

Part 6

Corporate plan 2007 to 2010

1 Introduction

This plan explains how we will continue to improve our performance over the next three years. Our aim is to provide high-quality services to our customers that meet their needs but are also cost-effective.

2 Background

As an Agency of the Scottish Government, we implement policies which contribute towards achieving the strategic objective of creating a Smarter Scotland. These include funding learners, widening access to higher education, modernising government and delivering public services electronically.

3 Environment

We live in a climate of change and continuously need to improve the way we work and the levels of service we can offer to our customers. Summarised below are some things that affect what we are, and will be, doing.

- **Outcome of the latest spending review** - the tightness of the settlement for the next three years means that our running costs will be constrained and that the accuracy of budget setting and monitoring will be of paramount importance.
- **Policy changes** - abolition of the Graduate Endowment fee (subject to the present Bill becoming law), extension of support for part time students and other policy changes that may be brought forward will require us to redeploy staff and change some systems of working.
- **The Student Loans Company (SLC)** - is engaged in a phased programme of taking over responsibility for student support in England and Wales starting in 2009 (pilots are already being run). Future arrangements for SLC's corporate governance remain under review. These factor may have a bearing on our relationship with the Company over time.
- **Technology** - opportunities from advances in technology are allowing us to cost effectively replace our current processing application GRASS which has been in existence for over ten years and is now uneconomical to support or develop further. Phase I of our new system (StEPS) is scheduled to come into operation in April 2008. Later phases may include building electronic links with a number of other organisations to reduce the amount of information we have to collect from students and their families.
- **A larger European Union** – with 27 countries now in the European Union, we are dealing with more European students coming to Scotland to study. Following a decision by the European Court, some of these

students are entitled to support with living costs that they would not have had in the past.

- **Higher customer expectations** – we know from the customer surveys we carry out each year that the public increasingly expects faster and better services from us. The objectives and targets we work to will accordingly have to be reviewed.

4 Our aims and what we will do to achieve them

Develop and maintain high-quality customer service in all areas of our business

We will:

- continue to simplify our forms and guidance using electronic media wherever possible;
- consult the HE sector in 2007-2008 on measures to increase the numbers of students applying on-line from 2009 onwards to as close to 100% as can realistically be achieved;
- provide programmes of staff training in information and communications technology, customer care and plain English;
- continue to reduce processing times and improve our performance on e-mail handling and telephone enquiries;
- review our present mechanistic performance targets with the aim of moving to an outcome based approach; and
- continue to test customer satisfaction with our services and measure our performance against other organisations.

Pay students monthly/pay loans for fees

We will:

- reduce further the number of payments we make using payable orders;
- liaise with the SLC on loans for fees and other matters affecting Scottish students on courses in the rest of the UK; and
- work with the SLC to co-ordinate the payment of support on a monthly basis and improve attendance confirmation procedures.

Successfully deliver Individual Learning Accounts Scotland (ILAS)

We will:

- jointly develop an improvement strategy to enhance management control of electronic transfer of data between SAAS and Learndirect Scotland (LDS);
- agree better working practices between SAAS and LDS to improve overall customer communications and highlight system difficulties at an earlier stage;
- deliver a revised suite of ILA products starting in 2008 with the introduction of an HE fee grant for part-time students; and
- Work with LDS to streamline the administration of the joint system, and contribute to the review of options to develop a more efficient and cost effective system.

Improve and simplify communication

We will:

- continue to operate to the standards of Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark;
- continue to improve navigation and usage of our website and CD – ROMs;
- develop a joint communications strategy with policy colleagues, Skills Development Scotland Ltd (the new Skills body), SQA and devolved UK administrations to ensure that student support messages are targeted on the right audience;
- develop closer working relationships with key stakeholders on data control, particularly around attendance confirmation and withdrawal; and
- develop a strategy for managing the continuing increase in numbers of visits to educational institutions to give advice.

Maintain effective energy and waste-management policies

We will:

- continue to review our environmental policy every two years;
- reduce further the use and storage of paper;
- aim to reduce the amount of energy we use for heating, hot water and lighting by 1% each year between now and 2009; and
- reduce travel (particularly to Glasgow) by using our video-conferencing equipment as much as possible.

Attract new business

We will:

- ensure that our equipment and systems of working are flexible and powerful enough for us to expand our business if and when opportunities arise; and
- make sure that information technology systems are user-friendly and that new staff or staff from other organisations can quickly learn how to work with them effectively.

Work with partners to deliver the Government's Smarter Scotland Strategy

We will:

- continue to work with Health Directorate colleagues to develop and deliver NHS Bursaries targeted at specific groups; and
- work closely with colleagues in HELS on the development and implementation of new learner support policies.

