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Written Statement: Update on Delivery of Higher Education in Wales

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Update on Delivery of Higher Education in Wales

Kirsty Williams, Minister for Education

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Our message to students, staff and universities in general is the same as the rest of the population: Stay home, work or study from home if you can. Only attend your place of work or study if you can't work from home.

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Universities will let students know when they should return to campus.

In light of the new variant, I have asked universities to review their plans and to review their risk assessments. We continue to work collaboratively on this, and I welcome the local, regional and national co-ordination that continues to characterise our approach in Wales.

Each university is reviewing their plans based on their individual circumstances within national guidance, taking account of the impact on the needs of their students, staff and communities.

Universities are being pro-active and realistic in looking at current delivery and support. This may mean difficult decisions on which courses and students are prioritised in the return to campus over the coming weeks, and which are delivered online only until later in February.

This will see a return for students who need access to facilities to meet course learning outcomes effectively, who need to complete professional accreditation, or who need additional support.

Universities will also be assessing the support needs of those students who did not travel for the holiday period as the local community is their home.

On return, students are also expected to take two asymptomatic tests and comply with rules as they re-join their term time household.

Universities in Wales are open for essential on campus activity as many students and staff need access to a laboratory, specialist academic library, appropriate study space or studio which means they need to leave home as they cannot complete that work from home.

I have met regularly with NUS Wales throughout the pandemic, and the support we are providing includes £10m for student hardship, mental health provision and student union funding.

Preliminary data shows, as of January 6th, that 1,350 asymptomatic tests have been recorded at universities in Wales, with only 5 of these being positive. The asymptomatic tests are being offered to students and staff.

Any student who does not want to or is unable to return should speak to their university to discuss what support is available for them to continue their studies online.

This statement is being issued during recess in order to keep members informed. Should members wish me to make a further statement or to answer questions on this when the Senedd returns I would be happy to do so.

Updated guidance has been published today:

<https://gov.wales/guidance-higher-education-keep-wales-safe-covid-19>

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