia care, and, demonstrating

responsiveness, developing non-contact thermometers to halt the advance of covid-19 and has created several spin out companies.

The University will play a central role and is committed to providing the flexible, responsive and applied learning and skills outlined in UWS Strategy 2025; that is what UWS has been doing since it was formed as Paisley College in 1897, but we are ambitious to achieve more.

## **Overview**

UWS welcomes that the SFC opened the call for evidence by acknowledging the strength of the higher and further education offer in Scotland – noting this strength is across learning and teaching, innovation, and research. The review needs to recognise the incredible strength that the differing parts of the FE and HE landscape across Scotland bring to deliver impact and not adopt a deficit-model approach. There will always be room for improvement, however the current system combines to deliver world-class outcomes for Scotland and any future development needs to preserve and protect some fundamental elements that enable that to continue.

UWS believe there are a number cornerstones to ensuring the global strength and resilience of Scottish higher education:

- The institutional autonomy of Scotland's universities with a strong and clear relationship directly with the Scottish Funding Council
- A funding model that is stable and allows institutions to plan for the medium and long term
- All universities should deliver learning, teaching, research and innovation – it is this breadth of activity, underpinning learning and teaching with the creation of new knowledge, which is fundamental and makes strong universities – any shift in policy or funding that intentionally or unintentionally polarised activity would be detrimental.

There remains significant scope for creative thinking aligned to the review's objectives.

### *Immediate priorities following covid-19 and EU exit transition*

In the short term, with a focus on recovery from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and dealing with the EU exit transition, SFC has moved rapidly to ensure institutions are secure in their core SFC funding for teaching and research, which is very welcome; and the Scottish Government has signalled its intention to retain the funding currently associated with EU students within the HE sector. However the immediate environment is one that is going to be significantly different – and universities across Scotland have already made rapid adjustments on considerable scale to their operating models.

The Scottish higher education system has suffered from being structurally underfunded in both learning and teaching, and research for some time. This has been consistently shown in Audit Scotland reports and annual TRAC surveys; the funding received to teach Scottish/EU students and to conduct research does not meet the full economic cost of delivery. The short- and long-term model for higher education in Scotland must be based upon a sustainable funding model for these core functions.

It is necessary to recognise that the rapid pivot to hybrid learning and micro-credentialing of provision has a considerable cost in both time and resources; successful flexible learning is not a cheap alternative to the historic model of on-campus delivery, and this must be recognised in any funding model. There will always be a requirement to maintain face to

face delivery in many subjects, where on-line learning will not be a sufficient to enable practice based learning and verify learning outcomes, but there is no doubt the use of technology has a significant role to play in embedding deep learning.

In the short term there has, and will continue to be, significant investment required to implement the new models and to support students learning in initially unfamiliar modes. We will need to adapt approaches to student engagement to support student retention, develop whole new sets of learning materials, and contest with the very real concerns on digital literacy and digital poverty for students accessing or returning to education. Universities will need to support and develop their staff through this period of considerable change.

There is a need for structural reform of the curriculum. UWS will draw on its experience as one of Scotland's leading providers of higher education under the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme, to allow far more chunking of the curriculum and enabling of micro-credentials. It may however, be timely to consider how a new mapping of the Scottish Qualification Framework could be more complimentary to other national and international frameworks.

It is critical to get these fundamentals right in the coming weeks and months to set solid foundations for the future health of HE and FE in Scotland.

### *Longer-term health of tertiary education in Scotland*

The FE and HE institutions that make up the tertiary landscape in Scotland have regularly adapted to meet changing government and societal priorities. The University of the West of Scotland has delivered: as Scotland's most prolific widening access university with over 48% of entrants from Scotland's poorest communities (MD40), as the largest provider of articulation with advanced standing offering more than 1200 student per year an efficient learner journey to degree outcomes, or through delivering knowledge transfer partnerships with over 30 companies in 2020, based on world-class research across every unit of assessment.

There are a number of core components necessary to support the long-term success of tertiary education in Scotland and to maintain and increase the contribution Scotland's colleges and universities make to Scotland and the world.

- Sustainable funding, focusing on priorities
- Clear, simple regulatory environment
- Mutually beneficial partnerships of equals

The current funding model is unsustainable due to structural underfunding of learning and teaching, and research, the impact of short-term annual awards makes strategic planning difficult, and the absence of real value capital funding is impacting on the quality of the physical learning environment leaving estates and critical IT infrastructures in a challenging state. The capacity to make long-term investments in a green, sustainable physical and digital infrastructure is a significant challenge across the sector. The future funding model must be evidence-based and reflect the real cost of delivery of learning and teaching, and research.

