Agenda – Children, Young People and Education Committee

Meeting Venue:	For further information contact:
Video Conference via Zoom	**Llinos Madeley**
Meeting date: 11 March 2021	Committee Clerk
Meeting time: 09.15	0300 200 6565
	SeneddCYPE@senedd.wales

In accordance with Standing Order 34.19, the Chair has determined that the public are excluded from the Committee's meeting in order to protect public health. This meeting will be broadcast live on www.senedd.tv

1   Introductions, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest
(09.15)

2   COVID-19: higher education
(09.15-10.15)   (Pages 1 – 43)

Dr Ben Calvert, Chair of Universities Wales Learning & Teaching Network and Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of South Wales
Amanda Wilkinson, Director of Universities Wales
Kieron Rees, Head of Policy and External Affairs, Universities Wales
Dr David Blaney, Chief Executive, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
Bethan Owen, Deputy Chief Executive, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales

**Senedd Cymru
Welsh Parliament**

Attached Documents:

Research brief

CYPE(5)-08-21 – Scrutiny of COVID 19 and its impact on student in further and higher education – Summary note 4 – 2 March 2021

CYPE(5)-08-21 – Paper 1

Break

(10.15-10.30)

3 COVID-19: further education

(10.30-11.30)

Philip Blaker, Chief Executive, Qualifications Wales

David Jones, Chair, Qualifications Wales

Denver Davies, Head of Monitoring and Compliance, Qualifications Wales

Yana Williams, Chief Executive, Coleg Cambria

Barry Walters, Principal of Pembrokeshire College

Karen Phillips, Principal of Coleg y Cymoedd

4 Papers to note

(11.30)

4.1 Letter from the Director General for Regulation at the Office for Statistical Regulation regarding the publication of a review into the approach for developing statistical models for awarding grades in 2020

(Pages 44 – 45)

Attached Documents:

CYPE(5)-08-21 – Paper to note 1

4.2 Letter from the Minister for Housing and Local Government to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee regarding the British-Irish Council (BIC) Digital Inclusion Work Sector Ministerial Meeting

(Pages 46 – 47)

Attached Documents:

CYPE(5)-08-21 – Paper to note 2

4.3 Summary of the roundtable discussion with the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services regarding the progress of children's rights in Wales

(Pages 48 – 51)

Attached Documents:

CYPE(5)-08-21 – Paper to note 3

5 Motion under Standing Order 17.42(ix) to resolve to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting

(11.30)

6 Covid-19: Consideration of evidence

(11.30-11.45)

Agenda Item 2

Document is Restricted

Online Focus Groups - Summary Note

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on children and young people in Wales, including students in further and higher education

February 2021

In December 2020 the Children, Young People and Education Committee of the Welsh Parliament (Senedd) set out to undertake detailed engagement work on what student life has been like for those currently studying further and higher education.

This summary note contains participants' views from a programme of online focus groups held between January - February 2021.

Findings in this note are based upon the responses of **66 participants** from across Wales who shared their views during **12 online focus groups**. The aim of the engagement was to gain qualitative information about the experiences of participants and deepen the Committee's understanding of the issues affecting students.

This method ensured a broad sample of students were able to engage and share their lived experiences - putting the voices of the citizens of Wales at the forefront of scrutiny.

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1. Data collection

In order to ensure the demographic was reflective of the Welsh student body, a pre-screening survey was arranged in order to capture the initial interest of students.

Working closely with external organisations to communicate the opportunity of registering interest for online focus groups, 297 participants completed the pre-screening survey. 92 participants were then invited to an online focus group. 66 participated in total. Appendix 1 includes a full list of organisations that supported the engagement approach.

Participants came from all 5 Senedd regions and represented all 8 Welsh universities. Of those who participated in an online focus group: 12 participants indicated they were accessing additional student services or had dependents; nine participants indicated they were international students; and eight students indicated they were Welsh citizens studying outside the country.

The questions posed at each focus group were based on the overarching question: *How has student life been for you*? Appendix 2 outlines the specific questions participants were asked.

This summary note outlines the key themes which arose during the online focus groups that may be of relevance to the Committee's work. Themes within this note have been selected on the basis that they were recurring or prominent in discussions thus enabling an insight into the lived experiences of students. Where it's possible and appropriate, anonymised quotes have been selected to add context. The quotes are displayed in grey boxes.

Members joined several of the online focus groups to hear the students' experiences first-hand.

To illustrate the key themes identified, case studies have been included that outline the timeline and impact of the pandemic on students from different backgrounds.

2. Key themes

Travel and Transition *including: Travel to and from university and home; the beginning of the academic year and the Christmas break; and International students*

Generally there was an **expectation from the students that they would return** to university smoothly this academic year however for many participants it was more stressful than anticipated.

> *"I found it difficult transitioning from the Welsh lockdown rules to the English lockdown rules because over the Christmas period, there were so many changes with the rules in terms of the tiers and then going into a lockdown."*
>
> *"I'm a first year student so I have nothing to compare it to but if I go back to September's Welcome Week, I really wouldn't call it a welcome week. I didn't feel welcome at all. We had absolutely nothing."*

Some participants suggested **communication from their university about traveling over borders was lacking** or not specific to people's circumstances. Messaging was described as 'mediocre' – with one participant who was on a language exchange in Italy when the pandemic hit, describing **feeling scared** about the way the university dealt with the situation.

> *"We have an app for the university which is where we get all of our news, timetabling and all that sort of stuff. But I don't think there was much explicit information about crossing borders."*
>
> *"I was in a bad place and I really want to be able to go home and I felt that there was no one saying "yes you can travel" - I felt a bit bad for asking the university."*
>
> *"If I'm honest, I'm not sure whether my University knows that Wales exists! It was down to me and my family to find out what the rules were and when I could travel home etc."*
>
> *"Communication was very much focused on English guidelines. There was barely anything for Wales."*
>
> *"I was actually in Italy when the coronavirus hit so I had to come home early and ever since that point I have not felt the same drive from my lecturers to*

support us. When we were asking for advice on what to do about being in Italy and should we come home, our lecturers were like, "We're not your parents so we can't tell you what to do." it was a scary situation."

Some students highlighted **issues around availability of lecturers** and support services over the Christmas break.

"For me there was very little clarity on when staff would be still answering emails and obviously that's the only way to get in touch people now. We could have done with a bit more information on when staff would be available for contact."

"It was like now we're not answering emails anymore. And you're like OK, but we have an assignment. We don't know who we can talk to."

International students described feeling 'tricked' and 'betrayed.' Where they made long and expensive journeys, they felt that if they had stayed at home they'd have received the same level of education. See Case Study 1 for more information.

"There was this real assurance that actually made me decide to come to the university – they made it out like they had a plan - and then when I arrived it was a completely different story. I felt extremely isolated because there was no in-person lectures. It felt like a betrayal because if I'd known that it was going to be all online, I never would have come to the UK."

"I just feel tricked, stupid and ripped off. I'm not asking for in-person lectures at all costs because the pandemic is here. But this is the livelihoods of our parents. Most of us are self-funded. Using international students as a bailout is going to cause massive hardships. We've been treated as a safety net."

"I'm feeling really stupid for the decisions we've made because, I feel like international students have been used to offset the financial crises within local economies, but that is not our problem."

"The uni seemed to do everything they could but the UK government weren't clear. Being an international student in this situation has been very, very difficult."

"I feel like this pandemic situation has also brought on for me a sense of greater insecurity in being in this country and what my status is here."

