

Cylchlythyr | Circular

HEFCW part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme 2020/21

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To: Heads of higher education providers in Wales
Principals of directly-funded further education colleges in Wales
Response by: 27 November 2020
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This circular describes HEFCW's part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme for 2020/21 and sets out the criteria students will need to meet in order to be eligible for a fee waiver under the scheme.

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Introduction

1. This circular describes HEFCW's part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme for 2020/21 and sets out the criteria students will need to meet in order to be eligible for a fee waiver under the scheme.

Background

2. Part-time higher education is a Welsh Government and HEFCW priority¹. HEFCW's part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme offers grants to providers that waive fees for part-time students who are unemployed and registered jobseekers or are in receipt of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) benefits, and who meet the eligibility criteria.
3. The part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme was designed as an instrument to help promote social justice and to assist more people to obtain higher level qualifications. As such the scheme is intended to contribute towards widening access, re-skilling or up-skilling of adults, and increasing rates of retention, progression and success. In the current context, it offers a means of helping to address the economic challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, including engaging with those who might otherwise be at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training), or who wish to enhance their existing skills and knowledge.
4. Students apply directly to providers for fee waivers; HEFCW will allocate fee waiver grants to those providers on the basis of returns they supply. This scheme does not involve direct contact between students and HEFCW.
5. In March 2013, the then Minister for Education and Skills announced changes to the part-time student support system from 2014/15 for those studying part-time higher education². In response, HEFCW reviewed its part-time fee waiver scheme arrangements and, following consultation, revisions were detailed in *Circular W14/28HE: The HEFCW part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme*³. The proposed changes to the scheme, outlined in *Circular W14/28HE*, have applied from 2014/15 onwards.
6. Professor Sir Ian Diamond recommended notable changes to the funding of part-time study in Wales in his review of higher education funding in Wales⁴. Welsh Government in its response⁵ to the review set out that it intended to fully regulate part-time study by 2021 and was committed to further discussions about how study at an intensity below 25% could continue to be encouraged and funded. HEFCW undertook to monitor these developments and committed to keep this scheme under review on an annual basis to ensure that the scheme aligns with any future developments.

¹ [W14/24HE: HEFCW's Part-Time Higher Education Position Statement](#)

² [Welsh Government: Written Statement - Higher Education Part-time Undergraduate Support](#)

³ [W14/28HE: The HEFCW part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme](#)

⁴ [Welsh Government Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Arrangements in Wales](#)

⁵ [Welsh Government response to the recommendations from the Review of Student Support and Higher Education Funding in Wales \('the Diamond Review'\)](#)

7. We have indicated previously that we were planning a fundamental review of our teaching funding methodology to reflect the outcomes of Professor Sir Ian Diamond's independent review of higher education funding and student finance arrangements and the expectation of increased HEFCW funding. In light of the funding allocations now anticipated, and the pressures caused by the Covid-19 crisis, we are now planning a partial review of our teaching funding methodology, for implementation from AY 2022/23. We will consider whether to include the scheme within the review.

Part-time student support arrangements from 2014/15

8. In July 2014 Welsh Government introduced part-time tuition fee loans which allowed new part-time entrants from all backgrounds equality of access to higher education, providing they had not already received a qualification at the same or higher level than the qualification they were intending studying for and were studying at or above 25% full-time equivalent (FTE)⁶. Any new student who wished to study below 25% FTE would be ineligible for the loan scheme.
9. Continuing students who started their course before 1 September 2014 were not eligible for a Welsh Government part-time tuition fee loan and were required to either self-fund or apply to other funding sources. The Welsh Government's means-tested part-time fee grant has remained available to continuing students that started their course before 1 September 2014, but is broadly aimed at those studying at an intensity of at least 50% FTE (courses must be completed in no more than twice the time it would take to complete the full-time equivalent).

HEFCW's part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme

10. As described above, the introduction of the Welsh Government part-time tuition fee loans in 2014/15 enabled all new eligible part-time students, studying at or above 25% FTE to have access to financial support for higher education in Wales. HEFCW's part-time fee waiver scheme was amended to support those providers offering financial support for certain groups of students who were not eligible for the Welsh Government's part-time tuition fee loan. There are separate criteria within the HEFCW scheme for students that commenced their studies prior to 1 September 2014 and students that commenced their studies on or after 1 September 2014.
11. The following forms the basis of HEFCW's fee waiver scheme:
 - HEFCW retained its previous fee waiver scheme criteria for eligible students that commenced their studies prior to 1 September 2014;
 - HEFCW amended its fee waiver scheme criteria for eligible students that commenced their studies on or after 1 September 2014 to apply only to those studying below 25% FTE (ie fewer than 30 credits).

