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Dear Convener,

Thank you for your letter of 13 February which sought clarification on the update provided by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on 10 January 2018. I will respond to each of your points in turn.

### **Retention**

**How the establishment of the Access Delivery Group specifically responds to the recommendation of the previous Committee around the need for better information on how widening access funding and guidance is being issued to institutions to support retention at both college and higher education institution level.**

As set out in the letter of 10 January from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, the guidance on the Access and Retention Fund was reviewed and intensified in the SFC's 2018-20 Outcome Agreement Guidance. At the next meeting of the Access Delivery Group, members will consider the Commissioner for Fair Access' Discussion Paper on Retention, Outcomes and Destinations, which was published on 23 January, as well as broader matters relating to retention. This will inform Scottish Government policy going forward.

**How the Access Delivery Group intends to work, including making relevant papers publicly available and its plans for reporting its monitoring of progress against all of the recommendations in the Commission for Widening Access report.**

The Access Delivery Group was established by the Scottish Government in response to the Commission on Widening Access's call for systemic, cooperative leadership and that implementation be placed "in the hands of the experts". The Group, which I chair, brings together senior leaders from across the education system and policymaking to:

- Develop a plan for delivery of the Commission's recommendations including key activities and milestones, and to be accountable for the delivery of that plan;
- Coordinate and encourage a whole systems approach to delivery of the Commission's recommendations and a collaborative approach to identifying solutions and overcoming delivery challenges where they arise;
- Provide mutual advice, support and, where appropriate, challenge;



- Provide a mechanism through which the Commissioner for Fair Access and Scottish Ministers can receive regular updates on progress and challenges with implementation of the Commission's recommendations.

The Group meets quarterly and is anticipated to operate until 2020 in the first instance, after which its continuation will be reviewed. Agenda items are developed by Scottish Government Access to Higher Education team officials, following discussion with the Group at the preceding meeting. Any member can, by contacting the Scottish Government officials, suggest items of business. I, as Chair, decide the agenda and designation of business. Where it is relevant and supports learning and the sharing of practice, specialist input may be invited as part of the agenda. Other observers with a relevant interest may also be invited to attend meetings.

Delivery Group members will receive quarterly updates on progress on implementation of the recommendations. Agendas, minutes and disclosable papers are published on the Access Delivery Group [page](#) of the Scottish Government website.

### College Regionalisation

**The Committee seeks further information on coordination measures in Lanarkshire and Highlands and Islands, which were designated as regional strategic bodies via the 2013 Act.**

New College Lanarkshire and the University for the Highlands & Islands gained fully-operational fundable body status on 1 August 2016 and 1 April 2015 respectively in relation to their roles as Regional Strategic Bodies.

New College Lanarkshire is the Regional Strategic Body for Lanarkshire, and is known as The Lanarkshire Board. The Lanarkshire Board has established a single, comprehensive and integrated governance structure to oversee the effectiveness of the whole region (which encompasses New College Lanarkshire itself and South Lanarkshire College as the assigned college). It has also established a single Outcome Agreement process with the Scottish Funding Council, the most recent version of which can be found [here](#).

This sets out in detail what the Region will deliver in an integrated way in return for over £40M of investment from the Scottish Funding Council, including:

- 187,000 Credits of teaching for students;
- Just under 20% of the Region's courses will be for the benefit of learners in the 10% most deprived areas;
- 27% of provision for learners studying STEM courses.

The University of the Highlands & Islands has also established integrated governance and planning processes, which are reflected in its [strategic plan](#) and [Outcome Agreement](#). For SFC's total investment of £77M in 2017-18, the Region will deliver:

- 113,000 Credits of teaching for students on further education programmes;
- 7,700 FTE of teaching for students on higher education programmes;
- 22% of provision for learners studying STEM courses at further education level;
- 30% of Scottish-domiciled learners starting their higher education courses will be studying STEM subjects.

## **Clarification on the Colleges Strategic Futures Group's remit and goals, as well as clarification as to why the Group was first established in November 2017 and not earlier.**

The Colleges Strategic Futures Group builds on the success of its Universities counterpart and formalises the on-going and continuous dialogue with leaders in the college sector on matters of strategic importance. The aim of the group is to provide a forum to facilitate a shared approach to securing the viability of the college sector and to foster long term financial planning and risk mitigation. The group will consider the challenges and opportunities presented to the sector in Scotland and will generate suggestions from the Scottish Government and colleges themselves on how we can effectively support the sustainability of the college sector and the wider economy.

The group will also facilitate dialogue between the college sector and the Scottish Government on the annual budget preparation process. It will work in partnership to identify approaches to maximise the sector's contribution to our key shared priorities and programmes, including widening access and the contribution of the skills agenda and innovation to stimulating economic growth, productivity and regional development.

### Regional Boards

#### **Clarification on whether there is any substantial evidence to show that the regional structure is better meeting the needs of students and businesses. If so, can any evidence be shared with Committee to demonstrate this improvement?**

Section 23K (1) of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 places a duty on regional strategic bodies to exercise their functions "with a view to improving the economic and social wellbeing of the localities of its colleges."

Section 23M of that Act places duties on them to consult and collaborate with, among others, students' associations of the colleges assigned to them and employer representatives. Each regional strategic body has student members and are required to comply with the sector's good governance code. That code includes, among other things that they "must have close regard to the voice of its students and the quality of the student experience should be central to all board decisions".