Some international students who shared their views described feeling like a 'cash cow' for universities, plugging financial gaps.

> *"When you see that were not being treated equally and that billionaires are receiving bailouts [...] It makes me feel like a cash cow."*
>
> *"I've made a list of the different charges that we are subjected to as international students; firstly there's the international student fees which has everyone's mentioned are pretty extortionate. Then there's the private accommodation fees, the visa fees, and a NHS surcharge (it's money that we are paying for being in the UK even though we're not in the UK but I paid it because we were encouraged to come back) And then flight costs, this year we're paying even more money because we're getting decisions last minute. Usually I booked my flights 3-6 months in advance but now I'm only booking them maybe a week in advance. Then there is the addition of PCR covid tests (roughly £100) and then self-isolation – we are paying a lot more money this year to sit in our houses, in our countries and access a mediocre education. We don't have the same access to libraries or facilities - I don't blame my course or my university think the blame goes to a higher level."*

Universities' **support during self-isolation was reported as being varied**.

> *"I had to figure out how to get hold of supplies as I had to self-isolate and the uni didn't offer any support."*
>
> *"I actually arrived in November because I have in-person lab sessions. I had to self-isolate for two weeks. I asked for food and supplies and they told me I had to buy things online. At first I thought it was a little difficult but I got used to it."*
>
> *"We got to look at what the contents were of the international student self-isolation food bag and I think most of my flatmates were disappointed in the quality of the food that was being provided. It was surprising that it was supposed to last you a day considering that you'd have to live on just some like cheap sandwiches especially if you're just moved in from a different country."*

Participants felt **careers advice services did not cater for international students**, even pre-pandemic.

> *"Careers advice are great in terms of general advice, but in terms of the intricacies of immigration advice they don't have the capability to deliver it at all, let alone in a pandemic."*

Student Services *including; Accommodation; Self-isolation and Testing*

Most students who participated in the focus groups were **aggrieved at the absence of a rent rebate** offer, given that the accommodation they had signed up for was now closed off or in some cases unused.

> *"I paid £2100 at the start of January and I haven't been there since the start of December. I emailed our landlord to ask for any refunds but in all fairness, he came back with "I can't support you unless I'm supported myself," which is more than fair. It just seems unfair that only those in halls are able to access refunds in most cases."*
>
> *"We've got communal rooms, but you're not allowed in there because of the restrictions, so basically you live in a bed sit [...] You are paying a lot of money and you're not allowed to use the gym, cinema room or pool room. But they haven't offered discounts on that."*
>
> *"It's difficult for landlords at the moment because they're not sure what's expected of them."*
>
> *"No one is to blame for what has happened but it is annoying that I have to pay for something I don't use."*

Most participants shared the view that **their universities had considered what they could offer students in self-isolation**, however this support was, for the most part, only accessible to those in halls.

Some students struggled to find the information which explained when they could **emerge from self-isolation**.

> *"We rung the NHS number 111 but were passed around because they weren't sure if we could come out of isolation – the caller actual said they didn't know how to best deal with their situation."*
>
> *"We had texts from track and trace that had different isolation end dates compared to the track and trace app."*

Testing facilities varied in accessibility and availability. Some participants described them as very accessible but uptake appeared low. Other participants described these facilities as poorly run and badly timed for anticipated student travel.

"We had facilities to take tests until the 8th of December roughly. It wasn't very useful because not everyone was going to go home so early [...] It would have been better to keep the testing open until the last day of uni so everyone gets the chance to do it."

"I went for a test in the in the late afternoon and I asked how many people have been in and they told me I was the second person that day to have a test. I thought it was very odd because the halls are literally across the road from the walk-in centre. It's very accessible."

"We had to leave within three days of a negative test. We only needed one test. For me personally, that wasn't ideal really because I couldn't get a lift home until six days after a negative test. So, following a negative test, I stayed in the house – I was the last to leave before going back for Christmas."

"They are offering these PCR tests on site and they are advising students to get two separate tests on their return. However for the students with a disability like myself, where masks are an issue and I don't feel comfortable wearing them they haven't offered an alternative. It's been really frustrating not being able to access to asymptomatic testing."

"There wasn't anywhere near enough tests. I only managed to get one and I just had to hope that it would be OK. The booking system only really allowed you to book one test at a time and I got in early. They just booked up really quickly."

"I'd say traveling home for Christmas was quite an easy affair because of the university. Testing for us was spot on and really easy. I'd give them a lot of credit because I got home and was completely anxiety free about Covid."

"I couldn't rebook my test so I never took a test. Not because I didn't want to, but I was unable to re-book it after my plans had to change. There were barriers to the booking system."

Students described feeling **unclear about whether the tests were compulsory**.

Generally they were asked "to be sensible" but **not forced to self-isolate** after they returned from the Christmas break.

"I know people who were told they had to have a test and others were told that the tests for optional."

> *"With the asymptomatic tests, they were not mandatory."*

Some organisations were reported as being **successful in moving student services online**. However, some students described the **struggle to locate these services** now that they are unable to enter the building and walk into an office. In some cases, **student services are on hold until face-to-face interaction can resume**. See Case Study 2 for more information.

> *"I have had mental health problems and I think everyone can agree that with coronavirus and lock down, it just amplifies everything. In terms of if I wanted to access a mental health support system or anything like that I actually would not know how to do it or where I would go."*
>
> *"I have no idea where to go for these services at the moment. if we were able to go on campus, I'd have a decent idea where I can go for that kind of stuff, but there's been very little signposting since everything is now online."*
>
> *"As for the disability services, nothing's been circulated. I haven't noticed any emails from the disability office. There's been a real lack of support for students who have additional needs anyway."*
>
> *"Overall the university has been able to transfer everything online and has been able to do so quickly."*

Participants observed regular and increased communication for mental health services. Generally **the services were noted as good or very good** and the **provision was high on each university's agenda** – usually with the Student Union (SU hereafter), supporting this work widely.

However, some **participants were eager for face-to-face mental health and wellbeing support to resume**. Offering such support online only was considered inadequate.

> *"The students' union is good at communicating that sessions are still available online, particularly around mental health issues."*
>
> *"Mental health support has been a completely different level this year compared to last year. I know there's a waiting time on services but this year that it hasn't been the case. They're constantly sending out emails about mental health resources."*

> *"A lot of people have said to me that online they pretend they're OK because what is the person over the computer actually gonna do? In September we were allowed to be at face-to-face seminars. But I can't meet my supervisors who are essentially all that I have to guide me through my PhD or I can't meet my mentor who essentially keeps me in uni."*

> *"I'd really value seeing someone for my mental health. I was doing an apprenticeship in health and social care. I started in 2019 halfway through Covid and they said to me we can either pull you or we can redeploy you through your apprenticeship. I decided to go on to learn about palliative care for the elderly. I'm 19, it's not the job that I planned out to do so soon. I need somebody to talk but I wouldn't feel comfortable talking to somebody over Teams. Just talking to a screen is like talking to yourself."*

Most groups raised issues around access to resource material and library facilities. A lack of access to resources resulted in some students having to buy materials, however this was not always the solution as **certain books and text were rare and/or expensive**.