⁶ [Student Finance Wales, Part-time students](#)

12. Intensity of study will normally be measured in credit values. Therefore a fee waiver grant will not be provided for any student who commenced their studies on or after 1 September 2014 and who studies 30 credits or more over an academic year. In the situation where a student initially undertakes fewer than 30 credits but subsequently adds to this during the academic year, providers will be unable to claim a HEFCW fee waiver grant. However, we would encourage providers to continue to provide that fee waiver, where possible, in order not to discourage students who decide they would like to study more credits. In all cases, institutional academic regulations will apply.
13. The maximum funding available to students is as follows, that:
 - For students who commenced their studies prior to 1 September 2014: £1200 per annum
 - For students who commenced their studies on or after 1 September 2014: £875 per annum.
14. The following sections outline the eligibility criteria for the scheme.

Continuing students who commenced their studies prior to 1 September 2014

Criteria for eligibility

15. Continuing students who commenced their studies prior to 1 September 2014 are excluded from applying for a Welsh Government part-time tuition fee loan, but they might be eligible for a Welsh Government part-time fee grant.
16. Continuing students who commenced their studies prior to 1 September 2014 will fit the criteria that allow a provider to claim a fee waiver grant, where a student meets the course and personal eligibility criteria as follows:
 - The student is in receipt of a part-time fee grant, but this is insufficient to cover the full cost of tuition fees that year⁷;
 - The student is studying at below 50% FTE intensity
17. In order for a provider to claim a HEFCW fee waiver grant on behalf of a student, the provider must be satisfied that the eligibility criteria have been met in relation to (i) the student's course, and (ii) the student's personal circumstances.

Course criteria

18. A student must:
 - (i) be studying part-time and have commenced their studies prior to 1 September 2014. The definition of part-time study is that used by HEFCW

⁷ Students are only eligible for up to £1200 in total combined from both schemes. For example, if their fees are £1300 and they receive the maximum fee grant of £1025, an additional £175 will be available to providers from HEFCW's scheme. Students will need to self-finance any amount above £1200.

in its 2019/20 Higher Education Students Early Statistics (HESES) survey.⁸

HEFCW recognises that part-time students do not necessarily follow a course of study on a traditional academic year basis. However, for administrative simplicity the grant scheme will be based on the financial year for providers, ie 1 August to 31 July.

- (ii) be registered, as a continuing student, on a programme with the aim of obtaining a recognised undergraduate higher education qualification; or on a course, module or unit which enables credit to be obtained towards a recognised undergraduate higher education qualification.

The following qualifications are recognised for the purpose of the scheme:

- First degree
- Foundation degree
- HNC
- HND
- Other undergraduate credit-bearing higher education award

Students who already have any of the above qualifications and are studying for a qualification that is of the same level or lower will not be eligible for a fee waiver. Non credit-bearing courses and postgraduate courses do not qualify for the scheme.

Students are not eligible for funding to repeat a course or any modules or units within a course, except in cases where extenuating circumstances may apply. Providers should contact HEFCW for clarification in these cases.

- (iii) be studying on a course which corresponds to ten credit values or more as defined by the Credit and Qualifications Framework Wales (CQFW) credit framework.

Credit values will have been determined on the basis of the CQFW standard of 120 credit values equalling one academic year of higher education experience for full-time undergraduates.

Fee waiver grant conditions

19. The following conditions of grant will apply to any payment made under the HEFCW part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme:

- Providers may claim grants only in support of waived tuition fees for those students who are deemed eligible for the HEFCW part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme, as set out in paragraphs 15 to 18 above. Fees may be waived to the full cost of the course's tuition fees, or

⁸ Circular [W19/39HE](#), Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey 2019/20

- a maximum of £1200 per student, whichever is the lower amount.
- All grants paid must be used for the purposes for which they are provided.
- Each provider must submit an annual return setting out the total value of fee waivers actually awarded.
- HEFCW will adjust the amount of grant paid to a provider in support of student tuition fees waived where the amount that a provider has actually waived is different from its initial estimate for a year. Additional payments required where providers have underestimated the level of funding required will be subject to the constraints of the overall HEFCW fee waiver budget.
- Fee waiver scheme grants will not be available where providers have waived the full tuition fee for a student where the same module(s) fees for the same academic year are being supported by a Welsh Government part-time fee grant. A fee waiver grant might be available where a provider has waived the remainder of a student's tuition fee where a Welsh Government part-time fee grant has been insufficient to cover the full tuition fee. Details of this exception are detailed above in paragraph 9.

