

21 December 2021

Education and Skills Committee
Committee Convener
Scottish Government

Ref: SS/KL
Direct: 07703 974 675

Dear Convener

Scottish Government's 2022/23 Budget Decisions

We write jointly as the representative bodies of both the college and university sectors to ask you to consider holding a session, early in the new year, to scrutinise the Scottish Government's 2022/23 budget decisions for the post-16 education sector.

The settlement will translate into a real terms cut to funding for both sectors, leaving institutions without the resource needed to deliver some key aspects of provision that relied on COVID consequentials last year. To us, this feels distinctly at odds with the Scottish Government's stated priority of education at all levels and the important role that universities and colleges will continue to play in Scotland's social, cultural and economic recovery from COVID-19.

We feel the Committee's important role of scrutiny has never been more important given the Budget Bill's guaranteed passage through Holyrood as a result of the Cooperation Agreement. We recognise the outcome of the Budget Bill for 2022/23 is unlikely to change but we feel the settlement for the college and university sectors needs some focused Parliamentary attention.

The real terms cut in the 2022/23 budget settlement for further and higher education is part of an established overall pattern of a lack of investment universities and colleges which has put real pressure on our students, staff and infrastructure.

We asked for increased investment in universities' capacity for research and innovation given the proven link to leverage of private and other investment into Scotland, supporting the recovery, high-skill jobs and fuelling sustainable growth. We also asked the Scottish Government to use this budget to invest more in teaching on a per student basis to address chronic underfunding. University students have faced three years of disruption to their degrees. We now have strong and concerning evidence that the disruption is taking an undeniable toll on students' educational resilience and mental health: 80% of students feel the pandemic has had a negative impact on their learning; 74% report having low wellbeing and more than a third reported moderate or severe depression. Universities critically need funding levels that will help us to support and redress these needs.

Colleges' students have also faced severe challenges. As the Committee will know, colleges are a popular destination for those from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds with 38% of school leavers from SIMD20 moving into further education. In order to continue to support those students (and all students) the budget is challenging given the lack of future funding for services, including mental health support which in 2021/22 was covered by Covid-Consequential funding. The harm which has been caused to young people, individuals in work of all ages, and to the structure of the economy, requires a strong skills-led recovery over the coming years. Scotland's colleges an important place for the seeds of recovery to take hold and flourish, delivering reskilling, upskilling, career improvement and holistic support to people locally and regionally, across the country.

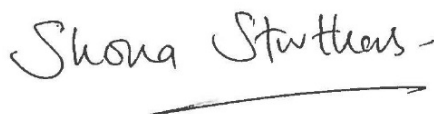
The Committee's exploration of this situation, early in the new year, would make a helpful and timely contribution to the Scottish Government's Resource Spending Review Framework which could determine funding for a multi-year period. The Scottish Government has indicated its intention for this process to be consultative and to engage widely to ensure stakeholder voices are heard so we hope the Committee's time on it would be welcomed in that spirit. We very much welcome the Scottish Government's intention to present a multi-year budget and the opportunity for stakeholders to inform the Scottish Government's thinking. However, the outcome of the 2022/23 budget sends the deeply unfortunate signal that the Scottish Government does not fully recognise the role that colleges and universities play in the critical delivery of education, skills, and research, which absolutely support economic recovery and transformation. In that context, we are very concerned of the prospects for colleges and universities in a multi-year settlement which the Cabinet Secretary for Finance is expected to deliver in May 2022.

We appreciate the Committee already has a very busy programme of work for 2021/22 but we hope you will give this serious consideration.

Yours Sincerely



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Shona Struthers
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