Dear Convener,

Thank you for your letter of 21 November in which you asked for clarification on why we have not sought to avoid reclassification of colleges in Scotland.

I have been clear from the outset that I consider the decision to reclassify our colleges – a decision that pre-dated our reforms - as both unhelpful and unwelcome.

In Scotland, we believe government funding for education exists to build a greater good and that successful outcomes are founded on partnership with colleges. Forcing colleges into the private sector would compromise these ambitions.

Self-evidently, good governance and accountability are fundamental to this partnership. That is why, in our consultative document Putting Learners at the Centre, we made clear that the governance arrangements for higher and further education should be sufficiently transparent to ensure learner and taxpayer confidence, balancing accountability for public funds with the right degree of institutional freedom and flexibility.

We therefore commissioned Professor Russel Griggs to lead an independent review of college governance; a number of his recommendations have been given effect by the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013.

It is clearly a matter for England how it chooses to respond to ONS reclassification. In Scotland, however, we are firmly of the view that the pursuit of enhanced democratic accountability must not be compromised by accounting changes. I am therefore confident that building on our existing arrangements through the new legislation is the right solution for Scotland.

MICHAEL RUSSELL