New students and continuing students who commenced their studies on or after 1 September 2014

Criteria for eligibility

20. In order for a provider to claim a HEFCW fee waiver grant on behalf of a student, the provider must be satisfied that the eligibility criteria have been met in relation to (i) the student's course, and (ii) the student's personal circumstances. These criteria are set out below.

Course criteria

21. A student must

- (i) be studying part-time at less than 25% of a full-time equivalent student and have commenced their course on or after 1 September 2014. The definition of part-time study is that used by HEFCW in its 2019/20 Higher Education Students Early Statistics (HESES) survey.

HEFCW recognises that part-time students do not necessarily follow a course of study on a traditional academic year basis. However, for administrative simplicity the grant scheme will be based on the financial year for providers, ie 1 August to 31 July.

- (ii) be registered, as a new entrant in 2019/20 or a continuing student from no earlier than 1 September 2014, on a programme with the aim of obtaining a recognised undergraduate higher education qualification; or on a course which enables credit to be obtained towards a recognised undergraduate higher education qualification.

The following qualifications are recognised for the purpose of the scheme:

- First degree
- Foundation degree
- HNC
- HND
- Other undergraduate credit-bearing higher education award.

Students who already have any of the above qualifications and are studying for a qualification that is of the same level or lower will not be eligible for a fee waiver. Non-credit bearing courses and postgraduate courses do not qualify for the scheme.

Students are not eligible for funding to repeat a course or any modules or units in a course, except in cases where extenuating circumstances may apply. Providers should contact HEFCW for clarification in these cases.

- (iii) be studying on a course which corresponds to ten credit values or more as defined by the CQFW credit framework.

Credit values will have been determined on the basis of the CQFW standard of 120 credit values equalling one academic year of higher education experience for full-time undergraduates.

- (iv) be studying at less than 25% of a full time equivalent student. This will be measured in credit values relative to an assumed standard 120 credit year for a full-time undergraduate student and so equate to studying for less than 30 credits for the academic year of the fee waiver

In the event that any student studies for 30 or more credits over the academic year they will cease to be eligible for the HEFCW part-time fee waiver scheme but providers are encouraged to continue providing that fee waiver without the HEFCW grant.

Fee waiver grant conditions

22. The following conditions of grant will apply to any payment made under the HEFCW part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme:

- Providers may claim grants only in support of waived tuition fees for those students who are deemed eligible for the HEFCW part-time undergraduate fee waiver scheme, as set out above. Fees may be waived to the full cost of the course's tuition fees, or the maximum of £875, whichever is the lower amount.
- All grants paid must be used for the purposes for which they are provided.
- Each institution must submit an annual return setting out the total value of fee waivers actually awarded.
- HEFCW will adjust the amount of grant paid to an institution in support of student tuition fees waived where the amount that an institution has actually waived is different from its initial estimate for a year. Additional

payments required where providers have underestimated the level of funding required will be subject to the constraints of the overall HEFCW fee waiver budget.

Personal criteria applicable to all eligible students under the scheme

Eligibility criteria

23. A student enrolled on an eligible course must:

- (i) be classed as eligible for funding according to the definition provided in HEFCW's HESES survey.
- (ii) be Welsh domiciled (provision of a Welsh address by the student would usually be considered sufficient evidence of Welsh domicile).
- (iii) meet **at least one** of the conditions set out under (a) to (d) below:
 - (a) the student's family is in receipt of:
 - Universal Credit
 - Tax Credits
 - Job Seekers Allowance and low-income benefits
 - Heating and housing benefits
 - Benefits for families
 - (b) the student is in receipt of:
 - Carers and disability benefits
 - Bereavement benefits

Information on the benefits which are listed above and the definitions of terms used in these benefits are available on the DWP website ([DWP Benefits](#)).

