

PE1807/A

Scottish Government submission of 4 August 2020

Industrial action

Firstly, the Scottish Government is very sorry to hear of the experiences of any students whose studies were disrupted by the industrial action of this academic year, and the anxiety this has caused. The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science has made clear his view that strikes are in no-one's interests, particularly students'. Mr Lochhead takes industrial action in universities very seriously indeed, and met trade union and employer representatives before and during the dispute to discuss the issues underlying the industrial action. He also made clear his expectation that universities should put in place alternative arrangements to mitigate the impact of any disruption to studies.

Covid-19

This is an unprecedented and fast moving situation which we appreciate is placing a great deal of stress on universities management, staff and students - particularly given the uncertainty and constantly evolving advice that is accompanying this outbreak. The sector has already done a huge amount of work both in terms of contributing to wider efforts around responding to the impact of the pandemic and in terms of providing advice to staff and students.

During this time all institutions have stopped face-to-face teaching and provided online teaching where appropriate. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has engaged directly with each institution to understand sector challenges, support business continuity development and to signpost to guidance.

Quality Assurance

We are aware there can be concerns about academic integrity and the value placed on awards when they are moved online. This is why the Quality Assurance Agency for Scotland (QAAS), as the quality body for higher education in Scotland, has been working across the sector and with institutions individually to consider how each university has responded to the challenges, what that means for the standards of the qualifications they are offering and what it has meant for the student experience. Each higher education institution (HEI) in Scotland must meet an agreed set of expectations for academic standards and quality which are set out in the UK Quality Code.

QAAS has also provided the sector with a suite of guidance and wider supporting resources, covering matters including securing academic standards (to ensure awards are held in the same esteem irrespective of the pandemic mitigations), transitioning teaching, learning and assessment to online delivery, and the wider student experience (for example awareness of student mental health and wellbeing support).

QAAS can investigate concerns about academic standards and quality in Scottish Higher Education Institutions raised by students, staff and other parties under its Scottish Concerns Scheme (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/how-to-raise-a-concern-in-scotland>). Although this is not a mechanism for addressing individual complaints or grievances, where such concerns indicate serious systemic or procedural problems within individual institutions, a detailed investigation will be conducted.

Support for online learning

As an increasing amount of learning migrates online, we recognise for many students there is a real risk that they can no longer afford the costs associated with learning, especially as part-time work declines and as the costs of accessing and participating in online learning become a more significant proportion of living costs.

We want to provide post-school learners in need of extra help with access to the technology they need in support of their studies, mindful of the disruptive impact caused by COVID-19. On 9 July 2020 the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education & Science announced a £5 million digital inclusion support fund for Further Education, Higher Education and Community Education learners. This funding will help learners, aged 16-24, facing hardship offset the equipment costs associated with accessing community, college and university learning delivered online. Whilst targeted at 16-24 year-olds there will be some flexibility applied to ensure no-one is unduly disadvantaged.

This follows the announcement of the Student Support Action Plan to address some of the financial concerns facing students amid the Covid-19 pandemic. This was announced in April and has so far provided emergency funding of £5 million for students in hardship across the Further (FE) and Higher education (HE) sectors. In addition to this, on 11 June the First Minister announced a new package of measures to support students facing financial hardship over the summer months. Universities and colleges will have early access to the first instalment of their 2020-2021 Higher Education Discretionary Funds, amounting to £11.4 million.

We have also implemented measures to support access to these funds, including the removal of previous upper limits for access to financial hardship support, and revised guidance to allow funds to be used to support remote learning – in recognition of those students in digital poverty e.g. purchasing IT equipment or broadband access.

Although eligibility criteria and amounts vary, an SFC survey follow-up from 15 May confirmed that the HE sector has made significant hardship funds available to international students. We therefore continue to encourage students with concerns about access to hardship funding to contact their own college or university for support or, where applicable, their own home funding body.

Tuition fees

The Scottish Government, via the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS), pays the tuition fee rate on behalf of Scottish domiciled students and eligible EU students to Scottish HEIs and this rate is fixed in regulations at £1,820 per academic

year. This rate is not due to change as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and we will continue to make these payments to institutions on behalf of eligible students.

Universities are autonomous bodies with responsibility for managing their own affairs, and Scottish Ministers cannot therefore intervene in internal matters such as decisions relating to the refunding of tuition fees for international students and those from the rest of the UK.

The current package of student support aims to contribute towards the costs associated with postgraduate study. It is however important to consider that the tuition fee levels for postgraduate courses are not regulated by the Scottish Government. This means that HEIs have the ability to set the tuition fee levels for each postgraduate course. As tuition fees at postgraduate level are not regulated, the Scottish Government is unable to intervene directly in the charging or indeed any reimbursement of these fees.

Universities UK have published a briefing document to aid consistency in how universities approach refund and compensation policies for students (<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2018/briefing-compensation-refund-policies-april-2018.pdf#search=industrial%20action%20student%20compensation>). Universities Scotland are familiar with this guidance and have shared with Scottish institutions in response to any queries they have received.

Students who are not satisfied with the alternative provision and support they are receiving should make this known to their university in the first instance. Each university will have its own complaints procedure, and will be mindful of extenuating circumstances. If a student is not happy with the outcome of any complaint their concerns can be raised with the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO), whose remit includes the further and higher education sectors.