Comments on SFC

Quality – Action Learning Project:
SFC should be commended on the approach it has taken on revising the quality arrangements for the College Sector. The introduction of the Action Learning Pilot, a project that NESCol was central to, was welcomed particularly in light of the somewhat tired and out of date approaches adopted latterly by Education Scotland. The leadership and direction given by SFC in ensuring that the basis of a new quality model was developed by colleges for colleges should also be commended. The outcomes of the ALP will assist in encouraging the college sector more widely to fully engage with more effective, bespoke, quality improvement approaches that will improve outcomes and experiences for students and other stakeholders regionally and nationally.

Student Funding:
Whilst SFC has stated that it believes that the correct amount of support funding exists to support students attending college it is clear that SFC is still not distributing the money effectively in order to meet genuine need. This College has seen a drop in its student support fund allocation of almost £800k over the last two years and has used £350k of its own funds to support a student funding shortfall for AY 2015-16. This is not a sustainable option for this or future years. The extent of this shortfall was not apparent earlier in the AY thus the College did not request additional funds when originally asked. However, shortly after the closure of the redistribution exercise it became apparent that more funds would be required.

It is easier to predict in-year the degree of financial support required for students later on in the academic session. It is also evident that that many colleges over-estimate the funds required for this exercise and are faced with returning monies to SFC after the final year audits are complete. The in-year re-distribution exercise needs to be more responsive and flexible within year if monies are to be targeted more effective towards genuine need. A second round of bids and progress checks in-year would allow SFC to move support funds around more to appropriately in order address areas of greatest need.

Student Data:
In the past data collated and held, through FES returns, has not always been used effectively by SFC to inform quality improvements within the sector. For example, the equality data that for many years colleges were asked to produce individually to ensure that they were addressing inequality and disadvantage was held centrally by SFC but never distributed effectively to colleges. Changes to the collation and distribution of data for quality improvement and benchmarking purposes across the college sector are welcomed. The work of the SFC’s Data Team is becoming more responsive to, and supportive of, college needs.
Getting consistent data will lead to more consistent practice being developed as colleges seek to analyse and act upon the data relating to their own, and other colleges’ students.

**Advice:**
The service provided by the SFC staff can be typically inconsistent and apparently based on individual opinion rather than an institutional view, and there is little evidence that SFC staff have an awareness of the operating environment in colleges

**Information requests:**
These are incremental, and the reporting burden always increases, never decreases.