



Saturday, 30 May 2020

Richard Lochhead MSP
Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science
Scottish Government
St Andrews House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Ref: SS/WM
Direct: 07703 974675

Dear Minister,

Collaborative response to COVID-19 challenges

Many thanks for participating in a constructive discussion with the College Principals' Group (CPG), on 26 May 2020, on the Scottish Government's route map out of the COVID-19 pandemic and the critical role to be played by the college sector in supporting economic and social recovery.

We believe that regular dialogue and collective working between the Scottish Government, its agencies and the college sector is vital to allow us all to respond swiftly to the sector-specific COVID-19 issues, and to agree how best to position colleges at the heart of economic recovery. We have been pleased with the engagement with you, other ministers, and Scottish Government officials and would seek your commitment that this continues and, indeed, that we work more closely on the co-creation of solutions to the skills needs of the post-COVID landscape.

This week's joint statement with Scottish Government, Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland – and the positive media coverage it generated – on the vital message of colleges and universities very much being open for business for the new academic year, demonstrates the value in working closely together.

Crucial role of colleges supporting Scotland's communities and economy

We appreciate your endorsement in this week's *Tes Scotland*, of the value of Scotland's colleges; of the crucial role we play in supporting communities and our economy, responding flexibly to the skills demands of regions, businesses and communities. We are confident that the college sector is ideally placed to support economic recovery across Scotland – through the provision of employability skills, retraining and upskilling in the coming months and years, and by supporting PACE activity in response to redundancy and company closure.

Economic commentators suggest that there is likely to be a deep and long-running dip in economic output, with ensuing impact on employment, poverty, and social exclusion. We believe that the response from Government needs to be ambitious in response to the potential scale of this economic downturn; and that a wide range of programmes and support will be needed to meet the needs of a very diverse group of people. Those with high skills levels and good work experience; those with poor literacy and numeracy; those with little or no work experience; those ready for work; and those needing more support and guidance.

Colleges are ideally placed to support this critical social justice agenda, in partnership with others. But to do this effectively, they need investment; they need flexibilities in current programmes; they need to have the ability to create new programmes to support emerging skills needs; and they need sufficient time for planning and preparation for on-line delivery in August 2020. Funding is urgently required for technology, building modifications, and support for students to buy equipment to study online. The whole of the next academic year will require to be adapted to support blended learning and social distancing on campuses.

College and university support package

You have previously outlined the possibility of a financial recovery package for colleges and universities and we are aware of the recent £75m investment in HE research. We understand that a joint SFC/US financial recovery group has been established to support the sustainability of Scotland's universities. We ask that a similar group be established for Scotland's colleges to allow us to work together on the identification of appropriate financial support for the college sector.

You are aware that the sector is forecasting an approximate **£100 million** loss of income during this current and next academic years. Our expectation is that this will equate to a substantial deficit across the sector, with significant negative impact on the ability of colleges to play their full role in social and economic recovery and renewal. It is a matter of urgency that the sector is provided with financial assistance.

Scottish Government support

At last week's CPG meeting, you committed to write to your ministerial colleagues to champion the critical role of the college sector in the national response to COVID recovery; and to the CEOs of relevant agencies (Scottish Funding Council, Skills Development Scotland, Scottish Qualifications Authority) to encourage collaborative working to secure resolution to those critical matters which remain outstanding. Despite regular engagement with these agencies, we are still waiting – ten weeks into lockdown – for answers to many fundamental questions which will impact significantly on institutional sustainability and sectoral reputation. These include reassurances on contractual payments to colleges for



Foundation and Modern Apprentices and on certification outcomes for many learners. These matters are now urgent – we believe your intervention will be helpful in securing resolution.

As we have previously pledged, the college sector is committed to working collectively with the wider tertiary skills system to create sustainable success for communities across Scotland. We remain keen to play our full part in supporting the Scottish Government and our communities to rebuild and reinvigorate our economy and our society. We need to be able to offer hope – to those leaving school, to those being made redundant and to those who are long-term unemployed.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

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

Shona Struthers
Chief Executive

CC: John Swinney, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills
Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture
Kate Forbes, Cabinet Secretary for Finance
Jamie Hepburn, Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills