

December 2020

SFC Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability

In June 2020, the Scottish Government called on the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to undertake a review considering how best the SFC and the sector can fulfil its mission in securing coherent provision in post-16 education.

The review has four main objectives:

1. To consider how best to achieve coherence and sustainability in the delivery of further and higher education during the COVID-19 crisis, EU exit transition, and beyond, while maintaining and enhancing quality.
2. To ensure the sectors can address the outcomes we need to achieve in Scotland.
3. To propose changes needed to SFC's funding, operations, and accountability frameworks in order to respond effectively to new challenges and opportunities.
4. To provide advice, where appropriate, to Scottish Ministers on relevant changes to policy, funding and accountability frameworks for tertiary education and research in Scotland.

There are three phases to the review: phase one was from June to October 2020, phase two from November 2020 until February 2021, and phase three will run until summer 2021.



Since the launch of the review, sparqs has worked to support student engagement in the review, including sessions at our summer training events 'That's Quality' and our respective network meetings for student officers and students' association staff, NEON and SESN. We have also continued to engage directly with the SFC to ensure that students can have a key role throughout the review process.

In August 2020, SFC put out a call for evidence across the sector, inviting institutions, associations and agencies, as well as other relevant stakeholders, to respond, highlighting what they thought the review should explore further. Over 100 responses were submitted, which have gone on to inform the phase one report.

sparqs submitted to the call for evidence and you can read our [response](#), as well as [NUS Scotland's](#). Both organisations were also involved in a roundtable discussion hosted by SFC, along with three student officers from institutions across Scotland, to further discuss what themes or topics will matter to students most.



Phase One Report

On 20th October 2020, the SFC published their Phase One Report of the Review, '*Coherence and Sustainability: A review of Scotland's Colleges and Universities Phase One Report: Insights to Develop Further.*' The report, along with supporting documentation, can be found on the [SFC website](#).

The report states that 2020-22 will be regarded as "Emergency Years" and the SFC plans to reduce "unnecessary bureaucracy", focusing on absolute priorities to ensure continued compliance with legislative requirements, to focus on the public health emergency and front-line delivery of student education and training, research and innovation.

The report highlights ten key themes that will be further explored in phase two of the review:

Theme One: Keeping the interests of current and future students, and equalities, at the heart of everything we do

- The need for excellent online and blended learning is now a key requirement for students, alongside greater consistency in the quality of that offer, and a strong response to digital inclusion and literacy.
- The need for supportive pastoral care, and mental health and wellbeing approaches and services, a continued focus on diversity and inclusion, and improved student-institution partnerships to strengthen communication and participation in decision-making forums.
- Keeping the interests of students at the heart of decision making in dealing with COVID-19 responses and disruption.

Theme Two: Supporting the digital revolution for learners

- Excellent digital, online and blended learning delivery is no longer a nice-to-have – it is an essential core strategy for every institution.
- The digital literacy needs of staff and students.
- The need to create new quality standards for blended and online learning, that involves students, as new practices develop.

Theme Three: Towards an integrated, connected tertiary education and skills eco-system for learners and employers

- Building on the pioneering regionalisation of colleges, the policy drivers around widening access and the existing articulation routes and partnerships between colleges and universities, to make an integrated tertiary system a reality for Scotland.
- Examining options with the senior phase of school in terms of duplication, connections, transitions and funding overlaps with tertiary education.
- Safeguarding widening access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and communities and creating better ladders, bridges and pathways for learners between qualifications and institutions.
- Exploring how a fully integrated tertiary funding model by SCQF level and whole system targets and outcomes might support closer collaboration, more efficient learner journeys, and more equitable approaches to funding.

Theme Four: Recognising colleges and universities as national assets and civic anchors

- Harnessing their significant contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of Scotland; celebrating their success and impact; better articulating a distinctive Scottish tertiary education tradition and offer; and embedding them into regional and international plans, and the promotion of Scottish interests.



Theme Five: Building long-term relationships with employers and industry

- A flow of knowledge, curriculum and course design and content, internships, work-experience, employment, reskilling and upskilling, and research between institutions and companies.

