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## Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education

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### Introduction

**About Edinburgh College Students' Association**

1. Edinburgh College Students' Association (ECSA) is an independent charity that represents our members - the circa 27,000 people that study at Edinburgh College. We act as their voice in College decisions, and are devoted to their educational interests and welfare. We provide advice and support for our members, and put on social and sporting activities for them to take part in.

**About this report**

2. This report was written based on a mix of evidence gathered through years of data-driven activities. Evidence included will be referenced throughout but useful things to note include:

- End of Year Report 2019/20 (<https://ecsa.scot/2020/07/end-year-report-2019-2020>)
- End of Year Survey (report attached)

ECSA supports the response submitted by NUS Scotland in addition to any evidence and notes added in this response.

### Strengths of well funded Students' Associations

**Recognising the role of Students' Associations**

4. Students' associations are central to supporting and advocating for students - that has never been clearer as we navigate the impacts of COVID-19. SA's have come a long way since the sector-agreed 'Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations in Scotland', however some of the growth possible is being hindered by the stagnation of funding awarded to Students' Associations across Scotland.

Students' Associations are in proven and unique positions to support students at a shorter timescale and often in a more personable way. Responding to lockdown and the

impact of COVID-19 has shown exactly how responsive SA's can be.

*Therefore ECSA believes it is crucial that the Scottish Government and our institutions continue to recognise the key role they play in delivering a strong student experience and student voice at institutions across Scotland and ensure that they are properly resourced.*

#### ECSA during lockdown 5.

When campuses shut and the country entered into lockdown it quickly became very clear that the role of ECSA was to ensure clear information was available to students. This was on top of advocating on behalf of students and continuing our usual work with class reps and quality processes.

Since we moved to remote working 4 months ago, we have been holding daily team meetings each weekday morning, created new web pages every week, and hosted several interactive sessions with students using a wide range of platforms - this is our new normal.

Whilst a lot of our energy was spent on developing new, up-to-date information, we recorded and answered more than 50 direct queries from students in the first 10 days of lockdown, with the majority contributing to updated information on our website. On top of this, we have worked on a further 15 student cases since lockdown began. Enquiries are logged when a question can be answered immediately, whereas cases are more complex, usually involve multiple people, and ordinarily take weeks or months to resolve fully.

Moving from on-campus learning to wholly online during lockdown has been a huge shift for students' learning experiences. We were aware early-on in the lockdown that many students felt isolated, anxious, and unsure about how to connect. We established our own "Virtual Campus" on Facebook to help tackle these issues. This group has more than 500 members and has helped provide fun, discussion, feedback, and support throughout the lockdown period. We have used this group to run polls on specific issues, organise online events, and share information and updates, such as the SQA announcements over recent months.

None of our online successes would have been possible had we not already had the sustained autonomy, organisation or funding we have enjoyed as a result of excellent partnership with Edinburgh College over many years.

In our End of Year Survey, 60 students (15%) of respondents were concerned (and considered ending their educational journey) about their additional support needs not being considered in their further studies if online learning were to continue.

*In this new normal where students and providers can expect to operate remotely at an increasing rate, we ask that the Scottish Government recognises the value that student support services offer to the student experience and therefore commits to protecting institutional student services and considers further funding to implement online provision of services.*

## Students' Associations at the center of change

6. With well-funded and supported student's association colleges, students and the sector get ground-breaking and sector leading innovation that comes straight from students.

ECSA was able to gather information and data from students across Edinburgh College after students were studying from home in a way the institution was not able to. This gave a valuable insight into the behaviours, concerns and barriers that students were facing during lockdown. It has influenced the way the college is responding and offered students the opportunity to be involved in decision-making about their own student experience.

In our End of Year Survey we received more than 400 responses and 40% of these students said that a lack of equipment was a barrier to their continuing education.