- (c) The student is a registered jobseeker, and has been for a continuous period of no less than six weeks prior to the date of application for fee waiver.
- (d) The sole income to the student's family is Department for Work and Pensions benefits.

For the purpose of the criterion (a) the definition of 'family' is as follows:

- married, civil partnership or unmarried couple, **or**
- married or unmarried couple or couple in a civil partnership with dependent children, **or**
- lone parent with dependent children.

Evidence required

24. To be eligible under the criteria set out above students must provide their provider with official documentary evidence of their entitlement. This, for example, may be in the form of a letter from Jobcentre Plus confirming the claimant's name, address and benefit entitlement.
25. Evidence relating to the eligibility criteria should be obtained prior to fees being waived. The provider should retain evidence of the documentation for audit purposes. HEFCW may wish to audit this evidence at a later date.

Changes in circumstances

26. A material change in circumstances may result in a student becoming, or ceasing to become, eligible for fee waiver during a period of study. Where such a case arises, the provider should seek to waive, rebate or claim fees, as appropriate, to an amount reflecting, in broad terms, the remainder of the year's period of study. Providers should require students to notify them if such a material change in their circumstances arises.
27. A student that initially undertakes fewer than 30 credits but subsequently adds to this during the academic year will be ineligible for the HEFCW part time fee waiver scheme. In this case providers are encouraged to continue providing that fee waiver without the HEFCW grant in order not to deter students from undertaking additional study.
28. A student may decide to change from a full-time to a part-time mode of study. If this change in status results in the student meeting the eligibility criteria then, where it is practical, the student should be able to benefit from the scheme. Such a case must be dealt with in the same way as any other significant change in circumstance.

Promoting the scheme

29. We would expect providers to promote fee waiver opportunities to those students who this policy is intended to support, particularly those from under-represented groups and/or those with protected characteristics.
30. HEFCW funding is not indefinite and funding schemes are reviewed on an annual basis. Consequently, funding for this scheme could be withdrawn prior to students achieving a full qualification, and students should be made aware of this.

General points relating to assessment of eligibility

31. Student status should normally be assessed at the beginning of a programme of study. It should then be reassessed at least once every twelve months thereafter, for the duration of the period of study.
32. Only tuition fees are eligible for fee waiver. The cost of any assessment or examination fees, additional to those included in the tuition fees, is not eligible under this scheme.
33. Higher education providers offering fee waivers under this scheme will be supported through this HEFCW grant. We encourage providers to operate and promote other schemes to recruit and support part-time students using, for example, their general resources, or other funding which can be used in support of part-time study.
34. Some cases will fall on the margins of the eligibility criteria set out in paragraphs 21 and 23 above. In such cases where the award of a fee waiver in the view of the provider would be clearly meeting the overall purpose of the scheme, providers may apply reasonable discretion when testing student eligibility. It is important that the reason for applying discretion is recorded by the institution as this may be audited by HEFCW at a later date. In the event that there are more than ten such cases within an institution, HEFCW should be informed without delay, via the contact details provided in this circular.

General conditions of grant

Basis of HEFCW grant payments to providers

35. Providers offering fee waivers under the scheme will be supported through the HEFCW fee waiver grant subject to available funds. The maximum level of funding that that can be claimed for any student in an academic year will either be the full cost of the course's tuition fees, or the maximum amount as outlined in paragraph 13, whichever is lower.
36. Each year providers are invited to claim a grant in support of tuition fees waived by submitting a return to HEFCW which sets out an estimate of the value of the tuition fees to be waived under this scheme, and an estimate of the number of students expected to benefit, together with the corresponding overall number of credit values. Providers are encouraged to consider actual values of fees waived under the scheme in previous years in making their estimates.
37. The estimates of the value of fee waivers provided in the returns from providers will be used as the basis of a payment from HEFCW to support providers for these fees. These payments will be typically made in February of each year, on the basis that the evidence below is submitted, subject to checking the institution's claim. We expect that the majority of students who benefit from this scheme will have commenced their studies on or after 1 September 2014.

