

Support for Part-time Study and Disabled Students – Colleges Scotland Response – October 2025

Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the voice of the sector, supporting the delivery of thriving colleges at the heart of a thriving Scotland. When Colleges Thrive, Scotland Thrives. As the membership body, Colleges Scotland represents all 24 colleges in Scotland, which deliver both further education and around 20% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

Colleges across Scotland offer opportunities for the most vulnerable learners, providing access to student support funding and pastoral support services to ensure their engagement in learning and teaching activity. From the latest available set of statistics for academic year 2022/23, 75% of college students attend on a part-time basis, with 23% of the college student population having a recorded disability. The latest evidence demonstrates that £95.5m of bursary funding was issued, alongside £18.4m of discretionary funding to support and enable students to succeed in their studies at college.

In advance of submitting this response to the Scottish Government, Colleges Scotland convened two sector workshops, bringing together sector experts with knowledge and experience of directly overseeing the distribution of student support funding for both HE and FE students studying at colleges, and in supporting both part-time and disabled student cohorts.

Their insights have directly informed this response, and we would recommend further engagement with these experts by Scottish Government, working through Colleges Scotland, to test any new thinking or initiatives generated from this consultation to ensure these make maximum impact in delivering support for part-time and disabled students.

Key Points

1. Do you provide further education courses (up to SCQF level 6) or higher education (HNC / HND / undergraduate or postgraduate degree)?

Colleges Scotland is responding on behalf of the college sector. The college sector offers a wide and diverse range of learning opportunities, at both further and higher education level. This includes HNC and HND qualifications. Some colleges also have partnerships with universities which allows students to study an undergraduate degree level qualification through a college.

2. Do you provide part-time or distance learning study options?

Colleges offer a good variety of part-time and distance learning study options in a wide range of subject areas, across both further and higher education level.

3. Do you think that support for part-time and distance learning study needs to be simplified?

Support for part-time and distance learning study needs to be simplified. There is a consensus that support for these students under the current system is unnecessarily complicated, with the following factors and reasons being cited:

- The definition of 'part-time' is unclear.
- It is difficult for students to navigate the support available, particularly where this differs between further and higher education levels.
- There is no standardised mechanism for students to access part-time programmes.
- There is a lack of clarity around what courses students can study on a part-time basis.
- Record-keeping becomes challenging when students move to different campuses, or transfer to a different college altogether.

There is a similar consensus that the current system has created a lack of equity between both full and part time study, and further and higher education in terms of the support available. The current funding system is felt to dictate decision making by institutions in determining and allocating student support funding, rather than this being led by the requirements of the student. Where it might be in a student's interest to move from full-time to part-time attendance, for example due to health reasons, the limitations of the current funding system mean this not a viable option for most students, thus impacting their ability to continue with their studies. This situation is in need of redress.

4. Apart from student financial support packages funded by the Scottish Government, what other financial and wider institutional support does your college offer part-time/distance learning students?

Across the sector workshops, it was recognised and highlighted that there are a range of financial and wider institutional support services available to part-time and distance learning students, including the following:

- Institutional bursaries
- Discretionary funds, including travel expenses and childcare (where available)
- Disability support, on a case-by-case basis
- Personal Learning Support Plans, including support with assessments and bespoke examination arrangements
- Wellbeing and counselling support
- Learning mentors

Generally, part-time and distance learning students have access to the same support offered to full-time students, however, it was acknowledged that it may be more difficult for students studying in the evening to access services that are largely delivered during the day.

In terms of part-time students in the full spectrum of college-based learning and teaching delivery, there needs to be further consideration on the role of School/College partnerships, with school pupils making up a significant proportion of part-time intakes for institutions. The co-ordination of the partnership can be very complex and time consuming, and in some cases, colleges do not have the capacity to support the additional learning needs of school pupils studying with them, whilst simultaneously supporting the engagement of other part-time student cohorts including ESOL learners.

5. Do you think that the introduction of living cost support (bursaries and/or loan) for part-time / distance learning study might affect your institution's course provision?