Further to barriers, students were also asked to identify their biggest concerns about the future. The results of this question will reflect the fact that 36% of the respondents will be finishing at Edinburgh College this summer and, thus, the biggest concern is identified as not getting a job (46%), with additional comments added from students worried about the industry they are studying in and the changes they might see post-COVID due to economic uncertainty. This is especially prevalent in industries such as hospitality and creative industries. Closely followed is the concern that it won't be possible to complete their current or further study (41%).

The evidence from the End of Year Survey offered a unique opportunity to implement changes that students

had asked for. For example the qualitative data of the survey made it clear that students would prefer one entry point when learning from home and the platform they preferred was Microsoft Teams. ECSA had this data available before the academic year was even concluded, meaning it would influence planning for the next session.

Additionally, the survey offered students the opportunity to take part in the internal College Student Experience group tasked with planning for the return to College. Over the course of the summer 8 students have been involved in weekly steering group meetings.

### **Threats to funding**

**Cost of living of students** 7. Along with NUS Scotland we welcome that the Scottish Government has made over £16 million available to Scotland's students - for emergency hardship funds and summer support. We also welcome the recently-announced £5 million package of support to address digital poverty.

In the short term the Scottish Government should continue to make funds available to keep support available for those students most at risk of withdrawing or being left behind due to digital poverty.

Students' Associations have long campaigned for summer support and further levels of student funding to be made available so students do not need to rely on part-time (and in some cases full-time) jobs to sustain themselves while going through education.

We saw from our End of Year Survey and through interactions with students that they were losing their jobs in this gloomy economy and it is one of their biggest concerns about the future. Imagine entering education to make better for yourself, but you have a big cloud of economic crisis and funding cuts hanging over you. At ECSA we try to do our bit by employing student staff where possible to give students the opportunities and experience needed.

We want better for students in Scotland and we ask the Scottish Government to guarantee no cuts to student funding with the cost of living of students in mind.

**Financial sustainability of the sector**

9. *Our further and higher education systems are at risk and it is a generation of students who will pay the price unless we see public investment from the Scottish and UK governments for those institutions facing financial hardship.*

Many students are coming through education systems at a time when cuts have been made to public investment for years. Students are looking for guarantees that the education sector will be safeguarded as the key to unlocking the economic recovery, that includes support services and recent investments in supporting student mental health.

### **Quality enhancement**

**Utilising Class Reps**

9. Class Representatives who are elected, trained and supported through well established systems run by students' associations are a force for good and will be paramount when it comes to ensuring engagement with quality enhancement frameworks.

We have an opportunity where now when students are learning from home more frequently, they might be more likely to commit to the role of Class Rep as they can take it on in their own time. This means more students and hopefully a more diverse set of students will be available to influence quality arrangements and share their experiences.

This pandemic has shone a spotlight on quality of learning and teaching specifically with onus on teaching being flexible and adaptable to circumstances. With students as experts of their own learning it is a prime time to get more students involved in quality arrangements to ensure we don't miss out on the opportunity to change day to day learning and teaching practices to fit more students.

We ask that Scottish Government consider an extra focus be put on the level of student engagement in quality arrangements and self-evaluations, especially in institutions where class representative systems are not run autonomously by the Students' Association.

**Conclusion**

10. We are asking the Scottish Government to consider well funded SAs, continuing the development of specifically

College Students' Associations with a commitment that these should be autonomous and funded. ECSA believes a student experience is only complete if a student is supported through their journey and not left to fend for themselves. This means safeguarding student support services as well as a review of whether current levels of student funding are fit for purpose in a new normal of fewer jobs and less certainty.

There's an opportunity to reshape the provision of learning and the level of support students receive. We ask that Scottish Government consider putting students at the heart of any review and the impact of yet more economic uncertainty is considered.

**Report written by:**

**Jordan Wyllie, Rose Dodgson & Victoria Browning (Full-Time Officers)**

With support from Heidi Vistisen (ECSA staff)

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