Witness Name: Gavin Donoghue
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Dated: 11 August 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY - MODULE 8

WITNESS STATEMENT OF GAVIN DONOGHUE

I, **Gavin Donoghue**, of Colleges Scotland, Argyll Court, Castle Business Park, Stirling, FK9 4TY will say as follows:

Roles and responsibilities

1. Colleges Scotland is the Membership organisation for colleges in Scotland. 24 colleges operate in 13 regions across Scotland, with there being 26 colleges during the specified period before a merger of UHI North Highland, UHI West Highland and UHI Lews Castle into UHI North West and Hebrides in 2023. There were three regional strategic bodies co-ordinating approaches for colleges in the Highlands and Islands, Glasgow, and Lanarkshire regions. In academic year 2019/20, there was 239,004 students in colleges. 56% of these were under 25 years old.

2. Colleges Scotland as the voice of the sector supports the delivery of thriving colleges at the heart of a thriving Scotland. We work closely with a wide range of colleagues across colleges to deliver on the sector's Statement of Ambition, which seeks to empower the college sector to make a strong and positive impact on the environment, the economy, and communities.

3. During the specified period, Colleges Scotland did not have any roles or responsibilities which incorporated direct engagement with young people; delivery of training and/or courses; or operating any teaching, apprenticeship or support facilities (including attainment, wellbeing and/or finances directly with individuals). The role of Colleges Scotland was to be the collective voice for colleges, engage in advocacy with Scottish Government and other key stakeholders, facilitate discussions and oversee the development and delivery of information, advice and guidance from Scottish Government.

4. Colleges Scotland has a long-standing working relationship with the Scottish Government and supports the delivery of its objectives, advocating for the college sector on a variety of policy and funding issues, alongside maintaining relationships with Education and Skills system agencies. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Colleges Scotland played a key role in supporting the college sector. Colleges Scotland was invited by Scottish Government to provide input on behalf of the sector in shaping Scottish Government guidance, providing key input and influence on behalf of colleges, and acting as a conduit for information flow to and from the sector, and relaying sector views to the Scottish Government and vice-versa to inform their decision making in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. During the specified period Colleges Scotland engaged with colleges to facilitate discussions around informing decision making for individual institutions in terms of the safe delivery of learning and teaching activity, in addition to maintaining activity on sector policy and funding matters.

6. Colleges Scotland maintained the existing relationship with Skills Development Scotland as the Scottish Government agency with responsibility for the awarding and contracting of Modern Apprenticeship delivery. Conversations focused on supporting and enabling apprentice candidates to engage and complete their learning.

7. Colleges Scotland also maintained the existing relationship with Scottish Government, engaging with the then Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, Richard Lochhead MSP, and from May 2021 the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training, Jamie Hepburn MSP. This included meetings of the Covid-19 Advanced Learning Recovery Group, alongside maintaining engagement on existing sector policy matters, including sector funding and reform.

8. The pre-existing relationship with Universities Scotland also continued to be maintained, with the senior leadership teams and policy teams continuing to engage on shared matters of policy interest, including areas in relation to Widening Access and Articulation for learners alongside joint activity on Student Mental Health and Wellbeing.

9. A relationship was maintained with the National Union of Students around shared areas of policy activity, with engagement between the Colleges Scotland CEO and the President of the NUS in Scotland.

10. In addition to those organisations specified above, Colleges Scotland also engaged with the Scottish Funding Council as the non-departmental public body with responsibility for the funding of Scotland's Further and Higher Education institutions, including at the time of the pandemic the 26 colleges, alongside Scotland's 19 universities.

11. At the outset of the pandemic, urgent discussions were required on college sector funding. This has been based on the volume of learners within institutions, with price bandings across different groups of learners, depending on subject studied. With the immediate impact of the pandemic on learner attendance and performance, this system had to be renegotiated with the Scottish Government and SFC to ensure that institutions continued to receive funding in spite of the drastic changes to their operations.

