

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

17 May 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

We submitted to you, on 26 April 2022, a response to your request for information on how HEFCW has supported universities and colleges to make as many courses as possible accessible through remote access. Your letter requested information on what discussions there have been with universities and colleges about these matters.

To provide a comprehensive update, we submitted an initial response on 26 April setting 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, provided here, is informed by up-to-date information from the eight universities and two colleges we regulate, plus the Open University in Wales.

In the academic year 2020/21 there were 6,030 full-time, UK domiciled, undergraduates students in receipt of the Disabled Students Allowance in higher education in Wales according to [Higher Education Statistics Agency data](#).

Institutions confirmed that they offer a variety of higher education provision ranging from completely in-person teaching to fully distance learning on a full- and part-time basis. Part-time study provides flexible learning opportunities enabling students to balance study with other commitments, including their health needs. Most institutions confirmed that a face-to-face learning experience was their core business, apart from the Open University in Wales. We provide further information about the Open University in Wales below.

Institutions' responses on remote learning took account of recent actions to support all students, including students with protected characteristics, during the pandemic when all teaching and learning moved to remote delivery. Institutions' responses varied according to their student demographic as many mature students returning to learning

Mr Rob Humphreys
Cadeirydd | Chair

Dr David Blaney
Prif Weithredwr | Chief Executive



for example often choose to study with local institutions to benefit from high levels of on-campus, face to face learning. In every case institutions confirmed that, before the pandemic and on an ongoing basis, they are making reasonable adjustment to learning and teaching to support students with disabilities.

Where we report practice by one institution below, we are not implying that other institutions do not have similar policies, resources, and/or processes.

The accessibility of as many courses as possible through remote learning

All institutions confirmed that there had been significant shifts in modes of learning and teaching as a result of the pandemic. Informed by Welsh Government Covid-19 guidance for 2020/21 and most of 2021/22, all institutions implemented 'study from home' protocols for the majority of students and courses. Remote teaching and learning required additional and different resources and institutions rapidly invested in additional resources including:

- IT infrastructure and online platforms;
- more remote library access and enhanced digital library resources, including improved digital access to core texts through extended 'ebook' provision and subscription to products which simplify access to library journals for remote users;
- provision of laptops on a loan system;
- training, webinars, and online resources and tools to equip teaching and support staff to fully embrace the hybrid learning community
- classrooms with hybrid learning facilities to support students with remote access to learning opportunities.

New ways of working during the pandemic and their successes and challenges are still being considered. All institutions are actively reviewing the lessons learned. All institutions are considering learning and teaching delivery modes from 2022/23 to include flexible, hybrid and digitally enhanced learning. Institutions referred to their digital strategies which underpin increased digital learning opportunities. Therefore, many more modules and courses will be accessible remotely. Learning and teaching methods will include:

- recorded teaching sessions to enable flexibility for students who are unable to attend, for example because of illness or caring responsibilities;
- continuing online assessments, including online examinations;
- a review of examinations as an assessment method where new methods are working well;
- teaching sessions timetabled over four days which will remain consistent over the academic year to enable students to plan in the long-term and arrange other commitments around this pattern.

In considering ways of learning and teaching and the potential for fully remote learning, institutions have taken account of a number of factors, including:

- students' and staff views;
- the regulations on funding of campus-based and distance learning courses;
- the requirements of [professional, statutory and regulatory bodies](#) which accredit, recognise and approve higher education programmes that lead to a professional or vocational qualification or exemption from a professional examination. These bodies often require practical experiential delivery, performance or case work as core study components and relate to subjects including medicine and health related subjects;
- the use of specific facilities such as for creative and performing arts and sports science, including access to specialised workshops or laboratory facilities.

Institutions raised concerns that remote learning can in some instances have negative impacts on students' well-being and health, contributing to isolation, loneliness and a less positive student experience, including exacerbating mental ill-health. The declared mental ill-health condition of students is a rapidly increasing category of disability in UK higher education. One institution reported that increased remote learning appeared to increase students' disengagement with learning, affecting retention, well-being, learning success and positive graduate outcomes. Several institutions identified that a sense of belonging through physical engagement with the institution and its facilities contributed to higher levels of retention and contributed to building a university community. To support a positive campus experience for students with disabilities, dedicated facilities such as safe learning spaces and quiet spaces are provided and there have been reviews of the pacing of lectures and practical adjustments for laboratory work and group activities.

The Open University in Wales

As set out above, all institutions in Wales offer partial or wholly remote learning opportunities on a full or part-time basis. The Open University in Wales as a dedicated provider of distance learning widens the opportunities available for students to study remotely, and creates a focus for expertise in this area, helping to maximise the value of public investment. The Open University in Wales is the largest provider of part-time higher education that is entirely distance learning. The Open University in Wales offers all its provision from open access, non-accredited short courses to postgraduate and professional development qualifications through online, flexible learning. In 2020/21, the Open University UK supported over 28,000 students with disabilities and additional needs and over 3,000 of these are Welsh students studying with the Open University in Wales. The Open University in Wales' total student enrolments have increased in recent years from 6,905 in 2017/18 to 14,280 in 2020/21. The Open University in Wales works with a range of statutory and non-statutory organisations to support students with disabilities, including [Remploy](#), a disability specialist delivering employment and skills support and with professional organisations such as the [National Association of Disability Practitioners](#) (NADAP) and [Diversity and Ability](#).

Reasonable Adjustment for disabled students under the Equality Act 2010

Higher education institutions have a legal duty to try to remove the barriers to education because of students' disabilities and make 'reasonable adjustment'. A summary of the

Equality Act (2010) section 7 as it relates to disabled students in higher education is available on the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education website ([OIAHE](#)).

All institutions in Wales have reasonable adjustment policies and processes to support students with disabilities and promote services delivered by student services. Colleges' support for students with disabilities takes account of the [Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal \(Wales\) Act](#). Under the Equality Act Wales all institutions must equality impact assess their policies to assess the impact on people with protected characteristics and to actively mitigate negative impacts.

For all modules and programmes provided, reasonable adjustments are made for disabled students on an individual basis on all programmes with the default position being that the more accessible and inclusive teaching and assessment is from the outset, the fewer adjustments need to be made for individual students. Reasonable adjustment requirements are discussed with prospective students at the point of application to an institution, where they declare a disability that may need additional support. Universities provide educational diagnostic assessments and referral to disability needs assessments where students consider they may have an undiagnosed disability. The provision of non-medical helper academic support, including access to specialist staff and expertise, can be made available as required. Students with fluctuating health conditions are able to request mitigating circumstances procedures should they need to, or use self-certification to request additional time to complete an assessment. For timed/fixed date assessments, institutions can provide extra time, quiet rooms, scribes or access to assistive technology. Therefore, reasonable adjustments can include, but are not limited to, remote learning.

We hope this further information provided in addition to our 26 April 2022 submission to you provides a full and up-to-date response to your request for information on how HEFCW has supported universities and colleges, and discussions we have had about making as many courses as possible accessible through remote access.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Rob Humphreys', followed by a period.

Rob Humphreys