Theme Six: Protecting and leveraging the excellence of our research and science base

- Encouraging reduced cross-subsidy from international teaching and working with partner funders and charities to support higher funding to cover the full economic costs of research.
- Ways of incentivising better co-ordination and collaboration to tackle grand challenges and harness Scotland's particular research strengths, through targeted mission funding.

Theme Seven: Driving the innovation agenda

- Greater translation of our investment in research into successful innovation through commercialisation.
- Bringing colleges more fully into innovation partnerships and the national innovation agenda.

Theme Eight: Enhancing collaboration

- Around pathways for learners, mission-driven research, internationalisation, procurement and shared services, and by exploring different organisational partnerships and models, and making changes to Regional Strategic Bodies in multi-college regions.

Theme Nine: Making the most of the sector's global connections

- The need for collective promotion of the Scottish tertiary education brand and offer.
- The need to protect our most globally renowned institutions as they attract talent and resource and important international relationships.

Theme Ten: Financial sustainability and funding

- Tackling the cross-subsidy from international student income for research activities.
- Incentivising collaboration, and working towards a more integrated, differentiated, connected tertiary education and skills system.

Student Engagement Advisory Group

Another recent development since the phase one report is the formation of a Student Engagement Advisory Group, of which both sparqs and NUS Scotland are members. This group will help support SFC around ongoing tools and mechanisms for student engagement and in ensuring that students can actively contribute to, and influence, the review as it progresses. We are keen to explore how students can be involved in this group or a sub-group of it, and we are working closely with SFC and student officers to think about what good student engagement in the review looks like.

We will also be utilising NEON as a space to discuss the review as it develops, and provide opportunities for students and SFC staff to discuss the review.



What can you do?

We appreciate that the initial consultation period had a very tight timeframe and as a consequence, students were not as heavily consulted as the sector would have liked. We are keen to explore the different ways that student officers, student reps and other students can contribute to the review discussion. sparqs hosted the SFC at a recent National Education Officers' Network meeting to further explore what good student engagement in the review will look like, and from other discussions we've had around the sector, we know that students' associations are keen to be as involved as they can. Below are some suggestions as to what you can do to support your own, and your fellow students', engagement in the review:

- 1.** If you haven't already, make sure you look over your institution's response to the call for evidence – ask a member of staff from your planning or governance team (or equivalent) who will be best placed to provide you with the response.
- 2.** Speak to key staff who have been involved in responding to the review so far, including senior management. Ask questions about your institution's response and priorities.
- 3.** Find out if your institution has a review working group to support ongoing engagement in the review. If they do, enquire as to how you can be involved in this group. If not, is this something you could discuss with staff about forming?
- 4.** Keep an eye out for the review coming up at committee meetings, such as at Boards, Senate or Learning and Teaching Committees, so you are prepared to contribute to the discussion.
- 5.** Discuss the phase one report with your fellow student officers; consider what the review covers and what it may be missing. What could have the biggest impact for students, how should the themes be prioritised and what topics matter most to students?
- 6.** Start to explore how you could engage a wider group of students; using pre-existing groups such as course reps or lead reps (School Officers/Curriculum Officers) would be a really good first step. You could perhaps use a course rep conference or monthly officer catch-up to talk about the review, identifying some of the key themes that matter most to students and exploring them with your reps. You could also reach out to clubs, societies and sports teams and do something similar at a relevant meeting or gathering.
- 7.** Another option would be to facilitate a workshop or focus group for all students to attend, exploring one or two themes that students would be interested in discussing, for example the digital revolution or mental health and wellbeing.
- 8.** You could consider creating a short survey that could be sent to students to find out more about what matters to them in terms of this review. This could be hosted on your students' association webpage or institutional VLE platform.
- 9.** Ask course reps to have these conversations as part of their staff-student consultative committees (or equivalent), engaging both staff and students in the discussion.
- 10.** Utilise external organisations like sparqs, NUS Scotland and the SFC to support your work and student engagement. We are all working to ensure that students are active partners in the review process, so would love to hear from you as to how we can help.

Further information

For further details visit the [SFC Review webpage](#) and read the [sparqs' news article on the review](#).

If you would like to discuss any of this further, please contact Stef Black, Senior Development Consultant – stef.black@sparqs.ac.uk.