There was an overarching view from the sector workshops that more detail on this proposal would be required for the potential effect on institutional course provision to be understood and for sector experts to fully consider and answer this question. At this stage of the consultation, clarity on the following key questions would be welcomed:

- Would additional support for part-time / distance learning students be at the expense of that available to full-time students?
- How would interaction with the benefits system work? For example, would this impact students in receipt of Universal Credit?
- If colleges were to offer more part-time courses, how would colleges resource this?
- Would the Scottish Funding Council permit colleges to draw down more funding or expect them to deliver more credits?

The introduction of living cost support for part-time and distance learning students would potentially give institutions the flexibility to enhance and diversify their curriculum offering and deliver opportunities that meet the needs of a more students. However, not all students are necessarily ready to undertake a full-time course when they first begin college, so more part-time options may support a smoother transition to college education and enhance overall retention rates.

In considering any potential introduction of living cost support for part-time and distance learning students, it needs to be recognised that FE students are generally averse to getting into debt, so loans may not be an ideal source of support for this group. This is evidenced in the findings on the Student Finance and Wellbeing Study (SFWS), which shows that 65% of FE students surveyed are concerned about taking on student loan debt.

6. The introduction of living cost support for part-time or distance learning study would mean the same eligibility criteria being used as it is for full-time study. Do you agree with this?

Again, further detail would be required for this to be fully considered and clarity on the following key questions would be required:

- What amount of funding would students receive in these circumstances?
- If students were in receipt of living cost support, how would this interact with other benefits they are receiving, i.e. Universal Credit?
- Would the living cost support for part-time or distance learning study be a proportion of what full-time students receive, or would it be like for like?

There is a potential risk, as conveyed in our workshops, that if living cost support for part-time or distance learning students is offered on a like for like basis, then there is no incentive for students to undertake their course on a full-time basis. Sector experts are clear in their view that if the offer for one group of students comes at the expense of another, this will have a detrimental effect on student choice.

7. Further education students can get their fees paid (this is called a fee waiver) or can get some support towards fees depending on their circumstances. Access to this support is subject to eligibility criteria which can include a means-test. What are your views on this approach?

Whilst this works for students on Further Education courses delivered in the college sector, the eligibility criteria needs to be clearer and more transparent. Under the current system, there is a consensus view that the fee waiver rules are complex and there are limited numbers of college staff with the relevant knowledge and expertise around this to ensure clear and consistent application across institutions. There is an opportunity to simplify the current rules and ensure consistency of approach.

8. What do you think would help to further improve support for part-time and distance learning students in higher education?

The support for part-time and distance learning students in higher education could be improved by the Part Time Fee Grant (PTFG) being increased in line with the living wage, as it has remained static at £25,000 for a significant multi-year period. There is a current lack of clarity around what courses are eligible for the PTFG, and it would help both staff and students greatly if the Scottish Government could provide further direction on this.

Part-time and distance learning students in higher education courses delivered through colleges would also benefit from being eligible to receive the care-experienced bursary, as this is currently only available to full-time students. This is an existing inequity that could be addressed within the current system.

More generally, support for part-time and distance learning students could be improved by there being greater transparency around the actual levels of support available. In practice, this would mean college staff are more greatly equipped to provide advice and guidance in students, particularly with navigating the differences between HE and FE student support.

9. Do you feel the current eligibility criteria for the PTFG work on focusing support for students who need it the most?

The current eligibility criteria for the PTFG is not focusing support for students who need it most. Whilst wages have increased, the PTFG threshold has not, and students who could benefit from additional support due to the cost-of-living crisis are losing out because they are earning more than £25,000. Our recommendation would be that the PTFG threshold is increased in line with wages.

10. Are there any non-monetary improvements relating to support for part-time and distance learning students that you would like to comment on?

From our engagement with sector experts in our workshop sessions, we can offer the following suggestions of non-monetary improvements relating to support for part-time and distance learning students, which we would recommend are explored further from this consultation process:

- In rural areas, support with travel and accommodation, of which the latter is generally geared towards full-time students.
- Flexibility for colleges to transfer between HE and FE discretionary funding pots and retain unspent HE funds to provide greater support to FE students in need.