38. In order to determine the actual value of fee waivers, we extract data returned by providers on the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student record and compare the actual value of fee waivers with the early estimate received the previous year to calculate the difference. Any difference between the two would be recognised in the payment of grant for the following year, subject to the constraints of the overall fee waiver budget. In the event that it had been estimated that a student would undertake fewer than 30 credits but actually undertook 30 credits or more, a deduction would be made from the payment of grant the following year. Any adjustments required in relation to data returns (particularly for 'actual' values) which were not processed in 2019/20 due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will be applied to payments in 2020/21.
39. As part of their submission of the student record to HESA, providers receive output generated by HEFCW through the Information Reporting Interface Service (IRIS). This includes a downloadable part-time fee waiver table. We require providers to sign off the data in that table with an electronic signature. An explanation of any anomalies in the data must be provided, for example if a fee waiver is reported to have been paid to a student who is not in an eligible category, or where there are ten or more discretionary cases within a provider.
40. Where the anomalies make a difference to the fee claimed, then this needs to be changed to reflect the actual amount of fee waiver paid out. Providers should indicate on the table and in their covering email any changes to their returns (eg in red text) and the amended table signed off and returned to HEFCW, together with an explanation for the change. The downloadable table must include data from the final IRIS output generated from the final (signed-off) submission to HESA.
41. The downloadable table displays information about the amount of fee waived (HESA field INSTANCE.FEEWAIVEAMT) and the qualifying criterion (HESA field INSTANCE.FEEWAIVETYPE). Further information can be found on the HESA website in the student record coding manual⁹. Members of staff responsible for the part-time fee waiver scheme should liaise with the HESA student record contact(s) for their institution so that they can download and scrutinise the analysis, check for consistency and look for anomalies that may need to be explained, for example, relating to changes in circumstance or discretionary fee waivers. The table also contains checks on the eligibility of the student with regards to mode and level of study, FTE and previous qualifications, and the amount of fee waiver given. As an illustrative example only, a copy of the table produced through IRIS for 2019/20 is provided at **Annex B**. Once providers are content with the data and any required explanations and amendments, providers should electronically sign beneath the table and email the signed copy to us. The table should be signed by the authorised signatory for the part-time fee waiver data. The names of the authorised signatories will be collected from providers in the autumn.
42. As a cross check, we will also analyse the HESA data when we receive final signed off HESA student record data for all providers, after the end of November.

⁹ INSTANCE. [C19051.FEEWAIVEAMT](#), [C19051.FEEWAIVETYPE](#)

43. Providers are required to provide the electronically signed table for **2019/20** downloaded from IRIS, and an estimate claim for fee waiver costs in **2020/21** by completing the pro-forma at **Annex A**. The completed **Annex A** and the signed IRIS table should be returned to HEFCW by **Friday 27 November 2020**.

Date	Action
November 2020	Providers download the part-time fee waiver table from the final IRIS output and provide it to HEFCW with any amendments or explanations required so it shows the actual value of fee waivers for 2019/20 students. The table should be electronically signed by the authorised signatory for the part-time fee waiver data, and emailed to hestats@hefcw.ac.uk by 27 November 2020.
	Providers provide HEFCW by 27 November 2020 with an estimated number and value of fee waivers for 2020/21 students electronically, using the form at Annex A , emailed to nicola.hunt@hefcw.ac.uk .
December 2020 onwards	HEFCW compare the actual value of fee waivers for 2019/20 students with the estimated value of fee waivers for 2019/20 students submitted in November 2019 to establish whether there is a variance between the two figures.
February 2021*	HEFCW pay providers based on the estimated value of fee waivers for 2020/21 students, adjusted for any variance calculated between the estimated and actual fee waivers for 2019/20 students, and any adjustments which were not processed in 2019/20 due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.
*This date is subject to checking the provider's claim with the detail on the HESA student record once HEFCW have the full signed off HESA student record.	

Assessing the impact of our policies

44. As part of our original policy development process we undertook an impact assessment to consider the impact of this scheme on individuals with protected characteristics and groups under-represented in higher education. We will continue to consider the impact of our policies in order to help safeguard against discrimination and promote equality and diversity in HE, and to consider the impact on the Welsh language, Welsh language provision and the potential impacts towards the goals and ways of working set out in the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

45. Providers are responsible for reviewing their own impact assessments in relation to part-time funding, taking into account the impact on individuals with protected characteristics and to help safeguard against discrimination. Contact equality@hefcw.ac.uk for more information about equality impact assessments.

Further information

46. For technical enquiries about IRIS please email hestats@hefcw.ac.uk. For all other enquiries relating to the scheme please contact Nicola Hunt (telephone: 029 2085 9735, email: nicola.hunt@hefcw.ac.uk).