> *"I found it very difficult because I'm on a creative course and I require some of the materials. There is one particular book where there is only one copy of that book available. Somebody has loaned it and there is no digital copy available. I could buy it on Amazon but it's about £30 - £50 and can take up to a month to arrive because it's so rare."*

> *"I found that the library click and collect service was a bit weak initially. It wasn't quite ready for us going back and by the time it was up and running properly I was trying to write a dissertation proposal without full access to things. It was incredibly difficult."*

Blended Learning including: Impact on health; and Practical Courses

Some participants illustrated how blended learning approaches were having a **negative impact on student's physical and mental health**. Issues were raised around a lack of work life balance and separation from the two, given most students were living and studying in the same small spaces.

> *"One thing that exacerbates the psychological effect on students in a pandemic in general, is the importance of separating work life balance. For a lot of students, they work, sleep and live in the same room, especially first years.*

They've got one room. On my bed room wall I have all my deadlines and you never really escaped from it."

"I've had continuous lectures since the Christmas break staring at a computer all day, and I think that it's going to have affected on people's mental health, but it worries me that it's going to affected people's eyes as well. It's going to affect more than one area. There's no avenue of flexibility."

"Motivation to do work is low for me and that can really get you down. I live in halls. My bed is just across from me. It's like one step away. It sounds terrible, but I can if I wanted to spend all day in my bed and not do anything."

Numerous participants highlighted how their **teaching hours had dramatically reduced** from when they initially signed up for the course.

"I think online learning has been really mediocre and there's not enough of it either. When I came to the open day, we were told there be about 20 hours a week of education and that's now six hours a week."

A number of students felt **practical elements of their course were not feasible** in an online learning environment.

"I've struggled in terms of the online delivery because they are delivering a very fast paced technical subject. There's a lot of maths and it's quite hard to follow when you've got a lecturer pointing a web camera at a piece of paper. It's not very clear and you might miss something."

"I've found it really difficult because my course is a very practical course. We cook every single week [...] and we've actually only recently started cooking again. We're doing that now over phone calls and obviously we're missing our practical assessments because our tutor can't actually taste our food."

"We have three practical modules, which are rotated each week. So I'm learning cinematography once every three weeks. If I tried to learn piano or a language like that it just wouldn't work."

"I do accounting and I feel that accounting and finance needs actual interaction on a board to learn. It's been very, very difficult to do it online."

"With a policing degree it's very much it needs to be a face-to-face."

Some participants described how clarity on extensions, late information about assignment deadlines and assessments were making **planning difficult and stressful**.

> *"I had to change my dissertation last minute as we didn't get an answer about using the labs and I couldn't stand the uncertainty any more – I wrote my ethics application in 48 hours and it's a 25 page document."*
>
> *"A lot of us needed some sort of reassurance that everything was going to be okay and that we were going to pass, but we feel a little lost."*

Some students felt at a disadvantage where they **lacked computer literacy**.

> *"I've never had to do a timed essay when typing. I've always done it on paper and I'm a much quicker writer than I am typer because in school you've been taught to write quickly for exams. I found trying to get used to the whole process of this online quite difficult. I've not done this before."*

Some participants reported a **lack of rationality around traveling for assignments** such as film making assignments. Students did not feel they were able to travel for this type of educational task. Risk assessments were available for use before going on location but when students spoke to tutors, they were not able to confirm that this type of activity was permitted.

Placements

Several participants highlighted concerns over **virtual placements potentially de-valuing qualifications**.

> *"When I graduate this summer I may possibly be graduating having never taught face-to-face for more than six weeks. That's a scary thought. I have not ever planned with a qualified teacher. These thing I thought I'd get from my course, but I'm not getting them because of the situation. I'm just worried that when I graduate and when I look for a job, whether I'll be considered a little bit under experience because I haven't had those experiences here."*
>
> *"My placements have been cancelled for the third time now. How do you do a nursing degree online for example? I'm not sure anybody here would feel comfortable with me coming up to them saying "I need to give you an*

injection and I've learnt from a YouTube video and a little PowerPoint my lecturer made for me.""

"I'm worried more so about my future. Is the only experience I'm ever going to get virtual? And how will that affect my long term future career prospects?"

From feedback given by participants, where possible, it appears **universities are doing their best to enable students to complete placements safely**. However, a number of participants who are clinically vulnerable were worried for their safety on placements. They explained how they had not been given assurances on **alternatives to attending a placement**.

"I'm expected to do a placement in April and I have so many reservations about this [...] I'm a vulnerable person going into a school setting with a classrooms full of children and staffrooms full of adults, all from separate households. I'm going to have to interact with them, because I'm going to be helping out and observing. It's unavoidable. If a school can't take me for my placement, I then can't do my assignments and I'll fail my module. I feel like I don't really have any choice but to go and do the placement or I will fail."

"The majority of my cohort have child care and kids to look after and there's a really high expectation and demand on students. It feels like the university think we should forget the rest of our life. I don't think there's been any regard for the people who are doing placements, regardless of whether their nursing or teaching. I feel like we've just been kicked under the bus."

"Obviously we can't as a cohort all fail this year but unless there is some change to our Qualified Teacher Status requirements I don't see how we can pass."

"I have mainly felt safe on placement despite being in a school, however as there is lots of talk currently as to whether teachers should be higher up on the list of vaccinations, I would been keen to know if student teachers are included in this."

Several students described how there is still **confusion** around what will happen if they do not complete placements.

Finance

Many students **felt they had not received value for money** for their course fees. These feelings were primarily linked to; teaching time being greatly reduced; lack of access to one-to-one tutor support; unskilled lecturers; lack of collaborative opportunities; and issues with practical courses.

> *"Arguably I could do my research from anywhere, as long as I have my laptop, a pen and Wi-Fi connection, but it's not that simple. They're missing the point, which is you need more than just a computer and zoom."*
>
> *"The time tabled hours have been cut by half. I've got two hours of contact time for 20 credit module and this is my final year as well."*
>
> *"In terms of value for money for teaching, I'd say the university has done the best that they can with what they have, but I don't necessarily think that it's worth £9k this year because I'm primarily doing a practical course. We build stuff. We do stuff in labs, but we can't do that at all this year. I've had two face-to-face lectures for the whole of the year."*
>
> *"I really enjoyed my course this year. Having said that I feel the way the university approached online learning was absolutely shocking. It took myself and my other course reps to physically teach staff how to use Teams. It's not my job. I'm on the course to learn."*

Students discussed **issues around budgeting and debt,** with particular reference to child care and buying their own resources. See <u>Case Study 3</u> for more details. Many said they were using savings to get through, or relying on family.

> *"I don't want to apply for a hardship fund as I know there are students in much worse conditions than me. Many students are likely to be dealing with the double cost of both having to fund themselves through being locked down unexpectedly, as well as not being able to apply for Summer work. The furlough scheme doesn't cater for students so it feels like these factors are concealing a hidden student debt that hasn't been acknowledged. For me this 'debt' has amounted to around £2500 which I have taken from my savings."*
>
> *"My big issue is, I know it's difficult for universities but I am paying a lot of money that I don't actually have. We are taking on quite significant debts in exchange for what's actually been less effective than a skill share account?"*

> *"My parents were able to help me during the first year and the second year, but I was lucky in that I was paid over the period of the placement, which has helped with the third year."*

Students acknowledged that, for the most part, their **university was doing as well as they could but they were reliant on clear, timely direction and guidance from the Welsh Government**. Most students felt that the Welsh Government should be "bailing the universities out".

> *"There seemed to be a void on information where higher education and further education is concerned. In the retail sector or other sectors it's been very, very clear."*
>
> *"The second semester is all online, which is disappointing for me personally, but I understand it's difficult for the different governments."*
>
> *"The Christmas break involved a very late decision on behalf of the government, that travel would or wouldn't be okay. We had a number of students in distress and accessing support services because they were terrified that they were going to be stranded at the university campus alone"* – Student Union representative (and student)

Several students had faced financial hardship during the year which is something they highlighted as a **pre-pandemic problem**.