Colleges exist to serve students so it is important that students have a role in shaping their colleges. Good students' associations provide a strong voice for students on campus. Colleges – with their students – make their own decisions on the support arrangement for their students' associations, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) continue to work with NUS Scotland, Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (SPARQS), Colleges Scotland and the Scottish Government in the further development of autonomous, effective students' associations through a shared Framework published in 2015 [[www.saframework.co.uk](http://www.saframework.co.uk)]. Feedback from associations last year confirms the positive impact of Scottish college students' associations on campus life and we look to the sector to continue to make an ongoing commitment to support best practice. If this is not happening the SFC will work with the college – and its students – to make sure it is.

The SFC carried out a sample survey in 2017 of colleges that they had funded to support the development of their students' associations and that survey found that there had been significant progress in terms of the development, function and focus of students' associations across the sector.

It is also worth noting that a new single student association has been established in the Highlands & Islands ([Highlands & Islands Students' Association](#)) and that the Glasgow Colleges' Regional Board has taken active steps to foster collaboration between the Glasgow college students' associations.

The SFC uses the Outcome Agreement process to evidence the level and extent to which colleges engage with employers and industry groups. 85% of colleges have established employer/ industry advisory boards to review and enhance curriculum quality, planning and outcomes. Engagement with the advisory groups at curriculum level ensures that the curriculum addresses current needs as well as forecasted future skills demands and that provision is aligned with the employment priorities of local business. Colleges have prioritised establishing links with DYW Regional Groups to further develop and enhance employer engagement with colleges. In 2017/18 Outcome Agreement Managers will intensify their engagement with Colleges to test the effectiveness of employer engagement.

**R180 and R183: Clarification on the Cabinet Secretary's response "no update required" in this regard. Is the Cabinet Secretary referring to an answer provided to this question elsewhere and, if so, could you clarify what answer has been provided?**

Section 23F(2) of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 provides that when making plans, a regional strategic body must have regard to the importance of ensuring that funds made available to it under section 12(1)(c) are used as economically, efficiently and effectively as possible. The Scottish Funding Council also has powers under paragraph 10(4) to direct a Regional Board in relation to the appointment of employees and their terms and conditions.

In order to address its new responsibilities as the Regional Strategic Body for the Highlands and Islands, UHI set up a new committee of Court, the Further Education Regional Board (FERB). All responsibility for further education matters was then delegated to this new committee and these arrangements have been in place since 2014. UHI was largely able to utilise existing resource to support this activity with only one new staff post created within UHI's senior executive team to manage the new FE side of the University's business.

### Strategic Futures Group

**The Committee seeks clarification on the following:**

- **Whether this forum is distinct from, or part of, the above mentioned Colleges Strategic Futures Group;**
- **Further information on the remit and intended goals of this Group; and**
- **Any sources that can be shared with the Committee that serve to demonstrate achievements, outputs or outcomes from the work of the previous Forum.**

I can confirm that the Scottish Government has established two distinctive groups to tackle the unique issues affecting both the higher education and further education sectors. However, while these groups are distinct they do follow a similar format which provides a consistent approach to communication and engagement across the entire tertiary sector.

The purpose of the Higher Education Strategic Futures Group (SFG) is to provide a forum to consider strategic questions, challenges and opportunities, influencing the continued success and world-class impact of the Higher Education sector in Scotland over the next decade and beyond. The agreed remit of the group is:

- To identify approaches to maximise the contribution of higher education to key shared priorities including widening access, the contribution of skills, research and innovation to stimulating economic growth and productivity and international and Brexit issues;
- To consider challenges and opportunities presented to the sector in Scotland, and generate suggestions on effective responses from government and institutions themselves to support both sectoral and wider economic sustainability and impact;
- To act as a facilitator of dialogue between SG, SFC and the HE sector on the budget preparation process for 2018-19 and beyond, and to identify opportunities for greater efficiency including new or alternative models of delivery and enhanced collaboration across the tertiary system;
- To identify opportunities for closer collaboration between the sector, SFC and the Scottish Government in pursuit of shared objectives, including exploration of new or enhanced income streams, or how any risk to current income can be mitigated; and
- To make further progress to develop a draft agreement ('compact') between SG, the sector and SFC to be put to Ministers, University Courts and the SFC Board for approval.

In 2017, the SFG discussed a variety of issues including Widening Access, Brexit, the Learner Journey, Industrial Strategy and the Spending Review. The group has offered the Scottish Government and Scottish Funding Council invaluable insight into how Ministerial priorities and UKG decisions impact directly on the sector and how they are planning to mitigate against these issues.

More specifically, the group has provided an appropriate space to discuss and consider the draft 2018/19 budget. Working closely together with the sector, Scottish Government officials gained a clear understanding of the pressures and concerns of higher education institutions and were able to present an effective argument to protect core teaching grants for Scottish Universities in 2018/19. The group also offered an opportunity for a collective discussion with Scottish Ministers to discuss the impending Spending Review that all members found imperative to a positive outcome for the sector.

This work will continue in 2018, and further to our first meeting of the year in January, we are working with members to secure future dates and finalise areas to be discussed.

I hope this update has been helpful but please do let me know if you have any further questions. I look forward to attending the evidence session on 7 March.

Yours sincerely,



**SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE**