Question 1. *'Think back to your experience during the first few weeks of term, what was it like for you enrolling at college? Was it a positive experience? We want to know about the good, and what could be improved from accepting your course to getting 'settled into college life', how easy was that transition?*

Induction: Of the students present, around 80% of them reported application, enrolment & induction from the academic side to be a positive experience. Many highlighted the overall positive experience of Welcome Weeks, though some improvements for future welcome events where suggested by students, returning Class Reps emphasised that this year's enrolment at Sighthill was much improved on the previous year.

"it was very positive, I met amazing people and I still talk to 90% of the class; The transition was quick and easy as I have done a school college partnership"

Class Cover: At least 50% of the students had a "cancelled" class in the first 7 weeks of term. This ranged from having a single class cancelled, to having only 1 class for the first 6 weeks of college. Students' main concern is the impact of this on their ability to finish the course and a lack of communication & organisation from staff about who is responsible for keeping them informed. Class Reps noted they would show up to classes and only be told there was no staff member coming 20 minutes in. Only one Class Rep said that they were informed about their class cancellation before the day of the class which was *"nice because they didn't waste time coming in for a cancelled class"*. There are additional quotes in relation to class cover in the section covering Question 2.

Timetables: Students who were accepted for their course pre summer break seem to have, for the most part, had a far more positive experience in becoming settled into their course, with less issues overall than those who were accepted post staff return in August.

The only enrolment issue experienced by almost all Class Reps present have been room bookings & timetables. There has been a lot of confusion and lack of information or mixed messages, as classes have been repeatedly moved. The students say this is now mostly resolved but made for a very frustrating and disruptive first few weeks of the academic term.

Bursary & Funding: All 35 Class Reps present identified that many students within their classes are having issues around delayed bursary & funding, highlighting that some students are in week 7 and are being told that there is "6-8 week" waiting periods for processing. Many are worried that they will be unable to wait such long periods without finances, even with seeking discretionary funding. Students noted that, even though they could apply for their course before the summer, many were not accepted until August, meaning they could not apply for any funding until they had their place. These students would have applied months ago had they been accepted and processed sooner. There is a frustration amongst students that are being disadvantaged for a college process issue that was out with their control. There was also examples of students who had applied as far back as April and are still having issues sorting out their funding.

Other students said that funding for the '20 -25 bracket' felt like it had extra barriers especially with family, regarding the role their family plays in supporting them. Many students are frustrated about how little support they receive from their family in reality, but how heavy the assumption is that their family does support them, and how this impacts what support they can receive from the college. This issue is outwith the college's control and relates to the funding guidelines for the Scottish Government. This has been raised in our evidence to the 'Student Support Review Consultation' (SSR) as it continues to cause issues for students and their families who are facing increasing financial pressures in the current economic climate.

Class Reps highlighted a need for more student support staff and 'front line staff' in general in the first few weeks when a high number of students are looking for support and resources are stretched. They cited long queues and high waiting times to access student support. For example, having to hand in council tax exemption forms and being told *"come back in two weeks to pick up your stamped form"*, rather than having it checked & stamped there and then.

Class Cohesion: Discussions with students raised a point around class cohesion. Students felt welcome weeks lacked the opportunity to get to know their classmates, moving around the campus in "awkward silence" was odd and uncomfortable for many students. An opportunity to introduce themselves to their class mates could help with class integration and creating positive relationships before the academic term starts. This would tie into other comments students made saying:

> *"I found it hard settling in, not knowing anyone in my class and being in a totally different environment it wasn't easy but the student and lecturers were nice and that made it much easier to push through until I got to a good place".*

Student Space: It was noted that students have raised issues around the student spaces at the Sighthill campus, that during breaks the spaces are full, that some students struggle to find a place to eat their lunch, and at peak times there seems to be "very long queues" to access any of the catering services. This is even after the developments catering & estates have made to the Sighthill campus over the summer break – Social space is still a premium at peak times at this campus.

Question 2. *Have you or any of your classmates had an issue at College that has made you/them consider dropping out? If so, what was the issue? If not, what do you think is the biggest reason for students struggling to stay on their course?'*

1. **Progression**: ESOL reps highlighted confusion over their courses, the funding implications and possible progression routes, there is a feeling for some students they are "wasting their time" and have considered dropping out because they don't see the benefit of their course in the scope of their learning experience.

2. **Travel:** Travel is an ongoing issue for some students, specifically students coming from the borders who are are struggling with the cost. College bursary and travel payments aren't covering the cost coming to class, for example having to take a bus and train to Edinburgh then a tram or bus from town, students considering if its 'sustainable' to come to college. This is, again, tied to restrictions in Bursary funding and have been raised in our submission to the SSR about how travel is looked at when assessing students for eligibility of support.