A longer-term funding award would support institutional creativity, which would promote student and employer confidence, and allow institutions to be bolder in their delivery. The

funding model should be revised to celebrate excellence where it is displayed and to be more adaptable to support the successful delivery of key Scottish government priorities such as widening access and success, enhancing regional economic growth and delivering efficient learner journeys. Any new funding model for Scottish HE should recognise that the market sets the supply and demand conditions. A desire to change the pattern of demand, led by government policy, requires appropriate additional level of investment to succeed.

The delivery against these objectives could be eased through the simplification of a currently over-burdensome regulatory framework, with heavy data and reporting requirements, and overly-complex sector-body inter-relationships as well as multiple streams of initiative funding do not always fully appreciate the complexity of institutional offers and could be mainstreamed or simplified. There is positive work ongoing with SFC to revise the Outcome Agreement process, but the review should consider the cost and efficiency of the current regulatory and enterprise agencies. We very strongly believe adding additional layers of reporting or regional oversight would not help deliver improvement and would be a detriment to institutional performance and reputation.

UWS is a key regional player and has plans in place to strengthen its contribution, through continuing to enhance its embedded partnerships with colleges and other public and private sector organisations. The partnerships are dynamic and vary according to region to meet the partners and areas need. In Ayrshire we are working closely with all three local authorities to support the Ayrshire Growth Deal and the new Regional Economic Strategy and are working in very close partnership with Ayrshire College on a range of initiatives; In Renfrewshire we are active participants in the Regional Economic Strategy and partner West College Scotland, including shared facility access in this last year; in Lanarkshire we have been working extremely closely with South Lanarkshire Council to develop our new Campus and have outstanding partnerships with New College Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire College; in Dumfries we have exceptionally strong working relationships with Dumfries and Galloway College and are engaged in discussion on how we develop that partnership for the benefit of the Region. Dumfries provides an interesting case study and learning around collaborative working – there are elements of the historical approach to the shared campus location in Dumfries that could be improved, including the burdensome multi-outcome agreement approach.

What all of our strategic partnerships – with colleges, NHS, local authorities, business and industry- support is the delivery of a streamlined, supported learner journey delivering skills and opportunities across the South and West of Scotland to meet the unique needs of these diverse communities.

The introductory text above sets out some high level responses from a UWS perspective, and our brief answers to the questions below are intended to give an indicative early position. The University would be pleased to expand on any of the points made and to be involved in further detailed discussion as the review proceeds.

- 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?**

Scottish HE institutions are world-renowned and trusted, and Scotland is seen as a safe and welcoming place. Through the departure from the EU and the recovery from the covid-19 pandemic, universities in Scotland can be a symbol of this secure, reliable force.

There are three fundamentals required to preserve the contribution Scottish universities make:

- Appropriately fund key economic and social priorities
- Stability of funding and longer term horizons
- Institutional autonomy must be maintained to achieve continued success

In challenging economic times, the government will need to make difficult funding decisions. Investment in higher education is a down-payment on future economic growth, through supporting and empowering individuals to succeed and through the economic and social benefits from investment in university research and development. Successive studies (TRAC, Audit Scotland) have shown that structural underfunding for learning and teaching, and research place institutions in peril – and with that, risk individuals opportunities. The review should consider ways to increase funding for key priorities such as widening access, articulation and innovation.

Short-term funding settlements encourage conservative behaviour and limit creativity. Unstable funding models, like that implemented in England, promote avarice and uncertainty. Returning to multi-year funding settlements, where adjustments to funding can be phased in over time to reflect performance on key priorities, would enable greater stability in university funding but without the stasis caused by annual funding settlements.

Increased funding for priorities and multi-year settlements underpin the success of strong, autonomous institutions appropriately delivering against the institutions missions and vision, enabling institutions to invest in priorities and to take calculated risks to deliver exciting innovation.

Scottish institutions are good at planning and adapting portfolios to meet changing demand of employers and students. For UWS this means adapting to different regional challenges and the varying portfolios of our various campuses illustrates this. We believe it is important for institutions to retain the ability to autonomously plan for long term portfolio development and not to be restricted in the range of subjects they are able to offer.