12. Subsequent engagement took place across a wide number of policy topics, including financial sustainability of colleges and the funding model for institutions, college sector infrastructure as well as those student facing areas, including Student Support Funding, additional funding for mental health and wellbeing initiatives, and the implementation of other skills focused initiatives through the college sector in Scotland including the Young Persons Guarantee.

13. Colleges Scotland held regular engagements with the Scottish Qualifications Authority regarding contingency planning for qualifications and course assessment and in relation to managing processes for ascertaining competencies.

14. Particular challenges were encountered in finding solutions for apprentices and SVQ students affected by the pandemic and its associated impacts, with college staff and assessors adapting practices to support learners to continue progressing their learning as far as was practicable in compliance with public health guidance, within the boundaries of the assessment strategy of respective qualifications using flexible methods of gathering and reviewing evidence.

Pre-pandemic planning

15. Prior to 2020 there had not been any consultation with the wider college sector around closure of colleges and/or the pausing of apprenticeships as part of a response to a pandemic, but there had been instances of colleges being subjected to cyber attacks which informed subsequent sector planning in response to such events.

Guidance and policy during the Specified Period

The initial response to the pandemic

16. The Scottish Government did not provide advice, guidance or instructions in respect of college closures between January and March 2020. Across the initial period the college sector was alive to the issues emerging amidst a rapidly changing public health context. In terms of the closure of colleges, ahead of the issue of clear direction from Scottish Government for institutions to close, a number of institutions made the decision to close their campuses on a voluntary basis in order to safeguard the wellbeing of students and staff. This led to a variance across the sector in terms of college closures, ahead of the instruction for all colleges to close. Colleges Scotland, through participation in the weekly College Principals Group meetings convened to discuss the sector's response to the pandemic, was aware of and receiving the latest concerns and actions of individual institutions. In terms of the closure of colleges ahead of the issue of clear direction from Scottish Government for institutions to close, whilst not reporting these directly to Colleges Scotland, we were aware of a number of institutions that had made the decision to close their campuses on a voluntary basis in order to safeguard the wellbeing of students and staff. Our understanding is that this led to a variance across the sector in terms of college closures.

17. Whilst colleges were closed for learning and teaching activity, some essential college staff were still required to attend campuses in order to ensure the maintenance of college estates, including both physical and digital infrastructure, whilst supporting students in accommodation on those college campuses with student accommodation, and feeding animals housed on campuses.

18. Colleges Scotland was not aware of any specific instruction for colleges to close from the Scottish Government, other than the First Minister reiterating the need for a national lockdown. Colleges Scotland was not given any instructions from Scottish Government to communicate a requirement to close to the sector. Colleges Scotland was aware of discussions within and between colleges around the most appropriate response to the rapidly changing public health environment, and our understanding was that the lack of specific instruction created a variance across the sector in terms of college closures.

19. During the specified period, the role of Colleges Scotland was to facilitate discussions for the college sector with Scottish Government officials and to oversee the development and delivery of information, advice and guidance with which colleges could enable access and the practical delivery of education for young people, alongside supporting the wellbeing of those young people.

20. Colleges Scotland played a key role in supporting the college sector. Colleges Scotland attempted to provide Scottish Government with input on behalf of the sector, to help in shaping Scottish Government guidance, by providing input and influence on behalf of colleges, and acting as a conduit for information flow to and from the sector, and relaying sector views to the Scottish Government and vice-versa to inform their decision making in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this capacity Scottish Government utilised Colleges Scotland to communicate with colleges around the potential need for them to close their facilities and to make plans for the delivery of remote education and training.

21. Colleges Scotland supported the college sector in its implementation of Scottish Government guidance relating to the pandemic response, including the closure of college buildings and campuses, remote learning and teaching and reopening with appropriate safety measures. This was done by playing a conduit role in facilitating consultation and engagement across colleges to share advice and guidance in mitigating the impact of Covid-19 on college operations and in interpreting the Scottish Government guidance into practical actions on campuses.