> *"I think people in their first year are going to be put off from what they've experienced this year, especially financially. I think a lot of people think students get student loans and they are well off, but my student loan it comes in and I pay rent and it's gone!"*
>
> *"I love my course, but the past year has been more stressed than it has been worth. If I didn't want to be a teacher at the end of it, I would have dropped out by now. If I can be teacher without debt, I would've left the course by now because it's so much stress and there is so much uncertainty."*

Communication including; Channels of Communication between the University and the Student body; and Pre-Covid Policies

Satisfaction of communication appeared to correlate with whether students had **tutors or lecturers** who were regularly keeping in touch.

Students also said that, on occasions, **lecturers were informed of key information simultaneously to students**.

> *"Communications with my personal tutor to ask them questions, has been pretty much a nightmare. You can wait for a week to get a one word response."*
>
> *"My lectures have been great in taking the class online - During the fire breaker lockdown at the end of last term, my tutor was doing lectures from a car because she didn't have any Wi-Fi in the house. She'd drive off to somewhere where she could pick up Wi-Fi signal and do lectures from the from her car."*
>
> *"I asked my tutor about any work that we should be doing over the break. He just said not to worry and just relax. 2 weeks later, I find out that they're sending us information about preparing work and tell us to do tasks over the Christmas break. I feel like I'm getting mixed messages from my tutors about what I should be doing and suddenly my stress is now through the roof."*
>
> *"I wouldn't say that they are particularly listening to us. For example, there was a live Q&A with the Vice Chancellor and the Students Union. I asked if there was a possibility of having an anonymous system where if you're worried about your module content you can make an anonymous complaint and it would be investigated independently. And they straight away just shut that down and said "no, it's not worth looking into.""*

Communication was described by many participants as a "**blanket approach**" – where universities sometimes informed students of the latest situation by simply forwarding Welsh Government updates, but adding little or no context as to how the news may affect the student body. **PhD students explained feeling forgotten** when much of the communication was targeted at undergraduate students.

> *"For a lot of things you have to escalate your complaints to the senior leadership teams and where a lot of us have sent emails we've been met with copy and pasted replies. They are literally carbon copies, or we get shifted around to different people. There have been a lot of empty answers."*
>
> *"We had a lot of emails with the subject line "coronavirus update" and it would cover the things that the government had said. Then you'd sit back waiting for the email about how it will be relevant to you, but it never came."*
>
> *"The clarity was absent. We needed information on when we could get hold of people. If we had been able to go to the university you could just go down the*

> corridor, knock on someone's door and ask, but now because we have to use emails it's impossible to track people down."

Some students explained they felt undervalued and there were underlying feelings of **frustration that their university encouraged them to return** to the campus only to speedily shut down the opportunity to study face-to-face.

> "I was thinking of dropping out of the course before I got here, if it was going to be all online, but because they sent out documents saying the approach they were taking to the blended learning approach. [...] But we got here in freshers week and I had two or three sessions a week pencilled in as being in-person and by the end of freshers week it was all online. I had no option really, but to stay."

> "Communication as a whole has been poor. For example with delaying our course for a month, it was just an email and a "get on with it" essentially."

Examples were shared of **policies** which were applied by universities despite their **lack of suitability during a pandemic**.

> "I asked for an extension because I lost time from the new way of adjusting to working and the new stresses that came with that. The department said they only give me one month, which led to my supervisors kicking up a fuss eventually they gave me a 2 month extension. But a month passed in this time. So I was in the same situation. I was very stressed and panicked that I'm going to suffer some negative consequences for this piece of work not being done because there was an arbitrary decision made off rules that weren't suited for the Covid pandemic."

> "I'm dyslexic and when I did my undergrad studies seven years ago I had my disability support put into place. When I came back in September as a postgraduate student, I wasn't able to access any of it. They have to retest me but they haven't been able to retest me because of Covid, and so I've been left in limbo. I'm stuck between student finance and the uni until I can be retested. I know that I should get a lot more support than I am getting because I've had it from that university previously. But I'm left to fight on myself."

> "We've been told that we could travel up to 90 minutes for placements. 90 minutes is quite far when you live in North Wales, but if I'm doing a 12 hour shift and then having to drive 90 minutes home when you finish a shift at like 8:30-9pm it's just ridiculous anyway."

"Over the summer I was fighting a lot with the senior college directors about dissertation extension requests. We were trying to ask for a blanket approach to have a one month extension. They seemed very out of touch with students. They were saying no, you had to apply individually. Lecturing staff were very sympathetic, saying, you will definitely get it but the director would not just do a blanket one. I also know the person that approves the extension requests in our Department, and her perspective is that she was simply getting hundreds of extension requests she needed to read through. It felt like a system either dysfunctional for this time, or that they need more staffing to support."

Further Education (FE hereafter) Settings *including; Students studying Higher Education (HE hereafter) courses*

Of the 12 focus groups, one group contained only those studying at FE settings. Of those participants, there was a mixture of students studying FE and HE courses.

Of these participants, **those studying an FE course felt supported**, however those studying HE courses set out several issues. These were mainly linked to a **lack of communication from the university that awarded the HE qualification**. See Case Study 4 for more information.

FE course students were pleased with the level of support they had received from their college. Colleges had managed to supply technology and support students to be able to study from home.

Mental health services and assistance from individual tutors as well as student unions were highlighted as integral to getting students through the pandemic. There was some uncertainty about examinations but **generally students were feeling positive about their courses** and their future outcomes.

"The college has been really helpful. Anything I've had problems with, any troubles I just send an email and then with in few minutes they reply with as much help as I can get. They always send you to who can help. It's never just one person they don't just stop you, they listen."

"I used the mental health service last year. It helps a lot. I was going through quite a bit at the time. It was very tough but they were very good. Especially compared to my experiences of it at comprehensive school and considering it's a free service."

"I think that we need to see a full spectrum of what we will be assessed on and what we will be marked on […] there's not really a full explanation."

"I have dyspraxia so I get support in my exams with extra time and with scribing everything. If they put them online then they tend to cut off at the allotted time and I have to save my work and go back in so it's very back and forth. They can't change this for just one student. But it's just that extra step that could be avoided."

"After receiving my results last year I couldn't really progress as far as I wanted to. The longer this goes on without information, the more I'm fearing that it's going to repeat last year where after results day I still don't know what I'm doing."

"Our good experience at university this year is because of individual tutors and individual librarians who are really going absolutely out of their way to support the people. They seem to understand and cater to our needs much better than the people who are supposed to serve the country."

There was a varying degree of concern around not attending in-person classes however, for students in shared accommodation e.g. in hostels, they found **blended learning more of a challenge due to anxieties** around being part of two bubbles, a household bubble and a college bubble. Where there was **hardship** it was quite severe. See Case study 5 for more information.

Although experiences of self-isolation were mixed where more often than not students had received good levels of support, one student felt there was an element of blame connected to self-isolation. They described being 'punished' for having to self-isolate.

"I had to isolate for two weeks in September, and because this was right at the beginning of term I had zero clue what to do. I was new in the college. It was my third week. I hadn't met my form tutor. I had no idea how to report my absence. Thankfully, I think that's changed, but initially I felt punished. It felt like 2 weeks of being overwhelmed."

