Glasgow Caledonian University submission
to the Education and Skills Committee

1. Introduction

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee request for views on the performance of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), and seek to inform its pre-budget scrutiny activity. At the outset, we wish to acknowledge the vitally important role that the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has in distributing Scottish Government funding to support delivery of national priorities for higher and further education. The three key outcomes outlined in the SFC’s Strategic Plan, ‘High-quality learning and teaching’ ‘World-leading research’ and ‘Greater Innovation in the Economy’ are clear signposts to guide the work of Scottish Universities, and align well with the strategic goals and ambitions within GCU’s 2020 Strategy.

2. Performance of SFC

We believe that the SFC, in its capacity as a Non-Departmental Public Body, has an important strategic view of the development and performance of the higher education sector in Scotland. This arm’s length distance between the universities and Ministers is essential to ensure the autonomy of institutions, as well as supporting a diverse HE sector, and is considered to be best practice internationally. SFC has expertise in teaching and research funding and working in collaboration with other Scottish and UK bodies such as the QAA, Research Councils, and HESA. SFC makes challenging demands of the sector to align with and deliver to the priorities of the Scottish Government through the use of Outcome Agreements negotiated between the SFC and individual institutions. We believe SFC can also provide evidence based feedback to the Government on behalf of the sector, when appropriate, to inform policy development.

Disbursement of Scottish Government funding

If the shared ambition of the Scottish Government, the SFC and universities for Scottish higher education to be genuinely world leading is to be realised, this requires adequate resources to be made available. The SFC must ensure that sustainable and commensurate levels of funding are delivered so that Scotland genuinely can be “best place in the world to learn, to educate, to research, and to innovate” as articulated on the SFC Strategic Plan.
SFC has ensured that public funding for Scottish universities is relatively stable, notwithstanding some change from year to year. Given the high quality four-year Scottish Honours degree and the lead-in time for successful widening access outreach, it is challenging for universities to adapt to sudden shifts in funding. This stability in funding has helped GCU attain continuous improvements in its quality metrics whilst maintaining a level of widening access entrants which is well above the sector average, whilst a GVA of £1 Billion each year to the UK economy. Continued use of formula funding by SFC has been helpful to ensure transparency of resource allocation for core teaching and research activities, and for capital and maintenance of buildings and estates, but we believe further transparency could be offered when strategic project funding is awarded to institutions.

Supporting evidence based policy and funding allocations

SFC has the expertise to assess the financial state of the Scottish higher education sector and benchmark it to the funding environments across the UK and internationally, in order to support funding settlements that secure a resource base that can achieve ambitions for a world leading sector as well as ensuring the long term sustainability of our institutions. It also has a key role to play in promoting evidence based decision making through analysis of institutional and sector data to ensure appropriate distribution of funding to maximise effectiveness. An example of where this has been demonstrated is through the ring-fenced funding for improved progression and retention based on proportions of widening access students at an institutional level. At GCU, such funding has supported initiatives to significantly improve retention of widening access students as well as projected degree completion, to become the top modern university in Scotland in this regard. To support colleges and universities to deliver on the Scottish Government’s ambitious agenda for closing the attainment gap, SFC plays a critical role in working with the sectors to develop the most appropriate measures of widening access.

Managing the Outcome Agreement process

The process of negotiating Outcome Agreements between the SFC and individual institutions has evolved and matured into an effective mechanism for setting out expectations for the delivery of Scottish Government policy ambitions. Whilst we believe that the Outcome Agreement process does not fully recognise the distinctiveness of modern universities, we appreciate the considerable work done by SFC colleagues to address this by devoting significant time to understanding the wider work that our institution does, particularly our research strengths, internationalisation agenda, engagement with industry, and continued ambitions on ensuring successful outcomes for all of our students and graduates, regardless of their backgrounds. There is room however, for further improvement in this understanding of the diversity of the HE sector through the wider Outcome Agreement process which, we believe, should be more clearly focussed at a sectoral level.

Supporting the learner journey across educational transitions

GCU recognises the benefits of having a joint Funding Council for both higher and further education. It enables a joined up approach between Universities and Colleges, particularly in the areas of widening access to HE and articulation from HN programmes to degree level study. GCU remains committed to its lauded approach to collaborative working with our college partners and the SFC.
We also work closely with schools and other educational partners to seek to raise aspirations and ensure a system wide approach to the learner journey and a smooth transition to, and through, higher education. The SFC has supported GCU in its innovative partnership with Glasgow City Council to establish the extremely successful Advanced Higher Hub on our campus, which has achieved outstanding results for school pupils, the majority of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds, to gain Advanced Highers not available at their schools and to progress to university degree courses across Scotland and the UK. Seeking to raise aspirations is also a key objective for GCU’s award winning Caledonian Club through working with primary school children and their parents, further demonstrating the whole systems approach adopted by the University.

**Positioning the Scottish higher education sector within the UK context**

SFC’s experience in working across the four nations of the UK has, for example, successfully ensured that the UK-wide Research Excellence Framework (REF) meets the needs of the Scottish sector. The experience and knowledge gained by the SFC from the REF discussions in the past will benefit the Scottish sector when it comes to the redesign of REF following the recommendations of the Stern Review. The strong performance by Scotland in the 2014 REF exercise illustrates that the SFC has helped foster a dynamic research culture across the Scottish sector. GCU’s excellent performance in the REF, which rated it top modern university in Scotland for research power, demonstrates the positive impact of the SFC’s promotion of research excellence wherever it occurs.

The need for a strong Scottish voice within the UK higher education arena is of growing importance with the continuing divergence of HE policy, and especially in the coming years with the establishment of UK Research and Innovation, the Teaching Excellence Framework, and the uncertainty for the HE sectors across the UK following the EU Referendum. These developments have potentially significant implications for Scottish universities and we recognise that the SFC’s ability to negotiate on the behalf of Scotland’s higher education sector will be vital to securing our position in this unchartered policy and political landscape.

**3. Conclusion**

The agencies involved in the provision of education and skills in Scotland face some significant challenges. These include the need to meet Scottish Government priorities on enhancing productivity and widening access to higher education, and the successful introduction of the UK Apprenticeship Levy in Scotland. These challenges need to be met against the backdrop of a financial environment that remains challenging. A review of the organisations involved in skills and education in Scotland provides the opportunity to take a whole systems approach to thinking about how education sectors could be more integrated and work more effectively to achieve the ambitions of the Scottish Government, whilst not undermining the broader economic and societal impact of higher education institutions. GCU believes that a more integrated and streamlined approach, with enhanced collaboration across the public bodies and agencies involved in the provision of education and skills, can ensure better alignment of public funding and deliver improved outcomes for Scotland. For this integrated approach to be successful, however, we believe it is necessary the SFC
continues to discharge its functions and responsibilities in relation to the further and higher education sectors.

We conclude this submission by reiterating the importance of the SFC as an independent NDPB, the high level of expertise within the organisation, and the success it has in delivering on its specified outcomes. SFC is integral to ensuring that we have a successful, sustainable and accountable higher education sector in Scotland. We look forward to collaborating with the SFC and with other bodies across Scotland in the future, as we seek to deliver our 2020 Strategy and our social mission as the University for the Common Good.