

SFC Call for Evidence

NUS Scotland Response

Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education

The National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland represents over 500,000 students and apprentices through our member college and university student associations. NUS Scotland is a federation of over 60 students' associations in Scotland with member associations stretching from the borders to the highlands. We work to promote, defend and extend the rights of students and apprentices in Scotland.

INTRODUCTION

NUS Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this review and recognises the unique challenges facing the education sector as a result of the current global pandemic. We understand the need for this review to be conducted as a matter of urgency, however we also welcome assurances that this is not the final opportunity to submit evidence, and believe it is critical that whatever conclusions the review reaches have wide support within the tertiary education sector. The short three-week timescale of the initial call for evidence is unfortunate. We note the Scottish Government's advice that a 12-week consultation period is best practice. We recognise the unprecedented circumstances, but believe that the short nature of this consultation has impinged on our ability to properly consult with and reflect the views of our members. As such, we would strongly urge the SFC to consult students.

This submission highlights some of the key points we urge the SFC to consider. We have tried to identify areas in order of the questions set out in the call for evidence, however a number of areas cross over more than one question, so we have not considered the questions one by one.

STRENGTHENING STUDENTS' ASSOCIATIONS

Students' associations are central to supporting and advocating for students - especially now as we navigate the impacts of COVID-19 and prioritise student experience and wellbeing. Day-to-day students' associations play a crucial role in representing and supporting students, driving national policy at the local level on their campuses, ensuring the quality of standards at their colleges and university, and much more.

It is crucial that the Scottish Government and our institutions continue to recognise the key role they play in delivering a strong student experience and student voice at institutions across Scotland and ensure that they are properly resourced.

Going forward, NUS Scotland strongly believes institutions have a duty to involve students' associations in any conversations on financial sustainability and to continue to recognise the crucial role that they have in supporting students through the Covid-19 outbreak.

SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC INVESTMENT

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic or the impacts of Brexit, colleges¹ and universities² alike faced significant financial challenges. Due to their increased reliance on marketized international fee income, and the trend of real-terms declining public investment, Universities now potentially face substantial financial losses in light of Covid-19. In 2020-21 it is estimated that Scottish Universities face an operating deficit of between £384 million and £651 million³. Meanwhile, it is estimated that colleges could lose £70 million in income next year⁴.

Our further and higher education systems are at risk and it is a generation of students who will pay the price unless we see public investment from the Scottish and UK governments for those institutions facing financial hardship.

In the long-term, the Scottish Government must ensure adequate public investment for our institutions so that they are safeguarded from economic shocks. We welcome the Scottish Government ruling out the introduction of tuition fees for Scottish undergraduate students in light of the current financial circumstances facing the sector

PROTECTING TEACHING, COURSES AND SUPPORT SERVICES

NUS Scotland recognises the clear need to protect teaching and the quality of courses in our institutions and calls for protections to be placed on retention of staff who teach and support students every day. **NUS Scotland believes that it is fundamental that the Scottish and UK governments provide the funds necessary to protect both academic and support staff jobs, the wide variety of courses on offer at our institutions, and first-class student services.**

WELCOMING OUR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

NUS Scotland has long called for an end to the exorbitant fees faced by international students. International students' pay eye watering high costs for their courses and accommodation, on top of visa costs, charges for healthcare and more. While we recognise the Scottish Government's recent announcement that EU students will be charged tuition fees is ultimately a result of Brexit, it is bitterly disappointing that yet more students will be paying for their education.

¹ [Audit Scotland Report on Scotland's Colleges 2019](#)

² [Audit Scotland Report on Finances of Scottish Universities](#)

³ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – Further and Higher Education Sustainability Plan](#)

⁴ [Scottish Budget- Colleges Welcome Funding Increase](#)

Viewing international students as a 'lucrative' income stream for our institutions is shameful and we reject the marketisation of the education system. International students are part of the fabric of our communities and positively contribute immeasurably to our society. **Governments, institutions, and society must ensure that Scotland is welcoming and inviting place to study and live.**

Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ programmes have boosted the education sector's ability to collaborate with EU partners for research projects, attracting global talent to the UK and giving our students invaluable experiences internationally. The funding platforms that the EU provides allow for all institutions to access the funding that they need and students to study abroad at low cost. Since 2014, UK-based researchers coordinated one in six Horizon 2020 research projects. **NUS Scotland notes the importance of international programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 and the recognises the benefits this brings to Scottish students and institutions- with Brexit fast approaching a suitable alternative or continued participation in these programmes must be found.**

ADEQUATE COST-OF-LIVING SUPPORT FOR SCOTLAND'S STUDENTS

We welcome that the Scottish Government has made over £16 million available to Scotland's students – for emergency hardship funds and summer support. We also welcome the recently-announced £5 million package of support to address digital poverty. **In the short term, the Scottish Government and its agencies must monitor student-demand, and continue to make emergency funds available to ensure that no student faces destitution.**

NUS Scotland has long argued for further improvements to be made to Scotland's cost-of-living support package on offer to students – especially those from the poorest backgrounds. The Covid-19 pandemic and associated disruption makes further improvements to cost-of-living support on offer to students in Scotland all the more urgent. The independent review of student support, *A New Social Contract for Students*⁵, assumes that cost-of-living support can be augmented with up to ten hours of work. The reality is that many students will work far more than ten-hours a week to make ends meet. We remain concerned that the economic damage caused by Covid-19 will reduce the availability of part-time work for students. In our recent survey (conducted in March/April) NUS Scotland found that 68 per cent of students in Scotland were concerned about their ability to manage financially⁶.