3. Case Studies

Case Study 1: International student from Kenya, studying a practical course:

I was promised blended learning would be happening at least in the beginning with scope to increase in-person teaching from January. I was very uncomfortable with coming back to the university, but given that it was my final year I felt that if I didn't come back it would negatively disadvantage me, especially against the local students who may have found it easier to travel. So because we were promised blended learning, I decided to make the journey.

The first struggle was even before I left the airport, because I had taken an interruption of studies and this completely messed up my visa. I don't know if it was the communication between universities and the immigration department but the uni hadn't informed the immigration department properly. So when I reached the UK I was detained at the airport and they didn't let me go through immigration until it was resolved. They held me at the airport with loads of other people and there was no social distancing. It was a really stressful and anxiety ridden trip.

I made the trip from London to Wales and I think it was the first day of induction when we were pretty much told that because of the uncertainty of how many students were registered, we wouldn't be able get some things up and running so we'd have 5 weeks of online learning.

I study architecture, which is a very hands-on degree. I thought it was best to come back to Wales because we use facilities like the workshop 3D printers, laser cutters. We have one-to-one tutorials where we are sat in front of the tutors sketching on paper and they'd scratch all over my work. I felt like I had to be there because, if you're not, you're really missing out on a major component of a very interactive collaborative course.

What is frustrating is not being given the information at the time when you need to make a decision. By the time I reached uni and I was told that everything would be online, it was too late for me to turn back. I'd already spent money on my flight, paid for accommodation and the visas.

The uni was definitely more prepared for Christmas and had this whole system recommending what day people should get their tests and self-isolate but it didn't relate to international students and there was no one we could go and ask.

I left all my stuff in my accommodation because the university encouraged us, once again, that for sure there will be more in-person teaching after January. But the government has now told us that we won't be back for in-person teaching until at least March.

I need to make a model for my degree, but I don't know if I should make it here in Kenya, or if in-person teaching starts, I'll have to travel back with the model.

I think at the end of the day they didn't know how to help us. So they decided to just not help us!

Case Study 2: Higher education student trying to access disability services for learning and due to requiring face-to-face assessment it's not been possible to put anything into place:

I have both a mental and physical disability, so I've been trying to put things in place that I had in school. I found it really difficult and I couldn't understand why they couldn't replicate what I received in the school. I had all of the paperwork I kept from school and had hoped they would be able to put it into a personal support and teaching plan but they said no. They said I need to come in and be assessed.

They explained they are only doing online evaluations of need currently but these cost £100. I live at home with my parents so I do not qualify for any means-tested bursaries. Fortunately because I'm under the NHS bursary I don't pay fees and I'm currently on £70 a month which I need to run a car, live and feed myself on.

I did try and contact student support but they said at the time of applying your household income was more than £60k, so you don't actually qualify for anything – but my parents working circumstances have changed now. I'm just wondering how am I supposed to afford anything now? Financial support was just awful. They batted me from one email to another.

Case Study 3: Higher education student contending with logistics and additional costs of child care

I have really struggled with childcare because I am a full time student and I'm still expected to get my assignments done, I'm still expected to get my reading done, I'm still expected on placement.

When I applied for this course, I waited until my children were of school age so I could afford wrap around care and have my children in school. That was how I planned on working things out and of course it's not how it's working out. There's

a huge amount of guilt associated with using the hubs that are in school because you get the feeling that the school doesn't want your children to be there. But if you are at home, no matter what you're doing at home, you can't manage with your children around. My children are still quite young and it's been so difficult and part of me did question, should I defer this year and hold off. But I worried if I'd get a place next year.

I've really struggled with the question, what do I do with my children? I'm supposed to be studying full time.

I haven't asked for any special allowances to be made but I think the government rather than the university needs to consider that students need a package where if they are expected to be in placement and you've got a family to be responsible for, there is care put in place.

The usual channel of Student Finance Wales for childcare has not been very supportive at this time at all, because when I applied for it, they wanted to know my proposed costs. Of course that has now changed now the schools are closed. But they still fix what you're entitled to based on how much childcare you proposed originally. They're not taking into consideration that this is a very different time compared to when my children were in school. I'm not getting any extra financial help now that schools are closed.

I would never have started this course had I known the unexpected bills that I'd be facing, specifically for child care. My child care bill is astronomical. There's not an emergency pot of money to help with that. I think it's expected that you just get on with it with children at home. People haven't planned for this, and there doesn't seem to be any sensible help.

Case Study 4 - HE student with dependents and studying in a FE setting:

I've got three children at home and I've found it quite difficult. I'd normally spend two days in college doing my work. It hasn't been as positive as it was last year. I'm finding that I'm facing quite a few barriers, but there is nothing in place to help with those in the college.

I have asked for a laptop because I saw something mentioned about funding and the laptop that I use is a work one so I'm not actually meant to be using it. The college came back and said that there was only funding for FE students and all they could offer me was a Chrome book at the moment. Our assignments have been PowerPoint presentations and you can't actually use them on a Chrome book.

Last year the last two months we were in lock down I really struggled with the online learning because if I go to college I'm just a student, if I'm at home, I'm still a Mum. Last year I was 3% off a distinction, and I really felt I was doing well. But I just think the last two modules the teachers weren't computer literate. And I just think it was down to online learning that I dropped marks.

We've never ever had any communication from the university, so even though our certificates say the university on them, I've not actually ever had communication from them. It's always just been through the college.

In normal times, my course is on a Tuesday and Thursday from 4-9pm. But at the moment we only have an hour on a Tuesday and the rest of it is left for us to do our own study. Quite a lot of us are finding it difficult because we're having to write the dissertation and you lose a bit of what you're trying to learn over a screen. I feel that we are quite disadvantaged. If we don't go back this year at all and there's no leeway in the grades, it'll feel quite unfair.

Case Study 5: FE student suffering from hardship and multiple challenges due to the impact of Covid-19, tutor support was crucial in ensuring the participant was able to cope:

I actually found lockdown quite difficult. I'm not gonna lie. I didn't have a laptop for the first few days and the college helped me. I also get help from the wellbeing team because I'm currently in supported housing.

At first I found it really difficult to ask the college for help. I got kicked out of home during October so we were in lockdown and I honestly had no idea who to go to. I had no laptop or computer to use and I found it really difficult. I talked to my tutor about it.

I'm in a hostel. When the lockdown was not there, we were able to go into college and a lot of the people I live with were so scared at the fact that I was going into college and hanging around with my college bubble as well as the bubble I had made in the hostel. It actually made me feel disconnected to everyone because I couldn't fully incorporate myself in both groups because I felt like I needed to keep that distance with everyone just in case.

It took a bit of time for me to get my finances through from the Welsh Government Learning Grant. I was finding it really hard to afford to buy food while we were in college. Everybody was going into the canteen and buying food. And I'd just be like "I can't today."

My tutor was asking me if I was okay for finances as she was worried about the fact that I was having trouble in my home situation. She realised that I would

sometimes go all day without eating. When we were doing the practical side of my course, I was so happy because it costs £2 a week for us to cook in the kitchens and we'd have our own portion of food. My tutor was even happier for me because she knew I was actually eating something.

I'm really lucky with the fact that I get on really well with my tutor, We are bilingual which is nice to have in common. It's really easy for me to talk to her and say what was going on in my mind, especially about the fact that I was having doubts over the course.

