

PE1769/C

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

The Status of Higher Education Institutions

Higher Education Institutions are autonomous bodies, independent of Government, with responsibility for their own strategic and operational decision making. As such, each has its own arrangements for handling complaints from students. As the Committee will be aware, any individual who is not satisfied with the outcome of the complaints process may refer the issue to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO), with the exception that complaints relating to the Open University in Scotland are dealt with by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education. This is because, as a UK institution with its main base in England, it falls under UK wide procedures.

I understand that you have approached the SPSO separately for their view on the petitioner's second point.

Higher Education Funding

Scotland has a world-class higher education system which contributes significantly to our inclusive growth ambitions and the diversity of our society. Since 2012-13 we have consistently invested over £1 billion annually in our universities and this will continue in 2020-21, accounting for around 40% of the sector's income. In 2020/21 there is an overall increase in the higher education budget of £22.1m or 0.1% in real terms (2.0% in cash terms) to further support Scotland's universities. We continue to work with SFC and the HE sector to support our HE institutions to remain attractive, competitive and truly excellent in global terms.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SCOTTISH HIGHER EDUCATION

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has a statutory obligation under section 13 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 to ensure that provision is made for assessing and enhancing the quality of higher education provided by fundable bodies. The SFC meets its obligation through the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF)

The QEF is the enhancement-led approach to quality assurance in Scotland. It includes rigorous institution-led review using external reference points and external review on a five-year cycle, known as Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR). The QEF includes a firm commitment to student partnership and a national suite of Enhancement Themes. Institutions demonstrate they meet the expectations of the UK Quality Code.

Quality Assurance Agency: Scottish Concerns Scheme

QAA Scotland is part of the UK-wide Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), which checks and advises on standards and quality in UK higher education

QAA Scotland can investigate concerns about academic standards and quality in Scottish Higher Education institutions (HEI) raised by students, staff and other parties through its Scottish Concerns Scheme. Under the Scottish Concerns Scheme, QAA Scotland can investigate concerns about:

- university sector HEIs in Scotland (QAA subscribers)
- courses provided by the Scottish university sector HEIs, whether delivered by the HEIs directly or through working with other organisations and partners in the UK or overseas
- HEIs that have entered the detailed scrutiny stage of an application for degree awarding powers or university title.

relating to:

- concerns about academic standards and quality, where QAA Scotland think these raise broader issues about the management of quality, standards and/or the information HEIs make available about their provision.

More broadly, the Scottish Government continues to work with partners to enhance student support and the student experience, as follows.

Student Mental Health and Well-Being

The Scottish Government has provided the SFC with additional funding of £3.645 million to provide additional counsellors in colleges and universities, for academic year 2019/20. This is the first year of the four-year programme working to achieve more than 80 additional counsellors in further and higher education.

The Scottish Government will also provide the SFC with an additional resource of £50k per year for 2 years to:

- support the implementation of mental health counsellors across colleges and universities, with robust monitoring of progress;
- support equity of access to counselling support by all students across both HE and FE.

Our Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group has also been tasked with developing an integrated approach to student wellbeing in colleges and universities, including linking with NHS Scotland Boards, Health and Social Care Partnerships, schools, social work and third sector services and, where appropriate, home country student support services

Tackling Gender-based violence in colleges and universities

In April 2018, the Equally Safe in Higher Education Tool Kit, developed by the University of Strathclyde and supported by the Scottish Government, was launched. The Tool Kit provides institutions with the practical resources to prevent and tackle Gender Based Violence.

Universities Scotland, with financial support from the Scottish Government, has produced Gender Based Violence Support cards for staff, launched September 2018 by the Deputy First Minister. Every member of staff now knows where to get help for someone who discloses any form of gender-based violence.

This work is complemented by the GBV and Student Mental Health Support Stickers launched by the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science in May 2019. These list national and confidential support services for people within a college or university setting experiencing Gender Based Violence and/or mental health issues. These

are for display in toilet facilities, communal areas, student accommodation, student unions and other spaces.

The Scottish Government has also provided funding for a Training and Education Coordinator at Rape Crisis Scotland to scope, develop and trial materials and models for staff training and student education. These materials should be complete in early 2020.

Widening Access

Widening access to higher education remains a priority for Scottish Government and we are making good progress. Scotland has record numbers of full-time, first degree entrants from our most deprived areas.

We are however aware that there is more to be done and we continue to work closely with the sector to tackle the barriers faced by students from Scotland's most deprived communities. As we move forward in the delivery of the CoWA recommendations, the end goals of graduation and positive destinations remain a key focus and priority. This work is supported by the Scottish Framework for Fair Access, which was launched by the Commissioner for Fair Access in May 2019.

Tuition Fees

The Scottish Government pays the tuition fees of Scottish domiciled and EU students studying for their first undergraduate degree at publicly funded higher education institutions in Scotland. The tuition fee the Scottish Government pays (via the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)) to Scottish higher education institutions on behalf of Scottish domiciled students is fixed at £1,820 per academic year.

This continued commitment to free tuition policy ensures that access to higher education is based on the ability to learn and not the ability to pay. Our free tuition policy benefits over 120,000 undergraduate students each year studying in Scotland, contributing to the delivery of fair access. Student Loans Company statistics (published June 2019) show students in Scotland continue to have the lowest average debt in the UK.

Financial Support for Disabled Students

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that all students with a disability, long term medical condition or additional support needs are supported as they study in further and higher education. This is through institutional support provided to each institution, and also through support directly to students. The Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) is a non-income assessed allowance to cover any extra costs or expenses a higher education student might incur while studying, which arise because of their disability. The purpose of the DSA is to remove any disadvantages they may have when undertaking a course because of their disability.

When students apply for DSA for the first time, they receive an individual needs assessment with a qualified adviser. This assessment then advises the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) of the type of support and equipment the student requires to undertake their course. This allows the institution to ensure the assessment takes full account of the individual student's learning needs.

In addition to this, all colleges and universities have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that students with disabilities which affect their studies are not placed at a disadvantage. This is an anticipatory duty which requires education providers to continually review and anticipate the general needs of disabled people, rather than simply waiting until an individual requests a particular adjustment.

SAAS have been asked to lead on a review of disability-related student support in both Further and Higher Education on behalf of the Scottish Government, following recommendations made by the independent review of student support. The aim of the review will be to deliver recommendations which improve the provision of support and increase parity across the sector. The project will engage directly with students with disabilities, their parents and representative groups to ensure that the student voice is being heard throughout this process and recommendations are reflective of their needs. Recommendations from the review are expected to be presented to the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science in summer 2020.