

Dear

I hope this letter finds you well.

Across Scotland, our 43 colleges have commenced the annual task of enrolling approximately one-in-ten people of working age in a vast range of courses over many levels.

Each year enrolment highlights one of the biggest problems faced by students – the complexity of the student funding systems. The “average” single parent studying a higher education course in one of Scotland’s colleges receives funding from nine different sources, with many of these conflicting with one another - particularly the UK-wide benefits system and the Scottish mechanisms for student support.

Often students find their funding can have negative impacts on their benefits, dramatically reducing their family income, with many resorting to taking out student loans, sometimes with very little prospect of repayment.

It will therefore come as no surprise that student funding and support is currently one of Scotland’s Colleges key priorities for this year. On 3 September the Scottish Government announced a consultation on plans to restore free education for all in Scotland, and to develop student support measures in light of that. This allows us a unique opportunity to address the problem of debt for those potential students for whom debt is the biggest barrier – learners from the most deprived backgrounds, mature students and lone parents; many of whom make up the 50,000 students studying higher education in Scotland’s colleges.

The additional £30m for a phased transition from student loans to grants, allocated to the final year of this spending review, allows the opportunity for Parliament to remove the burden of debt from those that find it the biggest obstacle. In so doing, we can create a funding system that interacts positively with the benefits system and allows students to move more effectively from non-advanced to advanced level courses within colleges. This would create a seamless student funding system, allowing students to progress from further education to higher education without having to worry about the impacts on their benefits, their family finances or of getting into debt.

Our proposal would boost the economy in its requirements for skilled workers, transform the life-chances of Scotland’s most deprived communities and signal a positive enhancement to student support. This would be locally administered support for local people in their local community college.

continued overleaf

Our proposal, set out in my letter to you of 25 April, involves moving higher education students onto the bursary system currently administered in colleges for further education students. The measures being proposed would not involve any reduction in student income, yet this simple change, using mechanisms already in place, will dramatically simplify the funding landscape for students in Scotland's colleges. It will give potential students a far better knowledge of how much money they will have available to them if they decide to study, whilst simultaneously removing the debt burden from large numbers of students.

At the same time, we are preparing to respond to the UK Government's Green Paper on changes to the benefits system. We were concerned to read that proposals to transform the benefits system and encourage more people into employment do not pay enough attention to the role that education, and particularly colleges, must play. Our response will highlight the work of Scotland's colleges in delivering further and higher education and demonstrate how crucial our institutions are to raising the aspirations of whole communities, giving people the skills to find sustainable, long-term and rewarding employment.

We are keen to ensure that you are kept informed of our policy developments and proposals. Scotland's Colleges has been engaging with many stakeholders and party policy officers over the recent recess, however we would very much like to meet as many Members as possible now Parliament is back in session. Please contact us on neil.cuthbert@asc.scotlandscollges.ac.uk if you would like to arrange a meeting.

I look forward to working with you over the coming months. Together, we can change the fortunes of many of Scotland's most deprived communities and create a brighter future for Scotland.

Yours sincerely,

Howard McKenzie

Acting Chief Executive, ASC