I was seriously thinking about quitting college over the fact that we couldn't do the practical side of it. I thought I was cheating the system a little bit because obviously we are missing assessments and we don't know what is happening with the assessment right now. I was seriously considering dropping out and she was really understanding. She said it's completely up to you but please try to stick it out. She then decided to do online sessions for the whole class because she knew one person was thinking about dropping out of the class.

4. Appendix

Appendix 1

The following organisations supported the process of evidence gathering from the online focus groups	
Aberystwyth University	EYST - Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team Wales
Bangor University	Liverpool John Moores University
Bath Spa	National Youth Advocacy Service
Bristol University	NUS Wales
Cardiff Metropolitan University	Race Equality First
Cardiff University	Swansea University
Chester University	University of Central Lancashire
Coleg y Cymoedd	University of South Wales

Colegau Cymru	University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Disability Wales	Welsh Youth Parliament
Diverse Cymru	Wrexham Glyndŵr University
Exeter University	

Appendix 2 – questions asked during the session

1. How your university managed the Christmas break: Support and guidance from the university over the Christmas holiday period: Did you feel supported throughout?

2. Accommodation: How would you describe your experience of your accommodation at the university? [you may want to begin by explaining what type of accommodation you have, for example, are you in halls, Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) like Liberty Living etc or do you live in student housing with a private landlord?]

3. Student support services: How would you describe the support services where you have accessed them?

4. Questions for 2nd years +: How would you compare the experience you've had this academic year compared to other years at the university?

5. Do you feel the university have performed well to support you?

6. Questions for students crossing borders for study: How would you describe how your university has supported your Christmas break when you knew you'd be crossing borders or have a long journey to get home?

   Did the university's arrangements reassure you that you were safe during this process?

7. Have you felt that the university is listening to you?

8. Placements (Where students have placements as part of their course):

   How would you describe the management of placement(s) as part of your course during the pandemic?

   Have you felt safe when on placement(s)?

9. Part-time work and money issues: Have you your finances been manageable and are you able to access the support you require to remain financially stable during the pandemic?

Impact of Covid-19 on Welsh HE Sector

HEFCW report to Children, Young People and Education Committee, March 2021

Financial impact

1. As reported to the Committee in June 2020, Universities were expected to experience substantial loss of income and changes to their operating models as a result of Covid-19. Analysis of information provided by universities to HEFCW in early April 2020 indicated that the Covid-19 outbreak might result in an income reduction of approximately £80m-£90m by July 2020. Our analysis of universities' 2019/20 financial results indicate that income has indeed been substantially impacted by the pandemic, with this reduction in income due to: loss of accommodation fees; reduction in commercial services; loss of research funding and other income. In addition, the sector has borne the additional cost of operating in a Covid-safe manner, including, amongst other costs, adaptations to the estate, IT infrastructure to support blended learning (including cyber-security), the purchase of PPE and testing costs. The sector has also borne increased student support costs, the cost of providing IT equipment to students experiencing hardship and the cost of providing support to the NHS, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. Some reimbursement has been provided in 2020/21 for the cost of universities providing this support, although this has not fully covered all costs.

2. However, all Welsh universities took strong steps from March 2020 to conserve cash where possible and to mitigate both the reduction in income, and the additional Covid related operating costs. These steps were primarily cost control and the deferral of expenditure, including capital expenditure. Cost control measures included the freezing of staff vacancies, the use of the UK Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to 'Furlough' staff, where applicable, and a general tightening of expenditure controls. In addition to cost controls, the pandemic has also resulted in reduced expenditure in some areas such as international travel, energy and utility costs. Overall, the sector surplus/deficit position for 2019/20 has improved significantly from that forecast at the start of the pandemic, with a near break-even position now expected[1].

3. Whilst the 2019/20 sector financial position was better than had originally been forecast, for the reasons noted above, 2020/21 was considered from very early in the pandemic as likely to present greater challenges for the sector, particularly in respect of student recruitment and the resulting impact on tuition fee income expected to continue into 2021/22 and beyond. In addition, the restrictions resulting from the pandemic have continued longer than had originally been anticipated, with ongoing impacts on income generation and Covid related costs. The longer these restrictions remain in place, the greater the financial impact will be moving forward.

4. Student recruitment for the sector in 2020/21 has been better than had been predicted at the start of the pandemic, although this was not the case for all universities. The recruitment of UK students was generally better than expected, particularly for the Russell Group universities, with the changes to

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[1] The slight deficit for 2019/20 excludes a positive non-cash adjustment of around £117 million associated with the USS pension scheme.

the A level result arrangements being a factor. However, reductions in international recruitment have been experienced due to the ongoing travel restrictions, perceptions regarding the UK's management of Covid, and a reluctance by some to start their studies with online tuition. However, these reductions have also been less dramatic than had originally been feared. Overall however, universities are experiencing a reduction in tuition fee income, particularly from international students, as well as a continuing reduction of income from accommodation fees, commercial services, short and summer courses, research funding and other sources. Universities have also had to bear the cost of accommodation refunds to those students that have been unable to return to campus due to Covid travel restrictions.

5.   Most undergraduate courses last for three years and therefore the impact of the reduced recruitment in 2020/21 will feed through into 2021/22 and beyond, as the lower levels of student recruitment work through. This has resulted in the need for universities to continue cost control measures with some needing to deepen restructuring plans that were already in train prior to the pandemic, with the potential for a wider economic effect from these job losses. Universities have also needed to continue to postpone capital expenditure, with a resulting impact on the cost of backlog maintenance and impact on the requirement for capital expenditure in future years. The reduced international fee income will also potentially impact on the research capacity of universities as the costs of university research are significantly higher than the research grants and income available to fund the volume of university research and the higher fees chargeable to international students contribute to the funding of university research activities. This reduced income is in addition to the risk of further loss of grant funding for research projects, particularly from the charity sector and industry. This could have an impact on university research capacity in the future and the economic benefit to Wales.

6.   Based on recent information provided to HEFCW, it is currently forecast that the sector will generate an overall deficit of over £50 million for 2020/21, although it should be noted that some universities were already planning managed deficits prior to the pandemic. However, the overall sector position in terms of operational cash and liquidity remains stable, although some universities have undertaken additional short term borrowing in order to provide cash headroom, leaving the sector highly geared with external debt forecast at well over 50% of income in 2020/21, significantly above average UK levels[2]. This is likely to restrict the ability of the sector to borrow further to support investment, further delaying the sector's ability to inwardly invest to attract students. The availability of planned long term capital funding from Government for Universities would enable them to increase their capacity to deliver WG priorities and over time reduce borrowing commitments to more sustainable levels.

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[2] The most recently available UK HEI sector average borrowing is 37.9% of income (2018/19).

Government Covid support

7. In the context of the financial challenges posed by the pandemic, Universities have benefitted from significant Welsh Government support, with this including £27 million via the Higher Education Investment and Recovery Fund[3]. The Higher Education Investment and Recovery Fund is helping universities to maintain vital teaching and research capacity in the context of the current financial challenges posed by the pandemic, thereby protecting subject capacity that is crucial to the economic, social and cultural needs of Wales. The demand for higher education by UK students is forecast to grow from 2021 onwards as the numbers of 18 year olds increases, and this may be even more so as a result of any post-Covid recession. By helping to retain quality teaching capacity and developing innovative delivery methods the funding will contribute to Welsh universities remaining competitive with universities in the rest of the UK and internationally.