- 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.)**

The review should focus on the collective, national contribution of colleges and universities – and on ensuring a new regulatory and funding model enables this effective, creative, collaborative contribution. This approach – enabling autonomous

institutions to deliver against their mission and vision – positively frames the distinctive, diverse contributions rather than considering a deficit-model of actions to stop.

Increasing flexibility in the funding and regulatory model can allow institutions to develop and deliver more dynamic teaching methods, can lift the barriers to greater partnership between colleges, universities, NHS, businesses and third sector groups. A more flexible funding model could enable the development of more widespread accelerated degree programmes to sit alongside the current four year honours degree approach, which requires review. With greater numbers of people in the population seeking new educational qualifications as workforce demands change, universities are ready to support government investment in the training and development of displaced workers and those at the early stage of their careers. With over 70% of the UWS population classified as mature learners, UWS is ideally to expand its curriculum and offer new qualifications at Certificate, Diploma or Degree level, or even smaller units, provided the funding model can support this. The flexibility should provide greater opportunities for accumulation of modular learning through one or multiple partners, building learning into smaller chunks and enabling micro credentials.

A more adaptable, multi-layered approach to credit accumulations where students can eschew typical linear study progression (through SCQF levels, from college to university) and can select their study path with greater individualisation, could support the changing nature of work and careers, the rise of the gig economy, and the affordances of technology, and mirror trends evident across Australia, New Zealand and parts of Europe.

The current approach and range of options within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework at level 7 is an area that the review may wish to consider as it appears there is scope for duplication and inefficiency in the learner journey at this stage.

All universities must remain research active, though the funding and regulatory environment should reflect the distinctive nature, geographical location and societal contribution of research relevant to each institution. The distributed geographical locations of universities is a significant national resource to utilise research outcomes to underpin regional economic growth by attracting R&D talent (e.g. KTPs, industrial PhD projects), by proactively developing student start-ups or social enterprises in relevant disciplines as a key learning outcome, maintaining a pipeline of niche spin-out developments, and attracting global players to collaborate with universities alongside Scottish SMEs.

At UWS, we will continue to deliver excellent, relevant and purposeful research which will underpin strategic growth.

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

Scottish universities are importers and exporters of global talent – both through learning and teaching and through research and innovation.

Universities have a role to play in continuing to offer competitive, high quality, attractive programmes to attract students, staff and researchers from overseas, and require government support to ensure capable, contributing graduates from Scotland, the EU and overseas are enabled to remain in Scotland post-qualification to contribute to the diversity and capacity of Scotland.

In research and innovation, Scotland and the UK have been disproportionately successful in securing research funding in partnership through the Horizon 2020 fund and other EU-projects. These partnerships can sustain but require government support to enable engagement in future EU funding schemes or for government to financially support ambitious, impactful funding pots to draw talent into Scotland.

UWS have also contributed to social and economic growth through engagement in city and regional deals and through the delivery of graduate apprenticeships, underpinned by EU regional development and social funding. It is critical that government maintain their commitment to initiatives with social good, despite funding changes.

Universities global contribution, in direct contribution to new knowledge and indirectly as partners for Scottish businesses to reach international markets, is predicated on the creation of a sustainable SFC funding model which delivers an appropriate unit of resource for delivery of teaching and adequate funding to reflect the full economic cost of research and innovation.

**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?**

Scottish universities were already facing significant risks as a result of exit from the EU in 2021 and the impact of the covid-19 pandemic exacerbates and amplifies these risks.

The risk of loss of EU and non-EU students significantly reduces the vibrancy and diversity of Scottish university communities, disabling some of the best and the brightest from other territories to study at our wonderful universities, and places financial risk on institutions linked with the current funding model.

These changes also allow for reflection on the collective objectives for higher education in Scotland. UWS would suggest that the following opportunities could be capitalised upon:

- Reduction in EU students supports creation of a sustainable funding model: there is limited evidence of the demand from suitably qualified Scottish students for the priority subjects to replace the demand currently met by EU students. This provides an opportunity to retain the funding within HE but review the number of places offered for study. This would be a welcome response to the Audit Scotland finding of structural underfunding for core functions and recognition the cost of delivery of key priorities.
- Rethink of the delivery model: Increasing flexibility in the funding and regulatory model can allow institutions to develop and deliver more dynamic teaching methods, can lift the barriers preventing greater partnership between colleges and universities and NHS, businesses and 3rd sector groups. A more flexible funding model can enable the development of widespread accelerated degree programmes (less than four years to honours), greater opportunities for accumulation of modular learning through one or multiple partners, and can facilitate a refreshed, appropriately financially supported lifelong learning model.
- Reimagining fragmented research and innovation structures: building on the strengths and impact of research pooling in Scotland, there is an opportunity to consolidate cross-disciplinary activities in research pooling and innovation centres to align efforts towards national economic and social recovery.
- Globally brokered partnerships: Universities in Scotland proudly 'welcome the world' and have worked in partnership with government through Connected Scotland to

build the Scottish global network. Aligning Scottish universities global partnerships with Scottish government strategic partner nations will help consolidate existing strengths (e.g. deep links with India) and focus investment in developing new, agreed partnerships.