5 Achieving our aims from the 2006-2009 corporate plan	Progress and achievements
<p>Develop and maintain high-quality customer service in all areas of our business</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue to simplify our forms and guidance; • encourage as many students as possible to apply to us using our website instead of paper forms; • provide programmes of staff training in information and communications technology, customer care and plain English; 	<p>We have produced new information leaflets to summarise guidance for specific student types (for example, EU students). A major review of our website content and layout has simplified navigation and use. The website has become our main information forum, and will help us achieve our aim of using plain English in all our communication products.</p> <p>On-line applications increased from 24% to 52% between 2005/06 and 2006/07. We have extended the shortened application process to those previously registered to use on-line services so as to increase on-line take up further. When our operational policy team attend external events/visits, they now distribute our CD Rom and not our printed Guide. This means that the emphasis is on using the on-line application service rather than making paper forms readily available. We also give applying on-line as the first option in all calls, letters and on our website. We have also extended this to personal callers to the building who can use their own or a loan laptop to apply on-line, or continue an application, from within reception in our building.</p> <p>We undertake a range of staff training. Apart from standard student support training, we are an accredited ECDL centre and encourage staff to complete this recognised ICT qualification. We have developed a new customer care programme focusing on call handling</p>

- continue to test customer satisfaction with our services and measure our performance against other organisations.

(using a dedicated training course developed by SAAS). We participated in the 'phone rage working group' along with the Scottish Government, Scottish Trades Union Congress and other public bodies, set up to identify and promote good practice in the workplace in protecting staff from physical and verbal abuse.

We continued to act on feedback from the customer survey. SAAS scores positively against comparator organisations. We introduced on-line applications in 2002 - three years ahead of the rest of the UK with take up now over 50% in 2006 (66% in 2007), compared to around 37% in the rest of the UK (RUK). Our EDM system has helped reduce the time we take to deal with an application from 28 days to an average of 10 (target in RUK is 6 weeks). Over 77% of customers are satisfied or very satisfied with our on-line services and this rises to 84% for our website.

Pay students monthly/pay loans for fees

- develop a system to make payments directly using BACS instead of using the Scottish Government's accounting system (SEAS);
- reduce to a minimum the number of payments we make using payable orders;
- work with SLC to co-ordinate the payment of support on a

Implemented and fully functional as at March 2007 to make payments directly through BACS, with accounting through SEAS.

Since July 2006 we have reduced the number of institutions receiving tuition fees by payable order from 200 to 20. We continue to work with the remaining 20 institutions with a view to making all fee payments using BACS by March 2008. We have introduced software to check that students correctly enter their bank account details on-line. We have begun a project to look at paying DSA nominees and others by BACS where possible.

<p>monthly basis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with SLC to pay loans for fees. 	<p>We have worked closely with SLC to introduce a system for paying most student support on a monthly rather than a termly basis as from 2007. The SAAS website contains information on payments, and SLC have confirmed they will provide copies of their communication products to ensure users of the SAAS website have access to all the information they will need on the move to monthly payments.</p> <p>System developed, tested and in place.</p>
<p>Strengthen systems for collecting the Graduate Endowment (GE)</p> <p>(NB This section relates to progress achieved in 2006-2007. Since then the Government has announced that the GE is to be abolished as from 1 April 2008.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improve the way we identify students who are liable to pay the GE; • redesign the letters we send to students telling them they are liable to pay; • simplify the process so that students can tell us on-line how they would like to pay the endowment; • reduce the time it takes to begin debt recovery action against those who are unwilling to pay. 	<p>Collection rate of 97% achieved.</p> <p>We reviewed the letters and forms for each phase of GE collection in line with plain English standards.</p> <p>Students able to tell us on-line how they would like to pay and also make payment on-line.</p> <p>We improved procedures to ensure that the debt recovery team commence action against students validated by their educational institutions as being liable. This additional validation reduced the cases being considered for debt recovery action by 60% from the previous year.</p>
<p>Successfully deliver Individual Learning Accounts Scotland (ILAS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • jointly develop an improvement strategy to enhance management 	<p>We introduced fortnightly technical forum telephone</p>

control of electronic transfer of data between SAAS and Learndirect Scotland (LDS);

- agree better working practices between SAAS and LDS to improve overall customer communications and highlight system difficulties at an earlier stage;
- join with scheme partners to review the scheme's success towards the end of 2006.

Improve and simplify communication

- complete the process of getting all our forms, guidance and other publications up to the standards of Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark by 2007;

conferences (or weekly as necessary) and monthly face to face meetings with SUFI (the other delivery partner) and HELS (policy lead). This has been helpful in resolving issues that might previously have 'snow-balled' by addressing them as and when they occur.

