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Scottish Parliament  
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Via email: [FPA.committee@parliament.scot](mailto:FPA.committee@parliament.scot)

22 June 2022

Dear Mr Gibson,

**Roundtable evidence session 24 May 2022**

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the roundtable on the National Performance Framework last month. Please accept my apologies for not having followed up sooner on my contribution to the discussion.

Mr Mason asked me about the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) proposed National Impact Framework (NIF) to ensure greater alignment with Scotland's National Performance Framework and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This is one of the recommendations in the [SFC's Review of Tertiary Education and Research](#) which The OU in Scotland has welcomed and looks forward to working with the SFC to develop. We have not been involved in any discussions about the National Impact Framework to date and we are anticipating another one-year light touch Outcome Agreement negotiation for the forthcoming academic year.

During the discussion I promised to forward on information relating to how we supported care experienced students during the pandemic. The information is overpage in Appendix A.

If there is any further information you require then I would be happy to provide it, in a timelier basis.

Yours sincerely

Keith Robson  
Senior Public Affairs Manager

## **Appendix A**

### Tackling Digital Poverty

The Open University received £23,531 from the Scottish Funding Council to support the provision of ICT equipment to tackle digital poverty in academic year 2020-21. We prioritised our Care Experienced students and Student Carers for this funding. Unlike other Scottish universities, OU students do not have access to the care experience bursary as they study part-time. In our [Corporate Parenting Scotland Plan 2020-21](#), we recognise the challenges our care-experienced students face and we are committed to improving outcomes for them. This Fund has supported us in this aim.

Given our students study by distance learning and are dispersed across all of Scotland, the use of this capital funding presented certain challenges as well as opportunities. The costs of setting up and administration of an ICT loan scheme was not an effective use of these limited funds as outlined in our initial report on their use. We therefore set up a Digital Inclusion Fund which allowed eligible students to apply for funding to reimburse them for the purchase of suitable IT equipment up to the value of £350 under the conditions of grant, and in line with our own internal processes.

The fund launched at the beginning of February 2021 and application numbers were so high over the first week of it being live that we had to close the fund on 9<sup>th</sup> February. All funds spent were used for the purposes intended. The total number of students supported by the funding was 81.

### Discretionary Fund

The university operates a discretionary fund to which students can apply to help keep them in study. The fund is non-repayable and covers costs such as:

- Study-related childcare costs
- Up to £250 towards the purchase of a new PC/laptop
- Internet access for the duration of the module
- Additional set books

To be eligible students must be resident in Scotland and aged 16 or over. In addition, they must be actively studying part time with the university and have an annual household income of less than £25,000 or be able to show they're experiencing financial hardship.

We have seen a significant increase in demand for the discretionary fund. We have seen an increased spend of 119% since the academic year 2017-18. Spending allocated to support students' digital provision now accounts for 90% of the fund's expenditure having seen demand grow during the pandemic.