

Tŷ Afon, Ffordd Bedwas
Bedwas, Caerffili,
CF83 8WT

029 2085 9696

Tŷ Afon, Bedwas Road
Bedwas, Caerphilly
CF83 8WT

www.hefcw.ac.uk

Cyngor Cyllido Addysg
Uwch Cymru
Higher Education Funding
Council for Wales

hefcw

26 April 2022

Jack Sargeant MS
Chair, Petitions Committee
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1SN

Dear Mr Sargeant

Petition P-06-1251: Secure the Right to Remote Access for Disabled and Neurodivergent People

Thank you for your letter of 25 March 2022 requesting information on how HEFCW has supported universities and colleges and what discussions there have been about making as many courses as possible accessible through remote access.

To provide a comprehensive update and meet your submission date, we are responding in two parts. The first part, provided in this letter, sets out the guidance and funding HEFCW provides to universities and some colleges to support students with disabilities, including neurodivergent students. The second part of our response will be informed by information from universities and some colleges we regulate on their current position. Given the Easter break, institutions will respond to us in early May and we will report to you in mid-May.

HEFCW's role

HEFCW has some regulatory responsibilities under the Higher Education (Wales) Act (2015) in relation to universities in Wales and two regulated colleges: Grŵp Llandrillo Menai and Neath Port Talbot Group of Colleges. We directly fund limited higher education provision at Gower College.

In this context, we have a statutory responsibility to ensure higher education provision is adequate to meet the reasonable needs of students and we have responsibilities around the quality of provision. We discharge our duties through liaison with institutions, monitoring and analysis of data and intelligence. We provide assurance on quality matters to our Council through advice from our statutory Quality Assurance Committee. Our Council is advised by a Student Achievement and Opportunities Committee on matters relating to how higher education meets the needs and expectations of learners and other stakeholders, including as this relates to widening access, equality and diversity, student health and well-being, including mental health. NUS Wales is

Mr Rob Humphreys
Cadeirydd | Chair

Dr David Blaney
Prif Weithredwr | Chief Executive



represented on all these committees. In meeting our statutory duties, we recognise that universities are autonomous institutions, including as this relates to curriculum design and delivery. Further information can be found on our [website](#).

HEFCW is not the regulator for the Equality Act 2010 or the Equality Act 2010 (Statutory Duties) (Wales) Regulations 2011. The Act and Regulations are regulated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) on behalf of the Welsh Government. As we have no statutory powers in this regard, HEFCW's role in securing equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education is through guidance, challenge, funding and performance monitoring.

How HEFCW supports institutions through enhancement and guidance

We grant fund UK organisations with relevant expertise to advise on the development of different modes of teaching and learning, and to support higher education providers to articulate to applicants and students the range of digital offers available to them. There is a wide range and volume of digital teaching and learning available, which has increased significantly since the pandemic and continues to evolve.

We grant fund the [Quality Assurance Agency](#) to support higher education providers to maintain and enhance quality and standards, including undertaking external reviews of providers, providing advice and guidance, supporting the development of blended learning, and ensuring it is of appropriate quality. The Quality Assurance Agency is a UK-wide membership body which publishes guidance, from which higher education in Wales benefits. Relevant publications include:

- [Building a Taxonomy for Digital Learning](#)
- [How UK higher education providers managed the shift to digital delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

Similarly, our continued grant funding of [Jisc](#) has enabled universities to make progress on using technology for accessibility and developing the digital skills of staff and students. Jisc has published a range of toolkits, and guides on inclusive assessment and inclusive practice. The pandemic accelerated digital developments and their integration across higher education provision. This has resulted in greater accessibility of provision, for example, the majority of lectures are now recorded and hosted on a virtual learning environment, enabling increased remote access to provision. NUS Wales tell us that this has had great benefits for students with a range of disabilities. HEFCW, in partnership with Universities Wales, funded Jisc to produce a synthesis of experiences and practices, adopted by universities across Wales during the pandemic to share practice and lessons learned. The synthesis highlighted areas that could be further enhanced, including on a sector-wide basis. Recent publication include:

- [Getting started with accessibility and inclusion](#)
- [Digital inclusion](#)
- [Inclusive assessment](#)
- [Inclusive digital practice and digital wellbeing](#)
- [Blended learning: a synthesis of change](#)