- Develop greater understanding of the challenges learners face to better target support.
- Offer more opportunities for community-based learning, to improve reach.
- Better clarity of the definition of 'part-time', including study hours and course length.

11. Should part-time and distance learning first-degree students be included in the official data measuring progress towards the Scottish Government's target to increase the proportion of SIMD-20 learners entering higher education?

We are generally supportive of the proposal for part-time and distance learning first-degree students to be included in the official data measuring progress towards the Scottish Government's target to increase the proportion of SIMD-20 learners entering higher education. However, it needs to be acknowledged that SIMD-20 is not an effective measure of deprivation in rural areas, as raised in discussions relating to the Scottish Government's Widening Access agenda, and greater consideration would need to be given to the challenges faced by these students.

12. Do you think that support for disabled students in further and/or higher education needs to be simplified?

Support for disabled students in further and higher education needs to be simplified. Under the current system, support for these students is deemed to be unnecessarily complicated, with the following reasons being cited from sector experts:

- There are often delays with students receiving DSA funding.
- The application process for DSA is complex.
- There is a lack of understanding and awareness from students about the support they are entitled to.
- There is no standardised application of the FE model across the college sector, so the level of support available to students varies widely.
- It can be challenging for students to obtain the evidence they need to access support.

The current HE support model is clear and transparent and works better for both students and colleges than the FE model, as there is greater flexibility in how HE students are supported. We would recommend that in order to simply support for disabled students studying on FE level courses that there be greater alignment and matching to the HE model.

13. What financial and wider support can be accessed by disabled students studying with you?

Disabled students have access to the same support offered to the general student population, and a significant amount of work is progressed across the college sector to ensure as far as possible that disabled students are aware of both the support available to them and how to access it. The importance of inclusive practices for disabled students cannot be overstated, and the college sector can offer examples of best practice to inform the design of any future approach to support for disabled students.

14. Do you find that disabled students' decision on whether to study full or part-time is affected by the level of financial or wider institutional support available?

Evidence collated from discussions with sector experts suggests that disabled students' decisions on whether to study full or part-time is affected by the level of financial and wider institutional support available, alongside the below factors:

- The differences between the FE and HE support models mean that studying at HE level may be more appealing to disabled students, although FE level might be better suited to their needs and circumstances.
- Colleges are not in a position to give students advice regarding any social security and welfare benefits they may be in receipt of.
- The definition of 'part-time' is unclear.
- There is a lack of financial support available for students over the summer period.

There would be a need to consider relevant data working with sector experts in order to fully answer this question, but more broadly a more person-centred approach to student support is needed in order to provide the most informed advice and guidance to inform individual decision making by disabled students around their mode of study.

15. What improvements do you feel could be made to the administration of support for disabled students in higher education?

The introduction of the DSA online application system has been welcomed by sector experts, and it has been acknowledged that this has generally been beneficial to both colleges and students. However, in order to build on this development, and further improve the administration of support for disabled students on higher education courses in the college sector, the system needs to be more efficient and streamlined to deliver its full potential and reduce waiting times on application decisions for students.

16. Do you carry out in-house needs assessments for disabled students who are applying to access DSA in Scotland?

Colleges across Scotland are implementing in-house assessments for disabled students who are applying to access DSA in Scotland; however, assessments can often be carried out externally too.

17. How long does it typically take DSA applicants to undergo a needs assessment once they have been referred?

The time period between DSA applicants being referred and undergoing a needs assessment depends on whether or not this is carried out in-house, however, generally speaking this can take around three to four weeks. This process requires participation from the student, which may be impacted by their disabilities, and the evidence-gathering stage can also be complex and time consuming. Sometimes, students need to be referred to an Educational Psychologist for assessment, which can often uncover more conditions or additional needs than were originally anticipated, which can lengthen the process. There is an opportunity to look at how the needs assessment process, and evidence-gathering stage, can be tweaked in line with student feedback and lived experience.

18. When recommending a Non-Medical Personal Helper to be hired by the student, do you check to ensure that the appointed individual has the necessary skills, experience, and clearance to support the student, prior to endorsing?

