Written response to the recommendations from Scottish Funding Council

Re: The Scottish Parliament’s Equal Opportunities Committee: Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities for disabled people in Scotland

We received a letter on 13 September from Margaret Mitchell MSP asking for a response to the above report.

I provided the Scottish Funding Council’s response to the recommendations in the report in July. Little has changed since then, so please regard this as our response to Margaret Mitchell’s latest letter. For convenience I enclose a copy of my earlier letter.

I am copying this response to the Association of Scotland’s College and Universities Scotland who are the representative bodies for colleges and higher education institutions.

David Wann
Director of Corporate Policy & Services
Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba
21 September 2007
Re: Parliamentary Committee report: *Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities* for disabled people in Scotland

Pleased find attached the Scottish Funding Council's response to the recommendations in the above report. I have also sent a copy of this letter to our sponsor department, and we look forward to working with all of our partners to take these recommendations forward. Should you require more information about our work or should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact my colleague, Andre Reibig, Policy Officer, Strategic Development (0131 313 6695, areibig@sfc.ac.uk).

Roger McClure  
Chief Executive  
Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council  
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba  
19 July 2007
The Scottish Funding Council's response to the Parliamentary Committee report: Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities for Disabled People in Scotland

The Council was asked to consider its response to the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 3:** All public authorities should work to the social model of disability when implementing their duties under the forthcoming Disability Equality Duty.

**Response:** The Council regards working towards the social model of disability (as opposed to the medical model) as a central and long-term objective. We recognise that we need to do more thinking around what the social model of disability really means in the context of learning and teaching as well as research in universities and colleges. We fund Equality Forward to help the sector to promote equality and to better understand this concept in order to put it into practice.

**Recommendation 7:** All public sector staff, especially in light of the Disability Equality Duty, have the promotion of equality as part of their job descriptions and performance competencies.

**Response:** We have drawn up an action plan in order to put our Equalities Scheme into practice, and we have set up an equalities advisory group to advise the Chief Executive about specific issues and to report annually on progress regarding our action plan. We have carried out impact assessments in all branches regarding all of our policies and practices, including those that apply to our executive staff. Our approach to this issue is to include our commitment to equalities in the staff code of conduct rather than by including a generic statement in the job descriptions or the performance competency framework. We feel that this is more effective and appropriate in order to embed the promotion of equalities in our policies and our action plan.

**Recommendation 18:** Public sector should be setting an example in the employment of disabled people and the Committee recommends that public bodies should use the Disability Equality Duty to establish and deliver exemplar practices in the employment of disabled people.

**Response:** Whilst we believe we can always improve from where we are currently, we think that at present we offer very good practice in terms of the employment of disabled people and in terms of making reasonable adjustments that staff need. At present, about 11 per cent of all our staff consider themselves as having a disability. This figure is close to the average for the public sector. We have also recently carried out a staff consultation regarding provision for disabled staff. The feedback from this consultation was very positive and helpful, and we have included relevant suggestions into our Equality Scheme Action Plan. The SFC will also join the “positive about disability” scheme by the end of 2007 with preparatory work being underway.
Our commitment to deliver exemplar practices in the employment of disabled people is also stated in our organisation's value statement, in our quality improvement scheme and in our corporate plan.

**Recommendation 38:** The Committee welcomes the self-evaluation work done by the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council and recommends that it builds on this monitoring and evaluation work to take forward the mainstreaming agenda and to roll out good practice in service provision to disabled people across the sector.

**Response:** We will continue to work with institutions, QAA and HMIE on an enhancement-led approach for improving learning and teaching provision for all students. The support organisations that we fund, such as Equality Forward and the Scottish Disability Team, assist institutions with the integration of disability matters into all aspects of the operations of institutions, including the curriculum.

**Recommendation 46:** The Scottish Executive should work with, for example, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the funding council, to consider how best to promote close working relationships between schools and further and higher education providers in a co-ordinated fashion across Scotland.

**Response:** We welcome this recommendation. Our four regional Widening Access Fora are tasked with building more formal working relationships with schools and local authorities. The Funding Council's Chief Executive has recently met with the representatives of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE) to discuss how we can improve our working relationships further.

**Recommendation 56:** The Committee considers the issue of communication support to students to go much wider than British Sign Language interpretation and recommends that the Scottish Executive, the funding council and further and higher education providers should work together to investigate ways of increasing the availability of a comprehensive range of communication support to disabled students, such as Deafblind communicators, Palantypists, Makaton, graphic symbol charts, speech-to-text reporters and British Sign Language interpreters.

**Response:** Equality Forward and the BRITE Centre are taking this forward. We funded a special report on the needs of deaf students in higher education, which was published in June 2005. Equality Forward has established a working group to take the recommendations from this special report forward.