We have led on discussions at a technical level, to ensure that changes within the two delivery organisations do not affect information flows. We have also arranged a sequence of meetings, in different formats, to help maintain communication at a level below the Operational Management Team. These measures have led to a better understanding of how our systems work together and allowed a joint view to be presented to HELS around service improvements.

The evaluation of the scheme is being undertaken over a 12 month period. However, initial and interim findings show that the scheme has met the key performance indicator's originally set out and there are no issues around service delivery from the SAAS side.

We have worked hard to get our communication products to a set standard. This includes Plain English Campaign's Crystal mark. However, the timescales for getting documents returned from PEC have meant the main guides (SAS4/8) do not as yet have the mark. We are looking to move towards a web based guidance system, and will include the guide in that, which will mean we can again work with PEC to secure the mark for all our documents.

- between now and 2008, stop sending large numbers of paper copies of forms and guides to universities and colleges to give to students (instead, we will issue CD-ROMS which contain everything in the guide as well as the video we currently send to schools);
- develop a joint communications strategy with policy colleagues and other devolved administrations to ensure that student support messages are targeted on the right audience;
- develop closer working relationships with key stakeholders on data control, particularly around attendance confirmation and withdrawal;
- develop a strategy for managing the continuing increase in numbers of visits to educational institutions to give advice.

Since 2005, we have halved the number of paper applications we issue. CD-Roms are sent to institutions in place of paper applications and this has helped the marked increase in on-line applications.

SAAS sits on an Information and Guidance group with Universities Scotland and HELS. We also attend a User Advisory Group for the National Information service, hosted by Learndirect Scotland. We have links with the Student Loans Company and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), which allow us to see (and comment on) wider UK communication products, to identify dedicated Scottish requirements.

We are looking to open up discussions with the Association of Scottish Colleges (ASC), to formulate a strategy to provide information and guidance to students moving from FE to HE.

SAAS has discussed the options around attendance data collection for 'fees only' students with Universities Scotland and some individual institutions. We are looking to set up further discussion about an improved system of notification and a project is underway to look at how institutions and SAAS can communicate better.

Operational Policy Team has additional resources to accommodate the programme of increased visits which has also included giving presentations at a number of events in Europe in partnership with the British Council and some universities. The team roles are split between Training and Communications and we are recruiting an officer who will be dedicated to visits and managing the programme.

Maintain effective energy and waste-management policies

- continue to review our environmental policy every two years;
- reduce further the use and storage of paper;
- aim to reduce the amount of energy we use for heating, hot water and lighting by 1% each year between now and 2009;
- reduce travel (particularly to Glasgow) by using our video-conferencing equipment as much as possible.

The next policy review is scheduled for December 2007.

We have set all our printers to automatically print double sided. Our requirement for external printing services has reduced as 100,000 application forms (SAS3) were printed for distribution in 2007 compared to 150,000 in 2006. Our annual report and corporate plan are now available through our website rather than distributing hard copies.

The Agency has collaborated with the SG to purchase electricity from renewable sources. Our “switch off” campaign has been very successful and installation of new energy efficient boilers, new light fittings and window refurbishment provided energy savings of 11% and a 14% reduction in CO₂ emissions between 2005/06 and 2006/07.

We used our video conferencing facilities 5 times in 2006/07. We provide staff attending meetings with bus/train tickets for public transport when travel cannot be avoided.

Attract new business

- ensure that our equipment and systems of working are flexible and powerful enough for us to expand our business if and when opportunities arise;
- make sure that information technology systems are user-friendly and that new staff or staff from other organisations can quickly learn how to work with them effectively.

Work with partners to deliver Ministerial aims

- continue to work with Health Department colleagues to develop and deliver a programme of NHS Bursaries targeted at specific groups, e.g. Dentistry students;
- Work with SLC to deliver fee loans to Scottish students on courses elsewhere in the UK;
- Learn lessons from the circumstances which led to the project to enable SAAS to pay loans to Scottish students having to be abandoned.

Hardware refresh of servers completed in April 2007 gives greatly increased capacity and resilience.

We are designing a replacement system for GRASS to make clear for each work item what action is expected when and where human intervention is required. We will design the new system so that ordinary business users can see how any changes will affect processing and targets. The new system will provide a dedicated off-line training environment for staff.

We delivered the existing NHS bursary programme for Dentists on time, within budget and it is working well. HD are reviewing the need to expand the bursary programme for other student groups and SAAS have identified ways to incorporate these into the existing programme if required.

We have modified our existing interfaces with SLC to ensure that fee loan data is passed effectively. We need to do more work around identifying data requirements for the HEI bursary (which SLC administer for all UK students) and this is in progress.

SAAS, HELS and SLC have studied the report prepared by Logica and have subsequently worked successfully together to deliver the monthly payments project.