8. The Fund is also supporting major collaborative programmes that will underpin the sector's role in economic recovery. Amongst others, these collaborative programmes include a programme to support blended learning in Welsh universities, including learning through the medium of Welsh, and a programme designed to sustain the capacity of the research base via direct support for early career researchers. This funding has hence placed Welsh universities in a better position to face the post-pandemic future and to contribute effectively to recovery in Wales.

9. The sector has also benefitted from significant Welsh Government support targeted at university support for students, including: £10 million to focus on the particular challenges faced by students during the current pandemic[4], £2.7 million to support wellbeing and mental health[5], £1.5 million for the 2020 Graduate Support Fund[6] and £40 million specifically to mitigate student hardship and issues relating to wellbeing[7].

10. As well as impacting more generally, the reduction in international student fee income noted above for 2020/21 will impact on the ability of the sector to sustain its research capacity. As a consequence several Welsh universities were eligible to access support, largely in the form of loans, from the UK Government's Sustaining University Research Expertise (SURE) Scheme.

11. In addition to use of the UK Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to the fullest reasonable extent, universities have explored other UK Government support schemes, including the Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CLBILS). Whilst one university was able to access CLBILS finance, most found that they had either restrictive covenants that

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[3] Higher Education Investment and Recovery Fund
[4] Additional financial support for higher education
[5] Wellbeing and health implementation plan funding
[6] 2020 Graduate Support Fund
[7] Covid-19 further financial support for higher education students

would not allow use of the Scheme or that the time frame for the repayment of the loan was too short.

Future challenges and the importance of funding

12. Recruitment competition and student expectations will continue to lead to pressure on universities to improve their infrastructure and develop new ways of working. This in turn creates pressure on cash and reserves, with a return to some form of operational normality being crucial if universities are to be able to re-invest in their infrastructure. This is especially true for Welsh universities with limited capacity to undertake additional borrowing. Financial headroom is therefore key to sustainability and investment in infrastructure.

13. HEFCW funding is an important underpinning factor in maintaining the sustainability and competitiveness of the sector in Wales and its ability to contribute to the economic, social and cultural needs of Wales. The Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Arrangements in Wales[8] (The Diamond Review) recommended measures to increase funding to the sector, with these funds starting to flow into the sector from 2019/20. This funding had been adversely affected by Covid-19, with the 2020/21 HEFCW funding initially reduced back to 2019/20 levels as a consequence of the wider public sector budget reductions needed to provide the Welsh Government with a Covid-19 fighting fund. However, this was mitigated to a substantial degree by the additional Covid-related funding support outlined above. The increased baseline funding set out in the draft 2021-22 budget is very welcome and will help to provide a secure foundation on which the sector can plan for a sustainable future. We would request that this increase in baseline funding be at least maintained in real terms as recurrent funding for investment in higher education in Wales. There are aspects of the Diamond Review recommendations that will require this further funding in order to be implemented, including the recommendations regarding unhypothecated funding, to drive change in areas associated with Welsh Government priorities, and postgraduate research scholarships.

14. There are also aspects of the recommendations of the Review of Government Funded Research and Innovation in Wales[9] (The Reid Review) that will depend on this further funding, including the recommended level of QR funding and full reinstatement of innovation and engagement support (Research Wales Innovation Funding).

15. There is no expectation of any future increase in the maximum tuition fee level and continued uncertainty as to the UK government response to the Review of Post 18 Education and Funding in England, led by Philip Augar. That Review report proposed fee reductions in England, with some more recent announcements made about further potential changes to student support in England that would likely impact on Wales. Against that background of no immediate likelihood of an increase in maximum tuition fees, universities will

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[8] Diamond Review (gov.wales)
[9] Reid Review (gov.wales)

face considerable ongoing pressure from increases in certain costs, and in particular the costs of pay and pension contribution increases. In respect of pension costs, the 2020 valuation of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS)[10] has shown an increase in the scheme's deficit. In order to manage this deficit, it is anticipated that the USS contribution rate will need to increase from a current total of 30.7% of pensionable pay (including a university employer contribution of 21.1%) to a total of between 42% and 56%, with the level dependent in part on the financial guarantees provided by the sector. This will require a significant increase in contributions, with an impact on the cost base of all member universities and potential industrial relations implications.

16. Universities recognise that a return to the old 'normal' is unlikely, and they must prepare for an adjusted cost base that does not assume levels of international recruitment will fully bounce back to pre-pandemic levels. The Global Wales III programme will be important in helping to rebuild international recruitment in a post-pandemic and post-Brexit era and the Welsh Government's continued support for this programme is encouraging. Universities also recognise the need to engage in new ways of working, including collaborating under the auspices of the sector's Looking Forward Group, convened by HEFCW, to develop a network of partnerships, focused on delivery and outcomes rather than structures, that will build on the diverse and varied strengths of our universities and ensure that a greater number of people and places are able to benefit from what they do. The Looking Forward Group is delivering against a roadmap to support the recovery and renewal of Wales following the COVID-19 pandemic, and the delivery of the Welsh Government's priorities and policies. Work in relation to medium and longer term aspects of the roadmap will continue over the coming years, and will impact on the future delivery of higher education in Wales.

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[10] [2020 valuation (uss.co.uk)](https://uss.co.uk)

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Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation

Lynne Neagle MS
Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay
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02 March 2021

Dear Ms Neagle,

Today the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) published a review into the approach for developing statistical models for awarding grades in 2020[1]. As your Committee will be aware, the grade awarding context in 2020 was challenging and had a profound impact on the lives of young people.

As the regulator of official statistics in the UK, it is our responsibility to uphold public confidence in statistics. In this context, we were concerned that public confidence in the use of statistical models by public bodies has been damaged and this may reduce the use of such models in future. However, statistical models and algorithms used by government and other public bodies are an increasingly prevalent part of contemporary life. As technology and the availability of data increase, there are significant benefits from using these types of models in the public sector.

To address these concerns, we have been exploring the approaches taken to awarding grades in 2020. Our focus in doing so has been to identify the important lessons for other public bodies working with statistical models and algorithms. Our review found that achieving public confidence in statistical models is not just about the technical design but is supported by the end to end process of developing them. We have identified 3 key principles that we believe can support public confidence. They are:

- Be open and trustworthy
- Be rigorous and ensure quality throughout
- Meet the need and provide public value

To help ensure statistical models command public confidence, we are calling on the centre of government, in collaboration with the administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to improve the support, guidance and professional oversight for those working with statistical models and algorithms.

In the exams case, we found that the public bodies responsible for designing the models all acted with integrity. We identified that there were inherent challenges in the task which made it difficult to deliver exam grades in a way that commanded public confidence. We

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[1] Learning lessons from the approach to developing models for awarding grades in the UK in 2020

conclude that many of the decisions made supported public confidence, while in some areas different choices could have been made. In particular, we consider that they could have done more to convey publicly the limitations to the use of models to award grades.

I hope this review is of interest to the Committee, and please let me know if any further questions.

Yours sincerely,

Ed Humpherson
Director General for Regulation

Agenda Item 4.2

Julie James AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Tai a Llywodraeth Leol
Minister for Housing and Local Government

Our ref: DC/JJ/00529/21

Lynne Neagle, MS - Chair
Children, Young People and Education Committee,
Welsh Parliament

03 March 2021

SeneddCYPE@senedd.wales

Dear Lynne,

I am writing in accordance with the inter-institutional relations agreement to let you know that the British-Irish Council (BIC) Digital Inclusion Work Sector Ministerial Meeting will be held this week on Friday 5 March. Member Administrations have agreed to hold a virtual meeting which will be hosted by the Isle of Man. As the Minister with responsibility for digital inclusion, I will be representing the Welsh Government.