22. Weekly online meetings with the College Principals' Group (CPG) were held, to ensure effective engagement with the senior sector leaders (pre-pandemic there were 4 CPG meeting scheduled per annum). A specific Covid 19 response Scenario Planning Group was also established, chaired by a principal and with Colleges Scotland as the secretariat, to bring together institutional representatives with experience and expertise in operating college facilities, responsibility for corporate services and human resources, as well as those with oversight of learning, teaching and curriculum delivery, ensuring the full breadth and scale of college operations was captured within the group, to co-ordinate the sector response to the pandemic. The purpose of the Scenario Planning Group was to provide a central forum for these representatives to assess and plan the safe delivery of college activity against the changing public health environment and in line with Scottish Government guidance, in addition to providing advice and guidance to support continued delivery of activity. The Group met approximately every few weeks, as and when required. The Scenario Planning Group was an advisory group, to provide information, advice,

informal guidance and support to those sector forums and groups already in existence prior to the emergence of the pandemic.

23. In regard mitigating impact on learners, Colleges Scotland engaged with the Scottish Government, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), as the commissioning body for Modern Apprenticeships, and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) throughout the duration of the specified period to identify and mitigate the impact of lockdown on young people undertaking apprenticeships in Scotland.

24. Particular challenges were encountered in finding solutions for apprentices and SVQ students affected by the pandemic and its associated impacts, with college staff and assessors adapting practices to support learners to continue progressing their learning as far as was practicable in compliance with public health guidance, within the boundaries of the assessment strategy of respective qualifications using flexible methods of gathering and reviewing evidence to ascertain learner competence and allow them to complete their apprenticeship and move into employment.

25. Many students faced delays in having their apprenticeship signed off because of a pause in their training during lockdown, which caused backlogs in delivering in-person assessment and certification of learner competence. Steps were subsequently taken by stakeholders, including colleges, to address this, for example, the development and delivery of an assessment strategy working with the Scottish Government, Scottish Qualifications Authority and Construction Industry Training Board to provide a clear plan to resolve the backlog in certificating Construction related qualifications. Another example is that Colleges Scotland worked with a large number of Awarding Bodies to assist in the development of verified assessment in remote environments.

26. Colleges Scotland as the representative body for the college sector in Scotland was not directly involved or engaged in discussions with colleges in Scotland regarding work to consider what they would potentially require in order to ensure that their facilities could stay open either fully or partially in the event that Covid-19 became a pandemic.

27. It was the role and responsibility of individual colleges to determine their ability to provide young people with education and training remotely in the event that they would have to close and what steps could be taken to ensure that young people could continue to access education and training in the event that colleges had to close, taking into account their local and regional environments.

Announcement of a national lockdown

28. There was no consultation between Colleges Scotland and the Scottish Government about the potential impact on young people of the closure of colleges prior to the announcement of a national lockdown on 23 March 2020. Those conversations which did take placer focused on lockdown process and procedures colleges were considering and implementing rather than considering the potential impact of those processes and procedures. It is important to note that this impact would not solely extend to young people and would also impact on all learner communities served by the college sector, including refugees and adult learners.

29. The pandemic had a notable impact on the mental health and wellbeing of both college learners and staff, with sector leaders reporting increased demand from learners for mental health and wellbeing services as offered by their institutions, including access to counsellors via video conferencing platforms. It was widely reported that learners struggled to engage with their courses and that they did not have the full college experience due to not being on campus.

30. Particular concerns were also raised at the time with Scottish Government both by institutions and through Colleges Scotland regarding the human rights and wellbeing of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners accessing colleges, with it quickly becoming apparent that these learners relied upon college staff to support their access to, and understanding of, state benefits and entitlements available to them. There was also a disproportionate impact on ASN learners and those in supported programmes through remote delivery of learning and teaching given the particular, individualised support these learners required to support them to fully succeed in their learning. Colleges Scotland understands from individual colleges that they tried to mitigate the impacts on ESOL and ASN learners, but we do not hold information on specific mitigation steps.