3. **Funding:** Students are frustrated their parents' income plays into what they can receive, one student said *"I live at home because I can't afford to move out but my parents do not provide for me – they can't afford it"*. This is a sentiment being echoed across the Class Rep conferences and even within

ECSA's casework it is highlighted repeatedly by students who are either independent or living at home with no 'financial support' from their families. Their family income is being included in the assessment but does not reflect the level of support a learner is receiving.

One rep highlighted that the delays in funding for both childcare & bursary have led to several students they know dropping out, as was one specific student who was considering dropping out but received funding 'just in time' which allowed them to stay on their course. Other class reps agreed there was similar experiences of this within their own courses.

Another issue raised seems to be a confusion around funding, the teaching staff and some support staff have been giving students, unclear, inconsistent, or conflicting information. Students say this adds to the problem of applying for support and adds confusion when what students really want is clarity on what is happening. More could be done to ensure better communications between the funding, support, and academic teams.

Childcare: A specific childcare concern being raised is the number of students who have had to pay their provider directly due to long hold ups from the college. Many of these students say they are "in the dark" about how they will get this money back. Some highlight how their relationship with the childcare provider has become strained through the delays and complications of the roll out of Edinburgh College's new process for administering childcare. This approach was adopted by the college to improve the service for students, but in its first year, the rollout has not been a smooth process for all. ECSA would highlight the high proportion of casework specifically for childcare being brought to us to help students reach a speedier resolution, as they are frustrated with a lack of progress from the college.

4. **Teaching delivery**: Class Reps of varying backgrounds and age ranges discussed how some teaching staff display an inflexible approach to teaching. Not recognising the diverse backgrounds of the students in front of them, that their approach may not be reflective of the students present. This lack of flexibility to employ different teaching methods is disengaging for learners and some Reps present urged teaching staff be more cognisant of the range of ages and experiences within the classroom environment.

   "One lecturer is so unengaging its worse than going to mass, this shows how boring an important topic can be when taught without proper guidance or skills to make it engaging. Talking for 2 hours straight at a board is not an effective way to learn"

5. **High course fees**: This was particularly voiced by ESOL students, an issue that may be out of the college's hands, but students in these courses are saying they are feeling more squeezed with the cost of coming to college, coupled with the lack of support available. This is something ECSA have raised within the SSR consultation to the Scottish Government.

6. **Home/College balance**: Almost all reps highlighted a significant issue about struggling to balance home life, with students with 'extra responsibilities' feeling the brunt, such as caring responsibilities. Coupled with the current funding arrangements, students are being hit by a 'double whammy' whereby, they either can't work and are worse off, or do work for low pay and their studies/home life become more strained due to increased work load. These factors play into student's decisions about continuing their studies.

7. **IT & Resources**: Staff having the correct skills on how to use E-learning & the VLE. It was noted that, even within digital technology courses with 'technological savvy' staff, Moodle was still underutilised as a support tool and resource for students to use to aide in their learning.

Students raised concerns that the computer resources on campus are "showing their age". Slow computers in IT rooms and study spaces, and specific hardware & networking issues for students studying courses that heavily rely on technology (such as the networking and computing courses) has led to a feeling that the current set of technology no longer meets the standards for being a useful learning resource.

8. **Staff Stresses:** These are becoming evident to students in the classroom, students say they can see & feel the frustrations of teaching & support staff and this is impacting on their relationship with staff and are worried this will only deteriorate as the year goes on. Students feel reticent to ask for more support when they can see how staff are currently coping, even if they feel the support is needed, such as drop in sessions.

9. **Course Organisation and Class Cover**: Class Cover has been discussed in the previous section, however ECSA have included some quotes from the workshop in this section.

   "Classes are being cancelled because there are so many lecturers missing we can't have all our classes, we are travelling long distance to attend half our classes in a given day not knowing if there will be anyone there when we get in"

   "We have had no lecturers for the first 5 weeks, people are getting fed up and the class is getting smaller and smaller."

   "Currently our class only has one lecturer per week for one class due to staff shortages"

10. **Council tax exemption status:** Short, Full time ESOL courses are not council tax exempt but some students have been given information stating otherwise, better clarification and correct information before enrolling in the course, could have allowed them to make better informed decisions.

11. **Mental Health:** Students echoed the feelings of the Milton Road Reps around the lack of support available for Mental Health, and a lack of understanding from some teaching & support staff in regards to Mental Health. That some students are legitimately struggling and that other issues mentioned in points 1 to 10 compound on top of this. Students want to see more training & guidance for staff and themselves on how to deal with students facing difficulties, to share the responsibility in ensuring their classmates can be supported to stay the course.

