



Thursday, 26 March 2020

John Swinney MSP  
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills  
The Scottish Government  
St Andrews House  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

Ref: SS/MM  
Direct: 07703 974675

Dear Deputy First Minister,

### **Business Continuity Planning – COVID-19**

The college sector is contending with issues of significant magnitude, implementing business continuity measures whilst seeking to continue to offer a remote service to 11,000 staff and 265,000 learners, including learning and teaching, support – financial and for wellbeing – and assessment.

The college sector is an essential civic anchor the length and breadth of Scotland. We would like to offer our buildings for hub use and specific social support, mini-buses for home deliveries, supporting food banks, and college cars to the NHS and Police. In addition, we have qualified students (and alumni) and expert staff in a broad range of practical subjects who could be put to use during this crisis, including health and social care, childcare, and uniformed services.

The college sector quickly mobilised all its resources to respond to the crisis, and we have welcomed the opportunities to discuss urgent matters arising with the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, Richard Lochhead MSP, his officials and with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

We are also holding regular dialogue with Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), as well as with SFC. We have valued engagement with the Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills, Jamie Hepburn MSP, on PACE discussions.

We need your personal help as our Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for all three agencies.

We need swift clarity and assurance on the following:

#### **Funding Guarantees**

The SFC has recently offered a welcome assurance on cash flows and some aspects of financial consideration, though there are additional queries which remain outstanding. The college sector urgently requires similar guarantees from SDS, and assurance that colleges, and their local

authority and school partners, will not be penalised if they are unable to complete their full recruitment or milestone achievement targets for apprentices.

Alongside that, we would ask too that support is quickly put in place to ensure employers do not lay off apprentices (though we are aware that such action is already taking place). To date, we have been advised by SDS that they are in discussions with Scottish Government on these matters.

### **College Learners' Certifications**

The sector is making significant progress in constructive dialogue with SQA (and other awarding bodies) about assessment and certification. We are very aware that we are a unique part of the Scottish skills system in not, thus far, being able to offer precise clarification to our students (SQA has done so for schools, as have individual universities). We ask for the adoption of a flexible approach which will enable college students who are seeking to progress – onto other higher-level college courses, university courses or into employment – to be assured that they will receive certifications to allow them to continue their journeys. We believe that college learners should receive the same clarity and assurance as has been offered by other parts of the wider skills system, and that the same degree of flexibility should be offered to ensure progression where appropriate. We are delighted with the constructive approach adopted by SQA and would hope that the same degree of flexibility should be offered to ensure progression where appropriate.

### **Support for Vulnerable Students**

Colleges provide support for a significant number of vulnerable students, both financial and in relation to their health and wellbeing. It is critical that we have full and swift clarity from the Scottish Government and its agencies on the matters raised in this communication to ensure that these individuals, and our wider college community, are fully supported at this uncertain time.

### **Free Broadband**

College leaders have been particularly exposed to the barriers in the current enterprise and skills system which prevent or delay effective operation. This includes the different types of funding arrangements which we have with providers, primarily SFC and SDS; the different relationships with various awarding bodies, which has delayed the offer of clarity and assurance to our student population.

Given that our entire skills system is now operating remotely with significant risk of dislocation for vulnerable and hardship students, we ask the Scottish Government to consider providing free broadband for students and staff to assist this significant digital expansion and to accelerate the broadband capacities and speeds across the country.

In conclusion, the college sector has responded exceptionally well to this crisis – it has agilely pivoted its entire approach to learning and teaching over a matter of days to remote delivery. We remain civic anchors at the heart of our communities and the Scottish economy.



We stand ready to support the Scottish Government and civic Scotland in response to this crisis.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Shona Struthers' with a horizontal line underneath.

Shona Struthers  
Chief Executive