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TO: College and University Principals

21 March 2020

CORONAVIRUS EMERGENCY

I wanted to thank you for your continued and ongoing engagement on COVID-19.

The Scottish Government is acutely aware of the financial and other pressures facing the sector right now.

I have found our recent discussions incredibly useful to gain an understanding of how we can work constructively together to provide collective leadership in the weeks and months ahead in what will be a challenging time for us all.

Effective communications

Collective messaging and a consistent approach are more important than ever given the current anxieties and concerns from your students and staff as well as wider society. As always, the health and wellbeing of your learners and employees, and the economic stability of your institutions, are of paramount importance to the Scottish Government.

I see regular communication as central to this. Now more than ever we need to be clear with staff and students on our expectations of, and support for, them. I also want to have regular communication with educational institutions and the other key agencies working on these issues at a national level.

It is vitally important that we protect those most vulnerable amongst your students and staff, and continue to prioritise helping them through what will be a challenging and anxious time for them all. We discussed this on our calls earlier this week.

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We have been working with STUC and business representative organisations to develop a set of fair work principles. These will provide a guide on how businesses and organisations should work with staff, and treat them fairly and flexibly in the extraordinary situation workplaces are dealing with.

We need to support those who feel their livelihoods and ability to pay bills are under threat. The coronavirus job retention scheme and other measures announced by the UK Government yesterday (Friday 20th March) should hopefully help you to contribute to this.

I am grateful to you for your offers to access your considerable assets, and expertise, to support Scotland through this challenging time for our country and it would be helpful to receive more detail on how this might work in practice.

I am keen that we make representations to the UK Government for further policy and fiscal interventions that may be needed to support these endeavours. We will also join up our work internally in the Scottish Government with the range of portfolio areas that will be important in addressing the emerging issues.

Exams and certification

You will be aware that the Deputy First Minister felt it necessary this week to take the difficult and unprecedented decision that the secondary school exam diet for 2020 cannot go ahead.

To ensure that the awarding of qualifications can continue, the Chief Examiner has been asked to develop a credible certification model in the absence of the exam diet. It will be critical that coursework is completed and teachers' professional judgements of estimated grades are made and submitted to Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to support this process.

The SQA will provide further detail in due course but in order for such an approach to be as effective as possible, the SQA will require relevant units to be completed, and coursework and teacher estimates of grades to be submitted, by the agreed deadlines, or indeed sooner where that is possible. Schools will be asked to support the completion of units and submit coursework and teacher estimates as soon as they can – and by the dates provided.

The SQA has issued a statement following the statement from the Deputy First Minister, and in it confirmed that they are looking to complete the certification process by 4 August or sooner. SQA will continue to provide updated guidance.

It will be critical for the system to work together and for Universities and Colleges to be able to accept the certification model that SQA devise.

To this end it will be important to ensure that positive engagement continues. Both sectors are represented on the Qualifications Contingency Group through Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland and active consideration is being given to the role that it can now perform under current circumstances.

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Collective leadership

I am clear that we need a system level response to the challenge ahead of us.

I intend to convene and lead a **Covid-19 high level response group** across further and higher education to respond to the current situation and to plan for recovery. Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland, together with a small but representative number of Principals, the Unions and bodies including the Scottish Funding Council and Student Awards Agency Scotland, will be part of that group.

I also want to ensure there are further opportunities for me to hear directly from all Principals on issues emerging. In this context, it is key we also have an FE Principals Reference Group and an HE Principals Reference Group that can meet from time to time underneath the high level group.

My officials will be in touch with further details on all of this.

Once again, I thank you for your continued support during this unprecedented time and please do not hesitate to get in touch with me or my officials on any issues.



RICHARD LOCHHEAD

Cc. Chair and Chief Executive, Scottish Funding Council
Convener and Chief Executive, Universities Scotland
Chair and Chief Executive, Colleges Scotland

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