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

As outlined in the overview, UWS believes partnerships function most effectively as mutually beneficial partnerships of equals, and this is exemplified in our current partnerships with colleges, NHS, primary and secondary schools and local authorities so support social work provision in the South and West regions.

UWS is a proud product of strategic mergers, and since its inception in 1897 has led various successful merger processes most significantly since the early 1990s including Craigie College, Bell College and nursing provision across the South and West of Scotland. However, from this experience we also know that mergers are expensive and time consuming - UWS is aware that enforced structural changes have the potential to divert attention from delivery of an institution's core business and purpose - and it is our experience that all parties need to be willing participants for them to be successful. It can be many years before the benefits are realised, and those are not generally linked to cost or efficiency.

Strategic alignment and partnership approach to meet the specific needs is more powerful than sweeping structural change. As outlined in the introduction, UWS is developing deeper, more embedded partnerships with our eight partner colleges – including sharing of spaces and services, alignment of curriculum – but without costly governance changes.

This is equally true in cross-university partnerships, where the distinctive contributions each institution provides is recognised. There are effective examples of greater strength delivered through selective research pooling, through sharing of resources and equipment in projects, and in strategic collaborations. Strengthening the Scottish-wide research talent pool in this way ensures that research and innovation is present across each institution and crucially can be delivered in diverse communities across Scotland.

**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**

The Scottish Funding Council should recognise its opportunity and responsibility to be bold. There are a series of clear objectives for universities in Scotland – to deliver opportunities for widening access, to shape effective efficient learner journeys, and for universities to be social and economic anchors in their regions. A revised funding model should be developed to recognise and enable achievement of these ambitions. Scarce resources should not be diverted to support additional layers of reporting – rather than the creation of additional boards or agencies the focus should be on ensuring an efficient and clearly understood relationship directly between the SFC and institutions.



- **Particular areas of collaboration between agencies that would best support the sectors' contributions.**

The sectors' contribution is most effective where autonomous institutions deal with one funding and regulatory body (Scottish Funding Council). No additional layers of agency reporting should be added – in fact the move should be to make agencies more efficient to allow investment of resources to be focused on the frontline delivery of higher and further education.

- **Adaptations to SFC's funding and accountability frameworks to promote agile and collaborative action by the sectors to build Scotland's recovery**

The delivery against these objectives could be eased through the simplification of a currently over-burdensome regulatory and reporting framework, with heavy data and reporting requirements, and overly-complex sector-body inter-relationships. There is positive work ongoing with SFC to revise the Outcome Agreement process, but the review could consider the cost and efficiency of the current regulatory and enterprise agencies.

- **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**

As Scotland's leading institutions for widening access to higher education for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, UWS provides opportunities for learning and development from communities across Scotland. However, the funding model which underpins this is not sustainable and the essential additional funding through the Widening Access and Retention Fund is insufficient. This review is an opportunity for the SFC to be bold and to redraw the funding model to move away from strategic initiative funding and recognise the true cost of delivery of Scottish government key priorities, and to fully-fund these activities.

- **What support SFC and government could give institutions to adapt to a changed environment**

The Scottish higher education system has suffered from being structurally underfunded in both learning and teaching, and research. As consistently shown in Audit Scotland reports and annual TRAC surveys, the funding received to teach Scottish/EU students and to conduct research does not meet the full economic cost of delivery. The short- and long-term model for tertiary education in Scotland must be based upon a sustainable funding model for these core functions.

Clearer national and regional data to underpin national planning efforts supported by multi-year funding would allow institutions to plan more effectively and to have a shared understanding of specific areas of need. This would ideally identify future needs at various SCQF levels, as well as discipline spread. Scotland's institutions already react to changing operating environments, and this is evident through the Covid-19 pandemic – however this would also require certain elements of flexible funding alongside a core multi-year funding model.

For this to work we require an agile system that is not overly complicated with separate multi-agency drivers and decision making point.