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Written Statement: Supporting students to return to higher education in January

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Supporting students to return to higher education in January

Kirsty Williams MS, Minister for Education

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The Welsh Government has committed to continuity of learning throughout the education system as a top priority throughout the pandemic. Active engagement in learning is vital to ensure our students continue to thrive in their courses of study and is essential for their mental-health and wellbeing. The skills and contribution of our students and our wider university communities is of critical importance as we face the challenges this pandemic brings, now and in the future.

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To support this commitment, I am announcing a managed and phased return for students to in-person learning and term time accommodation in January.

I have asked our universities to implement a slightly more staggered start to the spring term than usual, with blended learning continuing through the spring term. Online learning will start as planned and universities will communicate plans to their students. The majority of in-person learning will not start until after 11 January and I would encourage students, where possible, not to return to term time accommodation until in-person learning begins. This is to ensure we can manage the availability of asymptomatic lateral flow testing to support a safe return to term time accommodation and in-person learning.

Students will be asked to take a test on return, lay low at their term time address for a short period of three days and access a second test.

This will make sure we can keep our students safe by identifying any students who comes back to shared accommodation with Covid, ensure they self isolate and stop it spreading. The combination of testing and laying low will be important to stop the spread through the student community as students reform households, mix and re-engage with their term time friends after spending a period of time mixing with their families and friends over the holidays.

To support this approach, I am asking any student who chooses not to participate in the asymptomatic testing to participate in a 14 day period of laying low once back in their term time accommodation. This means reducing contacts and not going out other than for essential reasons such as access to medical care or to exercise outdoors. If all students get tested, this will be the easiest way for students to work together to help keep friends safe and reduce the risk of self isolation throughout the spring term.

A staggered start combined with testing will also support the Test, Trace, Protect teams by helping to manage flows of individuals that may need to enter the contact tracing system. We know we must help protect the NHS and avoid it being overwhelmed and that is exactly what a staggered start to university will help support.

I am asking our universities to make decisions in relation to their own students and staff and determine which students need to come back when. It may mean that students on placements, those on allied health care courses and those who need access to on campus facilities for practical courses will need to return first.

In partnership with the UK Government, we have agreed that mass testing will be available on campus from 4th January to help manage the return of students and staff and mitigate the risk of transmission. We are working to ensure our universities have access to enough tests at the right point in time to support their plans.

We will be looking at how testing at our universities can be managed in the longer term. Testing will need to support our universities, students, staff, communities and the wider public health response to the pandemic. We will continue to work across Government, with Public Health Wales and our universities to discuss how this can be managed before we determine our policy approach to asymptomatic testing for the rest of the spring term.

I want to get our students back to in-person teaching as quickly as possible so they can get on with their education, live their lives and have some freedom to socialise with friends in a safe way. Our university campuses are Covid secure and our universities have worked hard to make sure they can ensure the safety of staff and students in the teaching and learning environment.

We recognise that our universities and our students are varied and diverse. Not all students will have travelled over the holiday period. On campus, Covid secure facilities may remain open to ensure students are not disadvantaged and can, where necessary access facilities such as laboratories, libraries and study spaces.

Throughout this pandemic we have worked with our universities and I am incredibly proud of the way they have supported their students, staff and our communities. I am confident that they will continue to make responsible decisions that are appropriate to their circumstances and the needs of students, staff and local communities whilst helping keeping Wales safe.

Remember, no person should travel if they or someone they live with have symptoms, if they have a positive test or have been asked to self-isolate by a contact tracer.

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