Sector experts have advised that their institutions have trusted external suppliers they work with for the provision of Non-Medical Personal Helpers (NMPHs) to ensure individuals have the necessary skills, experience and clearance to support students. This has generally been seen

as a good experience for colleges and students alike, with students choosing to ask their college for a recommendation.

19. Do you assist these students in undertaking their employer obligations in relation to contract, tax, NI when they employ their own Non-Medical Personal Helper?

It is increasingly difficult for colleges and their staff to support students when it comes to employing their own NMPH, as they do not have any influence over this process. We would advise that this process would be more straightforward if the provision of a NMPH was managed wholly by colleges, rather than students employing their own.

20. In your opinion, is it helpful for students to have different allowances and limits or do you think that a single DSA allowance limit would better support students?

A single DSA allowance would better support students, as this would give them the flexibility to spread their allowance over their individual needs, and remove the risk of maxing out certain amounts. Student who are deaf, for example, will always be over allowance amounts due to their particular study needs. We would recommend an increase in DSA funds across the board, as the allowance has remained static for some time.

21. What is your approach when the cost to support the needs of a disabled student exceeds the relevant DSA allowance limits?

Through our workshop discussions, it was advised that in these circumstances, college staff would approach SAAS in the first instance, as is outlined in the DSA guidance, to request an exceptional allowance for the student in need. However, based on practical experience of our sector experts, SAAS only agree to pay the exceptional allowance where it is a student requiring British Sign Language support, which places limitations on the support available.

22. What is your approach when the type of support required for a disabled student cannot be met through DSA allowances or when the student is not eligible for DSA?

When the type of support required for a disabled student cannot be met through DSA allowances or when the student is not eligible for DSA, college staff will explore other options, such as changing the student's support worker or the college meeting the cost. Further flexibility within the broader student support funding arrangements would allow for more need to be addressed within existing levels of resource.

23. Should funding for disabled students in further education continue to go to the college to support the student with their disability, or do you think this should go directly to the student (similar to DSA for HE students) to manage to the additional costs?

Regardless of whether funding for disabled students in further education continues to go to the college or the student, funding for disabled students in further education should, first and foremost, follow the student and funding for disabled FE students should be brought in line with that for HE students.

In practice, if funding continues to go to the college, it should be ring-fenced for this specific purpose to ensure this addresses need. There are potential safeguarding and welfare risks involved with funding going directly to the student, as they may be vulnerable or require support with managing the money and so any potential moves towards direct student funding need to be carefully designed and delivered working with the college sector. In terms of any

changes, the Scottish Government should consider lessons learned from the provision of the Care Experienced Students Bursary when making a decision about funding distribution.

24. Can you provide examples of how different funding streams administered to your organisation by the Scottish Funding Council are used to support disabled students and students with additional learning needs?

Colleges will use discretionary funds to support disabled students and students with additional learning needs, along with the Independent Living Transition Fund. They also work with local organisations to tap into support for disabled students and student with additional learning needs. There is also an Additional Support Needs for Learning Allowance fund, but improvements need to be made in raising awareness across colleges of this funding and how it operates.

25. Are there any non-monetary improvements relating to support for disabled students that you would like to comment on?

There is an opportunity to revisit and redesign curriculum delivery to better meet the needs of disabled students. In practice this could include the removal of closed-book assessments, which are challenging for disabled students. This work can be progressed as part of the wider programme of Post School Qualifications reform being progressed as part of the Education Reform Agenda.

Future-proofing campuses by co-locating services, and improving partnership working with external organisations, would also enable colleges to further improve their support for disabled students, particularly with increasing numbers of individuals with mental health, neurodiverse and anxiety-related conditions coming into the college sector following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

As the Scottish Government receives responses with which to inform and shape the delivery of support for part-time and disabled students, we would expect that the knowledge and thinking of the college sector is taken into consideration in the next stages of this work.

In doing so, Colleges Scotland would be able to facilitate engagement with college institutional leads for Student Support to contribute to the enhancement of support for part-time and disabled students to ensure we can maximise the number of learners able to access education in Scotland's college sector.

Colleges Scotland
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