31. Wellbeing concerns were also raised for some learners in relation to their home environments and whether they were safe and secure in those in order to fully engage in their learning. This was later recognised by the Scottish Government developing and providing guidance which enabled learners from challenging home environments to come onto college campuses.

32. Given the practical nature of many college courses, the closure of campuses had a notably disproportionate impact on certain learner cohorts.

33. The college sector saw significant subject-specific impacts, most notably in the delivery of Modern Apprenticeships and in supporting apprentices to complete assessments which would enable them to progress fully into the workplace, across construction, electrical engineering and plumbing and heating courses in particular.

34. Those learners who were enrolled in courses relating to Health and Social Care, as well as Early Years and Childcare, were also significantly impacted by the closure of colleges and restricted access to their work placements due to social distancing and capacity guidance within these settings.

35. Colleges reported specific challenges in areas such as Hair and Beauty, where at certain stages of the pandemic learners were able to apply their skills in workplace settings, but were unable to return to college to progress their learning due to varying levels of guidance in place for workplaces and businesses in comparison to those being applied within the college sector.

Advice and guidance to colleges during the Specified Period

36. The role of Colleges Scotland was to be the collective voice for colleges, engage in advocacy with Scottish Government and other key stakeholders, facilitate discussions and oversee the development and delivery of information, advice and guidance from Scottish Government. Colleges Scotland did not (except on a small handful of occasions in the later stages of the pandemic, when a Colleges Scotland representative attended the Expert Advisory Group, from February 2022 onwards) attend the decision making meetings within Scottish Government. Examples of advice given to both the Expert Advisory Group and other forums included the potential options for delivery of learning and teaching, numbers of learners on campuses and space utilisation, as well as being a two-way conduit for information and views to be expressed.

37. Individual colleges would each communicate to students and agree their own policies and making their own decisions in light of the guidance. CS role was to communicate national level policy and create a space for discussion to shape these policies and ensure they were informed by college knowledge and understanding of curriculum delivery.

38. Whilst it was for individual colleges to communicate to their students, Colleges Scotland did share with Scottish Government in May 2021 that as a planning assumption for the subsequent 2021/22 academic year school pupils on college campuses would continue to abide by college guidance and rules. This was further raised in subsequent discussions about the potentially confusing situation for school pupils who attended college premises for at least some of the week, as the rules within the Scottish Government guidance were different for colleges and schools, and the need to align guidance for schools and colleges to ensure minimal confusion and disruptive impact.

39. At the time when rules were first set, it appeared that Scottish Government officials setting the rules were unaware that school pupils from schools attended colleges. During the re-opening of colleges and return to face-to-face learning the guidance for schools was different from the guidance for colleges. In producing this guidance there was a lack of awareness and recognition from Scottish Government officials that school pupils were accessing college campuses through school-college partnership and Foundation Apprenticeship related activity.

Closure of facilities and *Changes in the delivery of learning*

40. With the role of Colleges Scotland being the collective voice for colleges, to engage in advocacy with Scottish Government and other key stakeholders, facilitate discussions and oversee the development and delivery of information, advice and guidance from Scottish Government, we do not hold specific detailed information on specific facilities which were subject to closures during particular periods, or on type of learning options offered to any cohorts of students.

41. The impact of these closures on students, staff, apprenticeships and attainment have been set out in paragraphs 29 – 35 above.

42. Colleges quickly moved to online delivery and expanded digital capacity to ensure that students could continue learning. This sudden move to online learning placed colleges in a context of "reactive teaching" as opposed to the provision of genuine online learning. College Principals, working through Colleges Scotland, raised the challenges with Scottish Government, that resulted from the lack of information around online learning and how to facilitate this appropriately for learners, and on how to support staff to deliver learning and teaching activity through online platforms. Colleges Scotland continued to raise these

issues in meetings with Scottish Government, including the details around a specific fund to mitigate the impact of digital poverty on learners.

