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POLICY AND STRATEGY

Higher education policy statement: coronavirus

What we are doing to support universities and students dealing with the effects of coronavirus.

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Overview

The Welsh Government is enormously grateful for the way higher education institutions in Wales have been dealing with the challenge of the COVID-19 outbreak and working to mitigate the impact on students and staff. They are working in a way that exemplifies a sense of civic mission, which continues to characterise Welsh higher education.

Managing recruitment

We have come to an agreement with the Welsh higher education sector that temporary measures are required to manage the recruitment cycle for the 2020 to 2021 academic year. While the Welsh sector is a distinct entity in its own right, it is also an important part of the wider four nations higher education landscape, with strong partnerships across Europe and globally. We look forward to welcoming students, staff and researchers from across the UK and further afield, into our universities in Wales.

It is proposed that Welsh higher education providers, with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), agree forecast numbers which will apply to UK and EU undergraduates. Post-graduates, part time students and international students will not be included in the measures. The Welsh higher education sector has contributed to the UK sector's proposals, and we are proposing measures, with HEFCW, that will ensure stability in the 2020 to 2021 recruitment round and which are fair to students.

HEFCW will monitor institutional performance and evaluate behaviour in relation to admissions to Welsh institutions, and will expect institutions to comply with the sector-wide agreement backed up by a statement of fair admissions practices developed by UUK.

Maintaining stability for students

Students are at the heart of our decision-making. This has been an uncertain time, and we recognise that maintaining stability in the sector is vital to supporting students in the transition to higher education.

Students need access to good quality information, advice and guidance in order to make informed choices about their future learning and personal development. We have been working with UCAS and HEFCW to strengthen the admissions process this year and minimise disruption for students and institutions. This year's clearing process will include new initiatives specifically designed to provide personalised and instant choice to students, putting them in control of their applications, and the way in which they navigate the admission process.

We remain committed to widening access, both in our values and through our regulatory system. Through their fee and access plans, institutions commit to invest in equality of opportunity and the promotion of HE, resulting in a wide range of widening access provision and activities across Wales.

Student support

The Welsh Government firmly believes access to higher education should be based on merit, not on an individual's ability to pay. We recognise the importance of living costs to students and of providing targeted help towards those most in need. We are the only country in Europe that offers equivalent living costs support, in grants and loans, to full-time undergraduates, part-time undergraduates and post-graduates. This is available wherever Welsh students study in the UK. There is additional grant support available to master's students who return to, or progress at, universities in Wales in key subjects.

NHS bursaries are also available in Wales, underpinning our commitment to supporting and funding the future NHS workforce, this covers a range of health education courses, including nursing, medicine and dentistry. This support helps ensure an ongoing commitment to serving NHS Wales and our communities.

The health and wellbeing of staff and students is a major concern and we are particularly aware of the additional worry and anxiety caused by the pandemic. We welcome HEFCW's Well-being and Health Position Statement, which reaffirms a commitment to meeting and going beyond statutory compliance and delivering the Welsh Government's well-being policy expectations. All our higher education institutions have activities and measures in place to support staff and students' wellbeing, including their mental health, supported by funding the Welsh Government has made available to them through HEFCW. It is particularly important at this difficult time that support is being made available to students who have had to remain away from home and may be feeling isolated and institutions are putting in place additional support measures for students for whom the university is their primary residence.

We have provided additional funding for the 'Health for Health Professionals Wales' service, which is providing mental health support for NHS staff including medical students, nursing students and other healthcare students working to support the NHS in this critical time.

International activity

The Welsh Government welcomes international students from across the world, and values the contribution they make to our universities and communities.

We have committed to working with providers, through Global Wales, to support the international work of our universities and to foster relationships with other nations, regions and institutions. We have also funded a pilot, Global Wales Discover, to promote short-term overseas mobilities, particularly for those students who might not otherwise have considered, or been able to take up, such opportunities.

Immigration is a matter for the UK Government, and we have raised concerns about how visa requirements and English Language testing may negatively affect international students who are unable to comply as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. In March, the UK Government updated visa guidance to provide greater certainty for international higher education students in the UK currently unable to return home due to COVID-19.

Financial sustainability for providers

The Welsh Government recognises and acknowledges the very significant contribution the higher education sector is making to our response to the crisis. It is heartening that so many have been willing to lend their resources be it research expertise, accommodation, staff, students or other facilities to help out.

Stability in the sector is a key priority in the short to medium term and we have recognised the need for the sector to have confidence in the ongoing support of the Welsh Government. We have provided HEFCW with a provisional grant letter for 2020 to 2021.

We are working with the Student Loans Company and the other UK nations to reprofile tuition fee payments for providers, so they will receive more cash in the first term, supporting them to better manage financial risks over the autumn.

Universities can also access UK wide support, including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS), Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CLBILS) and COVID Corporate Financing Facility (CCFF). HE providers that meet the published criteria for CBILS or CLBILS should approach their bank and begin to apply for the scheme.

We recognise that the financial impact of the crisis on universities is substantial, and that further support from government may be required after institutions have done all they can to stabilise their financial position. We will continue to work within Welsh Government to identify options for further financial support for key sectors, including higher education, which will be vital for economic recovery, local and regional development, and a vibrant and informed democracy.

The scale of financial support that may be required is beyond devolved Administration budgets, and we welcome further discussions with HM Treasury on this to maintain the strength, stability and strategic direction of our sector as a whole.

Research and innovation

We endorse the need for a joint Ministerial task force to address the impact of COVID-19 on the research base and look forward to continuing to work closely and collaboratively with Ministers from DfE, BEIS, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

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