The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Richard Lochhead MSP
Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science
The Scottish Government
St. Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Ref: DC-BD9489

25 September 2020

Dear Richard,

Distribution of Funding to Tackle Digital Poverty

I wanted to write to you to welcome the additional funds that the Scottish Government has provided the further and higher education sector in Scotland to tackle digital exclusion. The funds to assist with the provision of ICT equipment to tackle digital poverty is indeed very welcome. Something that is particularly important as we move towards ever increasing remote or blended learning within a Covid-19 context.

I understand the additional £5million was distributed to college regional boards on the same criteria as to how the Student Funding Council was previously distributed. These were aimed at meeting short term or emergency support. However, I also understand that once the cash totals were allocated to regional boards, they were able to decide their own distribution mechanisms and formula. In the case of Glasgow, they chose to distribute funds on the same basis as it was given to them. Having met with Glasgow Kelvin College, I have doubts as to whether this was the most appropriate distribution mechanism (see later) but understand the speed and urgency by which the Regional Board wished to proceed. That may have been a determining factor in using the current formula. I have copied in Janie McCusker, Chair of the Glasgow Colleges Regional Board. I thank her and the Board for their ongoing work and commitment.

However, I do wish to raise concerns with the formula chosen by both the Scottish Government and the Regional Board. In doing so, I do not intend unpicking allocations already made, but rather to ask that consideration is given to a new distribution formula when future funds are provided. Let me explain.

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Ian Patrick, the Chair of the Board of Management at Glasgow Kelvin College, has informed me that his calculations indicate that just over 28% of SIMD and just under 25% of SIMD 20 students [based on of Full Time equivalent (FTE)] who attend a College in Glasgow, attend Glasgow Kelvin College. In stark contrast, the College received only just over 18% of Glasgow's share of this funding allocation. That does not seem either right or fair. Mr Patrick has also highlighted, again rightly, that a considerable number of students from deprived neighbourhoods attend on a part-time basis.

If we factor in part-time students and use the headcount figure, the percentage of students from SIMD 20 who attend a College in Glasgow and attend Glasgow Kelvin College rises to 39%. 39% of students in deprivation and only 18% of funds is a significant disparity. It cannot make sense to round up part-time students into an FTE figure in this context: a student from the poorest and most-deprived section of our community who is studying 50% of FTE still requires 100% of a laptop and will effectively be excluded if they cannot afford one.

There may have been a rationale for the formula used. However, I would suggest that there needs to be a speedy reassessment. For instance, for those on part-time courses and who previously 'got by', by taking on part time work, will have seen such opportunities disappear. We may be using a pre-Covid formula for Covid times. Strategies to tackle digital exclusion should not discriminate (unintentionally) against part time students from deprived communities.

Therefore, I ask both the Scottish Government and the Glasgow Colleges Regional Board to consider any future distribution formula ahead of any further funding award. As for the time constraint, I am informed that in June of this year, Glasgow Colleges Regional Board distributed £95k to the three Glasgow Colleges to address digital poverty. In that instance, a different methodology was used and I understand it was not a huge exercise to come up with a methodology which better reflected poverty.

I look forward to replies from both the Scottish Government and the Glasgow Colleges Regional Board.

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

Bob Doris MSP
MSP for Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn (SNP)

cc: Janie McCusker – Chair, Glasgow Colleges Regional Board