43. This transition to online learning and hybrid learning evidenced varying levels of digital literacy within learning and teaching staff across colleges, which subsequently impacted on the delivery of learning and teaching and access to learning resources. Colleges also reported on the challenges of engaging with learners through online platforms and in conducting classes and lectures, and of similar difficulties in providing pastoral support for learners.

44. At the same time the move to online and hybrid learning evidenced the levels of digital poverty being faced by learners across Scotland's colleges, with colleges reporting increased difficulties for learners in having consistent and affordable internet access as well as in securing laptops with which to maintain their engagement with their course.

45. The implementation of the levels system by the Scottish Government, applied across local authorities, caused further issues for the implementation of face-to-face learning. With colleges operating within regions overlapping across local authorities, this led to a situation wherein colleges were having to operate at different levels across different campuses, which created major challenges in implementing a consistent return to face-to-face learning within the parameters defined by the levels and associated public health guidance.

46. A separate issue which emerged during the re-opening of colleges and return to face-to-face learning was that the guidance for schools was different from the guidance for colleges, in that school pupils were not required to adhere to social distancing whilst in schools, meanwhile the college guidance was to maintain at least 2m social distancing. At the same time, school pupils were not required to wear face masks within schools, but to do so when engaging in activity on college campuses. This caused confusion for those learners being educated in both school and college settings within the same time periods. As per point 39 there was a lack of awareness and recognition from Scottish Government officials that school pupils were accessing college campuses through school-college partnership and Foundation Apprenticeship related activity. This was another example of poorly informed decision making.

47. Similarly, the guidance produced around sharing transport also led to students being unable to access learning on campus due to social distancing and isolation requirements, with this

having a particularly disproportionate impact on learners in rural settings who were unable to share car journeys to their local campus.

Student accommodation and Provision of practical support to students who were isolating

48. With the role of Colleges Scotland being the collective voice for colleges, to engage in advocacy with Scottish Government and other key stakeholders, facilitate discussions and oversee the development and delivery of information, advice and guidance from Scottish Government, we do not hold specific detailed information on accommodation and how these were managed by individual colleges, including the particular approaches to support students who were isolating. It should be noted, however, that only a small number of colleges have their own accommodation facilities.

The provision of mental health support to students

49. With the role of Colleges Scotland being the collective voice for colleges, to engage in advocacy with Scottish Government and other key stakeholders, facilitate discussions and oversee the development and delivery of information, advice and guidance from Scottish Government, we do not engage directly with students, including the provision of mental health support.

50. The Thriving Learners report by the Mental Health Foundation, in partnership with Colleges Scotland and funded by The Robertson Trust, (Exhibit GD/01 [INQ000545875]) is the most extensive study to date on the mental health and wellbeing of college students in Scotland. Conducted between February and May 2022, the research involved over 2,000 students from every Scottish college, aiming to understand their mental health challenges and inform sector-wide improvements. Key findings included that more than half of students surveyed (54%) reported having moderate, moderately severe, or severe symptoms of depression. Among those students who had experienced food insecurity, a quarter (25%) had severe symptoms of depression. Despite the prevalence of mental health problems among the college student population, more than half (55%) said they have concealed a mental health problem due to fear of stigmatisation. These findings and others shared within the report prompted a series of recommendations from Mental Health Foundation and Colleges Scotland including calls for sustained Scottish Government investment in mental health and wellbeing supports at college. College support services were also encouraged to enhance communications to students, particularly those at higher risk of poor mental health, about mental health and wellbeing supports available.

51. In regard to the period March to September 2020, one of the recommendations was that colleges and key funding agencies, including Scottish Government, need to work together to implement a post pandemic recovery plan that recognises and addresses the impact of the pandemic on student learning and social confidence.

Grade calculation

52. There was also greater competition for new admissions, with more learners either staying on in school for senior phase learning as opposed to moving into college and with more learners instead progressing into university level study through reduced entry requirements.

