

PE1807/E

Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science submission of 27 November 2020

Thank you for your recent letter dated 2 November 2020. In that letter you followed up our previous correspondence about Petition PE01807 by asking for my response to the petitioner's written submission of 17 August 2020 and my views on the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's (SPSO) submission of 8 October and the figures contained in that submission.

I would like to begin by saying that I have the greatest sympathy for all students at this time, and especially for those who have entered higher education in 2019-20 and 2020-21. The student experience of this cohort is very different to that of any of their predecessors and it is understandable that many students at this time may feel disappointed and that some of their hopes and expectations of their courses and of student life more widely have not been met.

However, that is also true for many other individuals and communities in Scotland and throughout the world. None of us have had the 2020 that we hoped for or wanted.

Universities in Scotland, and indeed across the world, have had to adapt to this new world and way of working in extremely short timescales and often against developing public health advice and changing rules and safety measures as the pandemic continues to claim lives and our understanding of it improves.

This is something that universities have done at pace and at vast cost to their own individual institutions, adapting to online provision and teaching to ensure higher education continues with as little disruption as possible while the safety of students and staff is protected.

Turning to the petitioner's submission of 17 August, the petitioner continues to push for Scottish Government intervention in these issues. However, this remains primarily an issue for universities and their students.

Supported by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), universities have made huge efforts to continue to provide a high quality learning experience for all of their students. I would hope that this is what most students have experienced and that most students will also appreciate the significant challenges and disruptions that universities have had to respond to and overcome.

Where a student feels that has not been the case, there is a clear process for them to take that up with their university and, if not satisfied with the university's response, with the SPSO. That process is right – this is a matter for the university and the student, not for Ministers. Universities must consider those complaints and do what they think is right. If a university found itself making substantial payments for this or other reasons, it could then raise that issue and the related financial challenges with the SFC and with Ministers. This is what already happens across multiple issues including various costs and financial pressures that universities have experienced as a result of the pandemic.

Turning to the submission of 8 October 2020 from the SPSO, it was useful to me to get a sense of the level of complaints that the SPSO is seeing on this and other issues. I want everyone to have a fantastic experience of studying in Scotland and I would also hope that most complaints that do arise can be resolved at an institutional level without escalation to the SPSO. However, these figures do give me some reassurance that, under the unique

circumstances of 2020, only a limited number of students have felt the need to take complaints to the SPSO. I would expect that these individual cases have been or will be discussed with the universities in question and that any systemic issues emerging will be highlighted and addressed with the relevant institution and potentially with the SFC and my officials.

I found the SPSO's summary of the issues raised in the petition and the possible role of the Scottish Government helpful, in particular their observation that

"it [the petition] asks for the Scottish Government to provide support. Decisions about how and when to use public resources to mitigate the impact of the pandemic have been on-going since the start of the pandemic and will continue for some time. These are not easy decisions and many competing interests need to be balanced"

As a Government, we provide over £1 billion in funding annually to our universities to support teaching costs for eligible students, research and capital maintenance. In direct response to the financial pressures caused by the pandemic, we have provided an additional £95 million including support for research, estate maintenance, digital inclusion, additional funded places and direct student support.

While this additional funding has been necessary to help universities and students through some of the financial pressures of COVID-19, as a government this is only one aspect of support we have had to provide. We do not have access to infinite funding and have had to make some difficult decisions on what must be prioritised. This includes funding requests such as that outlined in the original petition and the petitioner's submission of 17 August.

I want to finish by saying that I am sorry that the petitioner felt that his experience or the experience of some of his fellow students meant that he needed to bring this petition to you. I take pride in the quality of our universities and our global reputation as a place to study. We want to provide an environment where the expectations of all students, including international students, are met.

I will continue to work with our universities and the Scottish Funding Council to provide the best possible student experience while ensuring the safety of all.

RICHARD LOCHHEAD