The meeting is an opportunity for Member Administrations of the BIC to discuss digital inclusion, a key social justice and equalities issue, and the activity ongoing across administrations to ensure people are able to, engage with, and benefit from the rapid pace of technological change taking place in society. Furthermore, it will provide an opportunity to discuss the impact the pandemic has had on the digital inclusion agenda and the critical role we must continue to play to help citizens become digitally confident, a combination of motivation, basic digital skills and access.

The meeting will provide an opportunity for Ministers to reflect ongoing wider work across the sectors on the theme of online safety, while also agreeing the Forward Work Plan.

A communiqué will be agreed by the council at the meeting and I will update the Committee about its publication and the outcome of the meeting, in due course.

I have written in similar terms to the chairs of the Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee, Mick Antoniw, MS, Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee, John Griffiths MS, Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee, Bethan Sayed, MS, and Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee, Russell George, MS.

Yours sincerely,

Julie James AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Tai a Llywodraeth Leol
Minister for Housing and Local Government

Agenda Item 4.3

CYPE(5)-08-21 - Paper to note 3

Roundtable meeting with Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services, 14 January 2021 – summary of discussions

Background

The Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services hosted a roundtable meeting with senior figures in the children's sector. The purpose of the roundtable was to update attendees on progress with Children's Rights in Wales and to listen to ideas, concerns and thoughts from key stakeholders. A full list of attendees is available in Annex A.

The Deputy Minister stressed the importance of working collaboratively with stakeholders and partners. The Deputy Minister posed the following questions and the responses to the questions are included below:

1   **What has gone well in terms of the Welsh Government response to the Covid-19 pandemic?**

- The focus of the Deputy Minister and Welsh Government on children's rights during the pandemic - it is the responsibility of the whole government.
- Positive steps taken by the Ministerial Advisory Group for improving outcomes for children.
- Increased policy focus on addressing equality issues and disadvantage – support for the decision by the Welsh Government to provide free schools meals throughout the year.
- The focus on listening to children during the pandemic and the work of the Welsh Government in terms of participation, including conversations that have taken place between the First Minister and children and young people. These conversations should continue. The 1,000 Voices from Care project was seen as an example of effective participation.
- Increased time that foster parents were able to spend with their children which has led to improved relationships.
- UNICEF often looks to Wales for good practice in term of children rights.
- Improvements in the quality and depth of the CRIAs around the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The number of meaningful opportunities for stakeholders in the children's sector to share their views directly with Ministers and Welsh Government officials. As a result a number of positive actions have emerged from the various working groups.
- A recognition of the resilience of young people and how well they have responded to the crisis.

2   How could we improve our response to the Covid-19 pandemic?

- The need to understand how every child can be supported to learn with significant disruption to conventional learning.
- Focus on the educational attainment of children in care and the importance of continuity of contacts to ensure effective progression in learning was stressed.
- Certain public services have not understood children's rights and have applied an 'adult based approach' to parts of their provision. For example, some children in custody were unable to leave their cell except for a very limited period at the height of the pandemic. Some children's homes are applying isolation periods beyond 10 days depending on the local interpretation of public health guidance.
- A lack of focus on corporate parenting (which the Deputy Minister confirmed would have progressed in normal circumstances).
- The importance of considering the long term impact of the pandemic on children and young people. Although short term impacts are considered, there will be long term impact on:-
  - ➢ children being pushed into poverty;
  - ➢ worsening mental health;
  - ➢ education inequalities, and;
  - ➢ increased risk of abuse.
- The exceptional amount of pressure on children during the pandemic was noted, and the pressure on parents to become 'teachers'.
- The importance of refreshing and revisiting CRIAs and Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) to reflect policy changes.
- Lack of connectivity in rural areas and the low morale and fatigue resulting from continued use of online learning, for both children and parents.

3   Future considerations

- Welsh Government should establish a national mechanism to consider, and implement, the UN Treaties/conventions as recommended in the EHRC's report *Children's Rights in Great Britain*.
- The UNCRC Monitoring group report, published in December, recommends relooking at the legislation and expectations placed on public bodies around children rights. A number of services are delivered by public bodies but without a legal requirement to give due regard to children rights.
- Children in Wales will soon be contacting their members for their views/concerns/opportunities for the future. It is expected that digital exclusion will emerge as a key issue.
- Consider the recent Youth Justice report and response to Covid-19 which made a number of suggestions.

4   Views on the proposed arrangements as set out in the 2021 Children Rights Scheme (CRS)

- Welcome the 'excellent' CRS and the young person's version.
- The importance of communicating policy documents in the language of young people was stressed. The young person's version of the CRS was an exemplar for other policy areas.
- Next month the UN Committee will provide initial views to the Welsh Government as part of its next periodic review. Welsh Government should use this report to feed into the CRS consultation.
- There is an opportunity to use the CRS to embed children's rights in other pieces of legislation – for example the new curriculum. This could be a good opportunity to have a 'quick win'.
- The importance of training in supporting the children's rights. Reference was made to the key findings from the evaluation into the external training contract with University of Wales Trinity St David which emphasised the value of sector specific training and the importance of contextualising rights to the roles of those who attend.
- Include a reference to the National Participation Standards within the draft CRS and the development of a national framework to bring article 12 of the UNCRC to life.
- The importance of quality Children's Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) in helping stakeholders understand how children rights are considered in the policy making process. It was stated that Wales is a world leader in this area.
- Welcome the emphasis in the new curriculum on creating ethically, informed citizens. However the challenge will be how this is delivered effectively in practice. There is a need to engage with the teaching profession and children and young people to emphasise the importance of meaningful participation which is not always consistent.

5   Future considerations for the CRS

- Audit current UNCRC training to ensure it is targeted effectively.
- Welsh Government to consider introducing the CRIA as a statutory instrument. This could be one of the recommendations from the UN Committee's report.
- The Welsh Government response to the Children, Young Person and Education (CYPE) Committee inquiry into Children Rights was welcomed. Attendees will monitor how the recommendations are implemented and how these will link into the revised CRS.

6   Nominations for the raising awareness external reference group

Attendees were asked to indicate whether they were happy to be a part of the raising awareness external reference group.

Annex A - Attendees present:

- Dr Caroline Lohmann-Hancock, Senior Lecturer, University of Wales Trinity St David
- Catherine Davies, Lifelong Learning Policy Officer (Children), Welsh Local Government Association
- David Melding, Member of the Senedd
- Dragan Nastic, Senior Policy and Advocacy Advisor, UNICEF
- Helen Mary Jones, Member of the Senedd
- Professor Jane Williams, Professor of Law, Swansea University
- Dr. Nichola Welton, Senior Lecturer, University of Wales Trinity St David
- Owen Evans, Chief Executive Officer, Children in Wales
- Rachel Thomas, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales
- Ruth Coombes, Head of Wales, Equality and Human Rights Commission
- Professor Sally Holland, Children's Commissioner for Wales
- Sean O'Neill, Policy Director, Children in Wales
- Siân Thomas, Senedd Research Service – observer (on behalf of the Children, Young People and Education Committee)
- Professor Simon Hoffman, Professor of Law, Swansea University

Welsh Government Officials

- Amy Hope, Children and Families Division
- Jonathan Scourfield, Special Advisor
- Karen Cornish, Children and Families Division
- Karyn Pittick, Children and Families Division
- Rhys Davies, Children and Families Division
- Sarah Melkevik, Children and Families Division