53. Colleges reported the challenges of offering school leavers places on courses due to the fact deferred students were given first refusal on college places in the following year, at the risk of displacing other learner cohorts within the system. An exercise conducted by college sector Vice Principals noted that the impact of 18 months of restricted learning would result in deferred learning for specific groups beyond 2021-22 e.g. apprentices on 4 year programmes. The impact would include additional teaching time required for apprentices.

Support or guidance from Scottish Government

54. The role of Colleges Scotland was to be the collective voice for colleges, engage in advocacy with Scottish Government and other key stakeholders, facilitate discussions and oversee the development and delivery of information, advice and guidance from Scottish Government. As part of this role, we initiated and facilitated the weekly College Principals Group meetings, convened for the senior leaders to discuss the sector's response to the pandemic, at which Scottish Government officials usually attended the first part of these meetings. Professor Jason Leitch, Scotland's National Clinical Director, and other health professionals also attended a small number of the meetings of the College Principals Group, in order to hear directly from Principals in regard to the Government's response to the pandemic. Colleges Scotland was a member of different working groups, including the Further and Higher Education Covid-19 Ministerial Leadership Group, later renamed the Covid-19 Recovery Group, which were usually chaired by the relevant Scottish Government Minister with responsibility for Higher and Further Education.

Monitoring and assessment of impact

55. The Thriving Learners report by the Mental Health Foundation, whilst not related specifically to the pandemic, focused on college students in Scotland. The report does not directly quantify the impact of mental health challenges on academic attainment. However, it highlights several factors that can adversely affect students' academic performance. These include:

- Low Mental Wellbeing: 64% of college students reported low mental wellbeing.
- Depression Symptoms: 54% experienced moderate to severe symptoms of depression.
- Food Insecurity: 37% experienced food insecurity in the previous 12 months; 17% lived in households that had run out of food.
- Stigma and Concealment: 55% of students concealed a mental health problem due to fear of stigma.

56. While the report doesn't provide specific data on academic attainment, these factors—particularly depression and food insecurity—are known to negatively impact concentration, motivation, and overall academic performance. The report recommends that colleges and key funding agencies implement a post-pandemic recovery plan that addresses the effects of the pandemic on student learning and social confidence.

57. Despite concerted efforts, learner retention remains a significant concern. The College Sector Overview Report 2022–2023 by Education Scotland – (Exhibit GD/02 [INQ000643206]) highlights that:

- Many learners, especially those transitioning directly from school, lack the confidence and study skills necessary for college programs.
- Flexible learning options and additional support services have been introduced to aid at-risk learners, but challenges persist, particularly in ensuring consistent application and effectiveness.
- Variation in learner retention and attainment rates between colleges remained significant and that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic amplified these differences for AY 2021/22.
- Some subject areas had lower national rates of learner successful completion than others and that this had been a trend for some time. Several colleges had persistently low learner attainment rates across multiple subjects, with Education Scotland noting that these issues pre-dated the pandemic in these colleges.

58. The Changing Learner Report by Colleges Development Network (CDN) (Exhibit GD/03 [INQ000643205]) identifies evolving challenges among students. CDN works with colleges

to develop their people; through networks, events and webinars, college board training, and leadership development, and to share best practices and impact. The challenges identified amongst students by this report included:

- Lower academic performance and delayed skills development.
- Underdeveloped social skills and increased anxiety.
- Decreased resilience, with the pandemic exacerbating these issues.

While the pandemic exacerbated these issues, the report suggests they were already emerging before 2020.

59. In response, CDN launched the Changing Learner Programme in January 2025, which looked at how colleges could address the current challenges facing learners in Scotland, focusing on:

- Promoting positive behaviours and conflict resolution.
- Enhancing culture and community within colleges.
- Supporting staff wellbeing and safeguarding
- Creating an inclusive, supportive learning environment in response to the findings of the Changing Learner Report.
  Key findings of the Changing Learner Report included lower academic performance, delayed skills development, increased anxiety and reduced resilience. The report states that these issues, exacerbated by the pandemic, had started emerging prior to it.