During 2020/21, in the context of the pandemic, HEFCW published guidance to higher education on:

- [Covid-19 impact on higher education providers: information on consumer protection, student expectations and quality;](#)
- [Covid-19 impact on higher education providers: information on equality, diversity and inclusion.](#)

The first circular provided an update on actions we were taking on quality, standards and the student experience, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, together with information for institutions on matters which they should consider. The second circular encouraged universities to consider the potential for an increase in staff and students experiencing some adverse well-being due to Covid-19 including those experiencing digital poverty issues (hardware, software and broadband related exclusion). We recommended that the education and other support needs of students with specific disabilities be taken into account in new ways of living and studying. We reaffirmed that detailed impact assessments remained essential to ensure that decisions were evidence-informed and compliant with equality and employment legislation. We suggested that, when revising policies and processes affecting staff and students, universities should involve people with diverse backgrounds, including those with relevant lived experiences from across the organisation. Such practices should increase confidence in, and reduce any anxiety arising from, new ways of working or learning.

In addition, we liaise extensively with NUS Wales and students' unions, and we did so throughout the pandemic, to identify issues impacting on the student experience, and how these could be addressed. We engaged regularly with universities on their provision, from the start of the pandemic, to obtain assurance regarding the quality of provision.

How HEFCW supports institutions through funding

We provide a range of funding to enable institutions to digital learning, students with disabilities and students' well-being and health, including mental health. The following are the most recent allocations:

- We allocated, through circular [W21/04HE Covid-19 further financial support for higher education students](#), an additional funding of £40m from Welsh Government to universities to respond to the challenges of the Covid-19 operating context. Our expectations for the use of this funding included addressing student hardship included digital poverty among students, and to enable better access to online learning. Universities were asked to take account of the needs of students with protected characteristics, including acting within the spirit of the socio-economic duty of the Equality Act. In considering those most likely to be impacted by Covid-19, universities were asked to take account of their equality impact assessment findings.
- We allocated, through circular [W21/08HE Higher Education Investment and Recovery Fund Outcomes](#), £27m, to support the HE sector in mitigating the

effects of the pandemic and support the wider economic recovery. Funded proposals supported activity across Welsh higher education, including: investing in digital infrastructure and learning technologies, developing digital education and flexible and accessible provision and strengthening support for blended learning.

- As part of our core funding, we provide teaching funding annually to the Open University in Wales to support part-time undergraduate and postgraduate provision (see circular [W21/15HE HEFCW's Funding Allocations 2021/22](#)). HEFCW's total allocation in 2021/22 to the Open University in Wales is £18.5m. Our funding of the Open University in Wales ensuring that a specialist, part-time higher education provider offers its online courses and student support throughout Wales. Further information about the Open University in Wales's provision will be included in the second part of our response to you.
- Through core funding, we provide annually to universities and some colleges, a £2m student disability premium (see circular [W21/15HE HEFCW's Funding Allocations 2021/22](#)). The premium takes account of study at all modes and levels of study and contributes to supporting institutions' strategic equality planning, improving the student experience, and enabling them to contribute to our well-being and health policy developments.
- We continued to fund, through circular [W21/22HE Well-being and health strategy funding 2021/22](#), with £2m, universities' well-being and health strategy implementation plans. We have committed to fund these strategies in the long-term, subject to HEFCW budgets and the creation of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research recognising that well-being and health, including mental health support requires strategic, sustained interventions across the whole institution.
- With additional funding from Welsh Government, we provided through circular [W21/39HE Covid-19 Well-being and health additional financial support for higher education students](#), an additional £1.3m for universities and those colleges we regulate, to work with their Students' Unions to support student well-being and health given disrupted learning experiences. We encouraged this funding to be used to support those students whose well-being and health, including mental health, has been particularly impacted by Covid-19 changes to living and learning, and supporting well-being and health that was inclusive, regardless of domicile or mode or level of study, including with partner higher education providers.

Additional information to support our response

As indicated above, we will provide further information to you, following receipt of up to date information from our universities and those colleges we regulate by mid-May.

We hope our two-part response will provide you with sufficient information and assurance of our actions, and the actions of universities and colleges, to provide and continue to develop digital teaching and learning opportunities.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Rob Humphreys". The signature is written in a cursive style with a period at the end.

Rob Humphreys