



Vulnerable Students Stakeholder Group

19 May 2020 Note to Cascade

The structure of this meeting was more fluid to accommodate attendance and COVID-19 updates. The GfD update would follow after the meeting.

SLC operational update

SLC's transition to remote working under COVID-19 had been smooth and stability sustained. Background work was underway to fill any performance gaps. Processing should return to normal soon, and any identified gaps were being filled promptly.

Concerns about whether a physical return to campus would be possible meant that applications had dropped, but HEP messaging needed to be clear about the need to submit them promptly to avoid a late surge in applications.

CCGPS update

Application volumes had risen, with a considerable number having been received for the coming academic year. Childcare provider numbers continued to grow. Annual re-registration was not necessary. The vast majority of providers and students were linked.

Requests for payment had fallen sharply in April, most likely due to COVID-19. Students were no longer using childcare services due to not attending on campus and the closure of many childcare providers.

No instances of childcare funding having been exhausted had been reported, and feedback from students was very positive. Wider Plan seemed to be allowing them to manage their CCG entitlement more effectively.

Reduced functionality during the transition to remote working explained a drop in incoming calls in April. As the academic year was ending under atypical circumstances, the true baseline may only be visible at the same point in 2021. All data would continue to be monitored.

SFW update

Relatively few applications for Independent status had been unsuccessful. In line with England, application volumes for 2020/21 were much lower than usual. More students were being assessed as means-tested than non-means-tested, in line with previous years' trends. A spike in applications was expected when HEPs' delivery and teaching formats had been confirmed. There was also uncertainty over how exam results would be determined across all four domiciles.

More applications had been received where one or both parents were deceased, which could perhaps in part be attributable to COVID-19.

Remote working had been rolled out for SFW successfully, with eight new team members having been trained via WebEx. Further upskilling of existing colleagues was also planned.

The Estrangement query inbox for SFW had been created but was not yet live. Estrangement documentation was issued to the student once this status was confirmed. Applications should not take longer for Estranged students than for those who were not Estranged. Guidance on Estrangement was now more current and concise than it had been, and the new Estrangement form should satisfy all criteria at once.

HEPs were not necessarily confident in confirming a student's Estrangement status the first time, and the newly improved form did not fit every individual situation. The student could approach another third party for signature who did not have to be their HEP. Some potential signatories may be deterred from completing the form due to a lack of familiarity with the form or the student. Students needed to know who they could approach at HEPs to discuss it, and consistent messaging should make the process easier over time.

Vulnerable Customer Policy

The policy had now been signed off by SLC, and questions and feedback from the group were welcome. Its launch was still in the early stages, and SLC's Learning and Development colleagues inviting third party input from appropriate bodies on the relevant training.

The current climate may result in a surge in Vulnerable customers, and changes in SLC's processes would ensure they were properly supported. There was much demand for the policy at SLC, and updates would be provided as it was adopted. A student-friendly version of the policy was suggested to make it more accessible to the customers who would benefit from it most.

Independent team update

The Independent team was addressing challenges and identifying best practices through daily Teams meetings while remote working. SLAs had been maintained throughout the transition to lockdown with one exception which was promptly addressed, and initial call quality issues had been resolved.

Estrangement telephone lines were currently closed but the Independent Student and Estrangement Enquiries inboxes remained open, with queries being referred to case workers as appropriate. Enquiries could also be raised via the general contact centre telephone number.

Some changes to evidence requirements had been introduced, meaning that HEPs could now send the form by email to SLC via their academic email address.

The Independent team had expanded since the last meeting. One team member was also due to be upskilled, but training was proving to be challenging under lockdown. Twelve experienced assessors had been upskilled to award Independent status. There was new guidance on the Workable Application Report, which involved Independent evidence and complex decision-making. Assessors skills were now more widely spread in the department, and more colleagues had been multitasked. Additional assessors were being upskilled to case worker level. Resource was being secured to support the most vulnerable of students.

Application volumes were lower than at this point last year across the board, but applications continued to be submitted relatively early in the academic cycle.

Members thanked the Independent team for their efforts to maintain service levels under the current circumstances.

COVID-19

A COVID-19 response group had been formed to look at support for care experienced and Estranged students. This included representation from Stand Alone, Spectra, The Unite Foundation, NNECL, and the Become Charity. The group had been holding discussions with DfE on increasing numbers of students without parents who were also likely to lose seasonal employment under lockdown restrictions. Many students lacked a parental home or family resources for support. This summer was likely to pose more of a challenge than usual, as student funding did not cover this period even in normal conditions. The response group had suggested a one-off payment to be made through SLC who already held the data of the most eligible students.

Several detailed conversations had taken place and submissions had been made to the Minister of State for Universities, and her response was due soon. There had been considerable useful messaging through the Office for Students. The dialogue was hoped to continue when the ministerial steer had been received. Students should be protected from potential eviction from their accommodation. They could not access the furlough scheme available to employees.

Fast action was necessary if this funding was approved to prevent potential evictions. Students had no recourse to the furlough scheme or Universal Credit. SLC had not been involved in discussions with the response group so far, and no response could be given at this forum on the possibility of a one-off emergency payment to affected students or

associated messaging through SLC. Multiple other measures were already being taken by SLC.

The support of individual HEPs varied, with the greatest difficulty being the task of getting relevant information to those who needed it most. The Scottish Government was already considering its approach to support for these students, and the Northern Irish Government had announced additional funding.

Department for Education update

COVID-19 was currently the Department's near-exclusive focus. The stabilisation package for Higher Education had been announced some weeks ago. The potential reopening of HEPs in September depended on developments which had yet to transpire. Reforms to HE would be announced during the summer. The current trajectory suggested that things were being brought back under control but this depended on any eventual second wave. The new government had substantial plans for the sector and for long-standing issues.

Work on looked-after children, referenced in the new government's manifesto, had just begun prior to the pandemic. New proposals for the future needed close sector engagement.

Welsh Government update

SLC was thanked for all the hard work undertaken over the preceding months to ensure that ongoing student support had continued. The Welsh Government had joined NNECL and collaboration was underway, with the goal of inclusion.

In the absence of AOB, the meeting was closed.

Next meeting: Wednesday 24 June 2020, venue and format to be confirmed.