The Changing Learner Programme, in practical terms, offers tools for managing behaviours and resolving conflicts, training and resources to support learners affected by trauma, workshops to assist in implementing inclusive polices and practices, and workshops focused on mental health, self care and safeguarding.

Students' perspectives

60. Whilst Colleges Scotland does not have any roles or responsibilities which incorporated direct engagement with young people, Colleges Scotland does have regular engagement with the National Union of Students Scotland, which consists of quarterly strategic dialogue on policy matters of shared interest. In the pandemic period Colleges Scotland liaised with NUS Scotland on engagement with the Scottish Government regarding mental health counselling and pastoral support for learners.

Lessons learned

61. There were a number of forums wherein the college sector voice contributed. These were primarily education focused as opposed to health focused, including the Further and Higher Education Covid-19 Ministerial Leadership Group, later renamed the Covid-19 Recovery Group, as chaired by the Minister, and the College Covid Leads Group, chaired by senior Scottish Government officials. Colleges Scotland was later provided with the opportunity to provide input into a Coronavirus (COVID-19): Advisory Sub-Group on Universities and Colleges, chaired by Professor Linda Bauld.

62. However, there appeared to be a disconnect between the inputs provided by college sector representatives in these forums regarding suggested actions and directions in responding to the pandemic, and the subsequent outputs in the form of decisions taken by the Scottish Government. This made it unclear as to how much influence these forums provided for the sector in terms of informing decisions about the response to the pandemic. For example, the divergence in rules between school and colleges relating to social distancing was raised but the guidance was not changed. Another example was the divergence between business settings and educational settings wherein apprentices were able to apply their skills in their workplaces but not in the classroom.

63. Some of these groups mentioned above were advisory groups and therefore Colleges Scotland's representation was not always directly with the decision makers within Scottish Government, which presented a missed opportunity for unique college sector nuances to be understood and reflected in decision making. For example, the different guidance arrangements in place for school-college partnerships and challenges this subsequently presented in implementing these partnerships in practice, could have been avoided if more direct involvement between the college sector representatives and decision makers took place.

64. In addition, the focus of the activity of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) was considered too overt on school-based qualifications, with the working group for tackling the challenges around school qualifications established around 6 months before the equivalent group for colleges, despite in some cases similar qualifications being delivered at colleges to schools.

65. From the perspective of Colleges Scotland, there needs to be a far greater understanding of the particular and unique educational environments which colleges provide for their learners and staff.

66. During the pandemic it was apparent at different junctures, particularly around the re-opening and re-purposing of colleges premises, that these environments and their associated requirements had not been adequately considered by Scottish Government and other agencies in their guidance for the delivery of learning and teaching activity. For example, individual colleges were given a figure for the percentage of students that could be on campus without any reference to the physical nature of each campus. Whilst Colleges Scotland raised the issue mentioned here, our advice on this topic was not sought ahead of specific decisions being made. Direct college sector involvement with decision makers is required.

67. Similarly, the roles of colleges as civic anchors and as local and regional industry partners needs to be more fully understood. As was evident during the pandemic, colleges are vital community facilities for their learners, providing safe and warm spaces for learners to enter and engage with education. Simultaneously, the disproportionate impact on apprentices and other learners studying vocational subjects that incorporate the acquisition of practical skills was apparent, and future public health responses have to take into account that not all learning and teaching can be fully and satisfactorily completed on a remote and virtual basis.

68. The community role of colleges should be more fully understood in terms of what they can do for public health responses. In any future challenges in relation to public health, colleges have to be recognised as assets which can be employed to support the Scottish Government in providing safe spaces for learners and citizens in their communities, and not just venues for educational activity.

69. The pandemic emphasised and reinforced the challenges faced by college learners in terms of having consistent internet access and access to devices. Any future responses on a public health footing have to consider the importance of digital technology in providing social connectivity and supporting individual welfare in the absence of face-to-face engagement with education and other public facing services.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed Personal Data

Dated: 11 August 2025