NUS Scotland believes that the Scottish Government must revisit and improve the package of support on offer to Scotland's learners, especially those from the poorest backgrounds, ensuring that no student faces financial hardship, and that Scotland's excellent progress on widening access is not undermined.

⁵ [Independent Review Student Financial Support Scotland](#)

⁶ [Coronavirus and Students Survey- Scotland's Results](#)

SUPPORTING APPRENTICES

Apprentices in Scotland make up a large group of further education students. We have long called for greater support to be offered to these apprentices and while there is scope for the government to ensure that apprentices are fairly paid through their procurement rules there are also many other barriers that face apprentices such as the cost of tools and equipment falling heavily on the apprentice themselves rather than institutions and employers. **NUS Scotland strongly believes that apprenticeships should be fully resourced, and these costs met by the Scottish Government.**

NUS Scotland also recognises the importance of student support from access to careers services, sport and wellbeing, mental health support, etc. **We believe that this support should include apprentices and be available to all students regardless of age and mode of study.**

In addition, a recent report by the National Society of Apprentices⁷ found challenges with apprentices not receiving off the job training in colleges. Apprentices regularly raise the difficulty of getting time off to learn from their employers. By returning to day or block release we can make sure that apprentices get a quality education in colleges, delivering both real work and a real education.

ENSURING STUDENT SAFETY

NUS Scotland have welcomed the collaborative approach with the Scottish Government and its agencies throughout the pandemic and particularly as colleges and universities look to re-open. In the immediate term institutions should make readily available hand sanitizer and PPE where appropriate to students, along with sign posting students to the latest government advice.

An over-riding priority for NUS Scotland, and students' associations across Scotland, is safety for our students and staff. A safe return to campus means low-transmission rates, rigorous hygiene measures, comprehensive testing, face coverings, and adequate protection for vulnerable students to learn safely.

WIDENING ACCESS IN SCOTLAND'S INSTITUTIONS

Excellent progress has been made in widening access to our universities – 15.9 per cent of Scottish-domiciled entrants to full-time first degrees in academic year 2018/19 were from the 20 per cent most disadvantaged areas. **We welcome that Scotland's universities have committed to ensuring that Covid-19 does not derail further progress⁸.**

⁷ [National Society of Apprentices Covid-19 Report](#)

⁸ [COVID-19 will not derail universities' progress on widening access](#)

The full implications of the SQA's process of moderation of results on widening access are not yet known. SQA figures showed that the Higher pass rate for pupils from the most deprived backgrounds was reduced by 15.2 percentage points⁹, compared to 6.9 percentage points for the wealthiest pupils. While we recognise that the proportion of SIMD20 students admitted to Scottish universities increased marginally on results day¹⁰, many students may have lost out on their desired course because of the moderation process. **We urge the Scottish Government and its agencies to redress this unfair treatment as a matter of urgency and support these students to pursue their preferred path based on their ability, not their background or school's previous performance.**

SUPPORT FOR GRADUATES

Students entering the job market this year are going to be confronted with a contracted job market and reduced opportunities through no fault of their own. **Given the scale of the economic disruption caused to the economy and the jobs market by Covid-19, it is crucial that the Scottish Government and its agencies provide opportunities for education leavers, and those seeking to re-skill, irrespective of their age. NUS Scotland is calling for grant-support for education leavers so that they can develop their skills when trying to find work.**

THE LEARNER JOURNEY

The learner journey must remain a focus when thinking about the different routes into education. Making opportunities for progression and movement within institutions, and the attainment and success of students a priority. Schools, colleges and universities should work in partnership, fostering links to support the whole student learning experience. Some students enter further and higher education through vocational training, apprenticeships and work-based learning opportunities and so recognising that each student learning journey will be unique to them is important. **NUS Scotland believes that measures must remain in place to ensure the quality of experiences for those who enter and exit at different points and stages.**

QUALITY OF THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE

While universities and colleges use different frameworks, along with the associated processes to monitor, to assure and to enhance the learning experience, it is crucial that the place of student voice is protected.

The Quality Enhancement Framework for Universities offers an opportunity for self-reflection and partnership working which NUS believes we must continue to maintain, whilst also achieving progression within areas that are known challenges to the sector (such as attainment gaps and gender imbalances).

⁹ [SQA 2020 Alternative Certification Model: Equality Impact Assessment](#)

¹⁰ UCAS: Increase in number of Scottish students accepted into university on results day

When it comes to reporting and data gathering we need to ensure that the right data is reviewed to ensure progression and institutional performance. NUS Scotland welcomes the focus on enhancing the quality of the student experience and equalities in the institutions Key Performance Indicators.

SUPPORTING A GREEN RECOVERY

The climate emergency remains one of the most significant challenges facing the education sector and society in general. With an opportunity to build a fairer, greener, more equal society the education system can, and must, play a pivotal role in helping transition society towards a net-zero future.

NUS Scotland is calling for net zero emissions in higher education by 2030, ensuring that the sustainable development goals are embedded into education (including the curricula), research, leadership, operations, administration, engagement and knowledge exchange. Given the nature of this emergency NUS Scotland believes that institutions should be reporting annually on progress of sustainability and climate change strategy.

NUS Scotland hopes this submission is helpful to the SFC in the review. We look forward to contributing further as the review progresses and are keen to ensure that students views are heard during this consultation. We would also be pleased to expand further on any issue referred to in our submission.

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