**Recommendation 57:** In order to remove the barriers that current funding arrangements can present to disabled learners accessing further and higher education, the Committee recommends that:
all funding providers should review their systems with a view to simplifying them and making more accessible information available to students;

the funding council and the Student Awards Agency for Scotland should review the system of funding support to students where it results in students being refused funding support because the cost of communication support is deemed to be prohibitive;

as part of the current review of funding being undertaken by the funding council, consideration be given to extending Disabled Students Allowance to non-higher level further education students or introducing an alternative model to meet the same objective. The Committee believes that this would go some way to removing the current inequalities in the student funding system; and

any new funding mechanism should ensure that funding follows the student rather than the student having to chase funding sources and that simplified and accessible information is available.

Response: We agree that funding mechanisms should be designed in order to cater for the needs of disabled students. However, changes to the arrangements for student support, such as the Disabled Students Allowance, are primarily a matter for the Scottish Executive and the Students Awards Agency for Scotland. We will raise these issues with our partners at our regular liaison meetings.

Recommendation 58: The Committee recommends that future funding to universities for service provision to disabled students should no longer be dependent on how many disabled students attend, rather it should focus on actual service provision to disabled students.

Response: As part of a wider review of our funding premia, we have also recently reviewed the Disabled Students Premium. We involved all of our main partners in this process, including those representing students with disabilities, The new mechanism is putting the onus on the institutions to build capacity for disabled students. We will be considering possible further refinements in the light of the additional information we have asked colleagues in the art & design sector to provide.

Recommendation 61: The Committee agrees that the timing of applications to the Student Awards Agency for Scotland can present a barrier and result in a backlog of applications. The Committee, therefore, recommends that the Student Awards Agency for Scotland and the funding council work with further and higher education providers to identify disabled students earlier and signpost the Student Awards Agency for Scotland services to them.

Response: We agree with this recommendation, which is primarily a matter for SAAS and the institutions to take forward. We will continue liaise and work with them.
**Recommendation 64:** In order to ensure that the barriers, such as those presented by "pretendy" courses, are removed, the Committee recommends that:

- the Scottish Executive should consider and address the perception that colleges are becoming day centres. The Committee notes that this situation may conflict with the social inclusion agenda, but considers that it must be dealt with more effectively to ensure appropriate choice and service provision to disabled people;

- the Scottish Executive, the funding council and further and higher education providers develop solutions to ensure that students are not forced to study life courses as a means of keeping occupied, as an easy option for social services, or to get colleges extra funding; and

- if a disabled person is placed on such a course, then it must be as a result of personal choice and as part of a structured programme of evaluation and development.

**Response:** As part of our quality assurance and enhancement-led approach to learning and teaching, HMIE inspect and evaluate college provision on a cyclical basis and the assessment of appropriate learning outcomes for all learners, including those with disabilities, is part of this process. As stated in our evidence to the Parliamentary Inquiry, we know that overall disabled students in Scotland's colleges and universities benefit well from their learning experience. We will continue to work with Equality Forward, Skill Scotland, colleges and universities to develop and share good practice on how disabled students can be helped to benefit more from their learning experience and to assist them in making the successful transition either into employment or into the next level of learning.

**Recommendation 68:** Consideration should be given to funding provision for students with complex needs from the funding council, along with other further and higher education provision.

**Response:** The Scottish Funding Council regularly reviews all of its funding systems to ensure they continue to be fit for purpose. For the college sector, we have recently developed a needs-led approach to funding students with additional support needs, and this new system is now being piloted.

**Recommendation 69:** In order that all future students benefit from the Teachability project, the Committee recommends that:

- the funding council should provide renewed and increased funding for the Teachability project to enable it to be rolled out as a condition of funding to all higher education providers; and

- a similar scheme to the Teachability project should be developed and piloted in the further education sector.
Response: The Teachability project was intended to develop resources to help teaching and support staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) to respond better to the needs of disabled students. The project was very successful and for this reason, the Funding Council extended its funding from two years to a further four years. A total of £583,000 was invested into the Teachability project. The project has achieved its objectives - the resources that it set out to create are now available and are being used widely by Scottish HEIs. All institutions are expected to meet the needs of all of their students, including those with disabilities. Institutions are required to demonstrate the effectiveness of their student support and learning systems as part of regularly reviewing their quality systems. We believe that there is scope to extent the use of Teachability resources to the college sector. Equality Forward and the Scottish Disability Team are investigating how this can be taken forward. Through Equality Forward, the Scottish Disability Team and our regular liaison with groups representing disabled students, we will continue to keep under review whether further national development work is required to extent or refresh these resources.

Recommendation 138: The Committee further recommends that public sector organisations ensure that they clearly publicise details of the accessibility of their services to ensure that those service users who may have individual access requirements are fully aware of what is available to them.

Response: Our web site has been built to comply with the W3C AA accessibility standards. All of our publications are available on request in alternative formats, such as braille. We are committed to improving the accessibility of our services. This is reflected in the action plan that is part of our Equality Scheme. We are also seeking further advice and guidance from Equality Forward on how we can improve our service delivery for disabled people.