    "Mostly mental health and funding are the main concerns for students in my class, course organisation is an issue, why would we stick around for a course we feel we are having our time wasted on"

Question 3. *'Last year the 5 issues were identified by Class Reps (see the PowerPoint slide) as the biggest issues facing students. Are these issues still a problem? Have you or your classmates experienced any of them? Please discuss in small groups.'*

Student funding: 24 students present placed a specific note (over 68%) in this section (not including the prevalence in other sections of the document) about them and their classmates struggling with funding They listed several reasons:

- Long delays on processing
- Lack of communication on the progress of an application
- Lack of clarity on what students are entitled too
- Financial impact on delayed payments
- Impact on vulnerable students & their families wellbeing

This is impacting on some student's ability to stay on the course, as they described it as 'holding out' until their support is processed. Student parents also made clear how distressing the situation was with their childcare providers who are taking up non-payment directly with the parents.

Resources & IT: Students highlighting outdated technology, slow computers that are 'showing their age' all across the Sighthill campus. A highlight was class rooms with too many students, not enough computers and laptops not being suitable to do the required work (specifically an issue for students within the computing department)

3 or more students highlighted that students have had difficulty with SAM forms and that 'access can be spotty' and have been said that sometimes the service just isn't available or doesn't work, especially when accessing from home.

A small number of students raised the issue that they have been told they are not allowed to record classes, even though it's a specific need as part of their support needs. The staff member has said 'they have union backing and do not need to give permission'. Students were unaware that this is a legal requirement by the college to provide this support for the student. This issue has been raised before and the college has clear guidance on this. ECSA informed the rep that this issue should be escalated formally if no solution is reached to a satisfactory conclusion for the student.

Mental Health: around 50% of the room highlighted specific mental health concerns of access, support and staff training, however there was a more general agreement in the room that other concerns raised at the workshop are 'piling more on top' of already stressed and troubled students. While fixing other issues would not solve students mental health issues it could remove additional factors that negatively impact their experience. Which would overall be a positive step to improve their mental health.

Student support: 10 students highlighted issues around waiting for advice and support. Students who have declared learner support needs are still awaiting assessment well over a month after speaking to a staff member, others mentioned classmates of theirs have been seen to but the support doesn't seem to be making its way from assessment to the 'class level'. Long queues at peak periods at student services makes this more difficult to chase up. Students feel staff are sympathetic & concerned but the follow through seems to be less than effective in some cases.

Some students feel they still don't know who to go to about specific issues, who is responsible and who should they speak to i.e curriculum vs support staff and there is a 'gaping hole' in responsibility & follow through in which students are getting caught in the middle of.

Course organisation: This was covered heavily in the first two sections by students. What consistently came through, though, from around half the students present, was issues of a lack of clarity. A student quoted: *"sickness is inevitable, that's fine, we can live with that, but travelling for hours to sit in a class and eventually be told, oh yeah that person just isn't coming in, by another lecturing staff member just really isn't acceptable"*. There are concerns around course management in some areas, that when things change or go wrong there doesn't seem to be a consistent approach for contingency planning and this then impacts on students learning.

Question 4. *Do you think the College and/or ECSA can be doing to remove challenges, support more students to stay on at College and be successful? Discuss in your groups, write your answers below and we will do a group feedback session at the end.*

Solutions:

1. A focus on getting front line staff trained in Mental Health First Aid or support, as well as students and staff being made aware of their legal rights regarding support for disabilities and additional support needs. A comprehensive yet easy to understand document as an 'All in one' for students and staff made available in high traffic areas & online spaces.

2. A quicker process for application for funding, there needs to be more consistency when processing applications. Students highlighted they wished someone had simply contacted them about any and all of their issues in relation to their application in one go (such as providing additional evidence), rather than the current process of asking for documentation in dribs and drabs sometimes days and weeks apart, which appears to be the experience for students across the college.

3. Hire more staff for processing & student services for the first month. Have a dedicated 'front of house' team so the funding people can have more capacity to work on applications.

4. Clearer communications in a more timely manner regarding staff sickness and class cover, including more detail about the impact on students and what steps the college will take. For example, extra classes later on in the academic calendar would be helpful and may be already envisaged by the lecturers, but being transparent is key.

5. Class Reps want more engagement with CL's and CM's, about their courses so they can chase up issues at the course level. Implementation of specific course/curriculum meetings with other reps and staff throughout the academic year could help tackle class issues at a local level. This would help grow the 'partnership approach' we want to see between students & staff.

6. Welcome weeks next year to have a greater focus on getting to know your classmates. Like an icebreaker, open lunch or coffee session before the 'tour' starts. This would foster better relationships between classmates ahead of the academic year.

7. A look at the estates/social spaces/canteens and how queue management at these venues can best support students using it on a day to day basis.

Class Reps present: 35