M: Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science

Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

David Linden MP
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Our Reference: 202000064919

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Dear David,

Digital Exclusion

Thank you for writing to the Deputy First Minister regarding concerns relating to digital exclusion within the college sector. As Minister responsible for the college sector, I have been asked to respond on Mr Swinney's behalf.

The Scottish Government and I are extremely grateful to the college sector for continuing to meet the needs of learners during the COVID-19 health pandemic. The adaptability, agility and innovation shown by the college sector is highly regarded and appreciated.

It is heartening to hear Glasgow Kelvin College is continuing to support students during these unprecedented times. This, undoubtedly, ensures learners gain new skills and develop their talents, standing Scotland in good stead, as we recover from Covid-19.

In recognition of some of the challenges faced by college students, including digital exclusion, during the pandemic, the Scottish Government has taken a range of actions to support students. For example, I was delighted to announce in parliament on 9th July 2020 our investment of £5 million to help offset the costs of equipment for those learners in need of extra support whilst participating in community education, college and university. My officials are engaging with key partners, including Colleges Scotland, SFC and SAAS, to ensure we maximise the benefit of this funding thus ensuring

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that it reaches those learners most in need.

In addition, other actions have been taken to support current learners, for example:

- The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has allowed colleges and universities to use discretionary student support funds to cover the necessary equipment / infrastructure costs for students to be able to continue their studies remotely.

- Vulnerable groups of students such as estranged and care-experienced are priority groups for discretionary fund support. New eligibility guidance has supported institutions to ensure that no students are disadvantaged in their studies due to the lack of access to the appropriate technology. As an example, this has led to the University of the Highlands and Islands, taking advantage of this new approach, to launch an emergency fund to help college and university students who are unable to purchase essential technology due to financial hardship. This fund has been used to provide students with a range of equipment and services, including laptops and broadband connections.

In addition, the Scottish Government has published guidance on the Student Information Scotland website (https://www.studentinformation.gov.scot/) which offers a range of useful advice and support for students in Scotland, including on accessing financial support.

To continue to support the needs of Further Education students and the College sector, I meet regularly with a range of partners across the college sector, including NUS Scotland, to understand and determine what more we can do to support our college learners at this challenging time.

I trust this response is useful. I wish all your constituents who are studying at Glasgow Kelvin College all the very best in their studies and future careers.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

Richard Lochhead
M: Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science

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