

Kirsty Williams AS/MS  
Y Gweinidog Addysg  
Minister for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-05-1127  
Ein cyf/Our ref KW/00618/21

Janet Finch-Saunders MS  
Chair, Petitions Committee

29 January 2021

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your email of 15 January regarding a petition to reduce tuition fees for Welsh university students as a result of reduced services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am aware the situation that students face as a result of the global pandemic is far from ideal and I am very grateful for the responsible way in which the majority of students have acted to ensure that we keep Wales safe. I recognise that education has a positive effect on students' personal development, their wellbeing, and life chances. I am also aware that students and young people have already suffered a lot of disruption to their education at school and university as a result of the pandemic. I am committed to prioritising the reopening of education as soon as it is safe to do so.

I have asked the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to ensure that the standard and quality of education this year is not diminished. I have been clear that this year would be different for students. However, I have been equally clear that universities in Wales should ensure that no student should be penalised unfairly at this difficult time and students should be able to leave with qualifications that are a fair reflection of their abilities, whilst maintaining quality and standards. I recognise that universities in Wales have worked hard to maintain those standards whilst successfully implementing approaches such as blended learning for their students. I agree the value of in person education on students' wellbeing, progression and future success must not be underestimated and this is why I have worked closely with the sector to ensure that universities remain Covid-safe with reduced numbers of students on campus.

Unfortunately the current levels of infection, strain on the NHS and the new variant mean that I have had to ask universities to prioritise the return to in-person on campus activity for only essential in-person education, in the same way that the rest of the population is being asked to work from home. I have also asked university students not to move to their term time accommodation until their university lets them know that in-person learning will resume.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

This is to reduce the numbers of students travelling across the UK. We know the virus transmits easily when people have contact with others and to help keep students, universities and communities safe we must all do the right thing. This is not because universities are unsafe, but because the risk of transmission and the new variant mean it is safer to limit travel and to ask students to stay at home and work from home if they can. However, essential university services, such as libraries, study spaces, laboratories and studios, can remain open to ensure students who cannot work from home for a specific reason have access to essential facilities in order to continue their education. Universities are working hard to enable essential in person teaching to continue and for facilities to remain open in a Covid-secure environment, whilst also providing online teaching and learning. The development and delivery of blended learning provision has meant institutions have incurred additional costs this academic year and staff have worked hard to support their students.

As a result of this difficult decision and in recognition of the pressure the pandemic is placing on students, staff and universities I have provided an extra £50 million this year to support university students and staff during the pandemic. This includes £40 million for universities to support students facing financial hardship, helping the students most affected by the pandemic with expenses such as accommodation costs as soon as possible.

In relation to tuition fees and the petition, universities in Wales are autonomous bodies. The responsibility for the planning and delivery of their provision, therefore, lies with the university themselves. Tuition and accommodation fees are a contractual agreement between the student and institution, and students should discuss any issues they have with their university. The Welsh Government has no role in setting tuition fee rates, other than to establish the maximum that can be charged by Welsh universities if they wish to have their undergraduate courses automatically designed for student support. They do this by submitting a fee and access plans for approval by HEFCW.

A reduction in tuition fees does not address students facing hardship due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Students only begin repaying their student loans when they are earning over £26,575. The repayment rate is currently set at 9% per annum on any income earned above this amount. Further, any unpaid loan will be written off 30 years after the loan is eligible for repayment, this is typically the first April after graduation, this means that only the highest earners will repay their loan in full.

The Welsh Government provides the most generous system of student support in the UK. I am proud that in Wales, we have continued to provide maintenance grants for students. Welsh students are also unique in receiving a maintenance loan write-off of up to £1500 when students begin repaying their student loans.

I hope this response was helpful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty Williams', written in a cursive style.

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