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16 October 2023

Dear Members of the committee

Thank you for your letter of 6 July regarding your concerns for the wellbeing of international students studying in Wales and the support available both in terms of their mental health and broader living experiences.

The Welsh Government is determined that citizens from other countries who have chosen to study in Wales feel welcomed and valued members of our communities.

We hugely value and appreciate the contribution made by our international students to our universities and Wales, not just economically but in enabling us to be a welcoming, outward-looking and diverse nation. That is why we support the inward mobility of international students and staff through our innovative Taith mobility programme, as well as by funding projects such as Global Wales, which seeks to encourage more international students to choose Wales as their place of study.

Student accommodation

It is not acceptable for any individual to be living in sub-standard or unsuitable accommodation. Universities in Wales provide advice and guidance to all students, including international students, on how best to source and secure accommodation before they travel to attend university. Universities have a responsibility to ensure that information and advice provided by contracted and subcontracting agents is clear and up to date, so prospective students can make fully informed decisions.

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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.

We are currently working with HEFCW to ensure international students are aware of their responsibilities before accepting a university place.

Where students are not eligible for university halls of residence, and particularly where students are travelling with their families or dependants, they are advised to research and secure accommodation prior to travel. In some instances, universities have had international students arrive with dependents without informing the institution beforehand. This is something that the universities are proactively trying to tackle.

Community engagement

During the summer, my officials joined a cross sector meeting to address local concerns in the area of Blaenau Gwent as highlighted by a member of the committee, Buffy Williams MS. Universities demonstrated a willingness to be involved in any multi agency discussions and continue to engage with local services.

Universities advised that community engagement, where individuals are referred into the services provided by the university has more of an impact. Specific discussions were around easier identification of individuals who may be most at risk from hardship, so that constructive action can be taken quickly.

Local Authority representatives also presented information on the action they are taking in relation to housing standards, welfare checks, and coffee mornings to aid community integration.

Further meetings are proposed to continue the discussion in future, recognising this is a complex and multi-agency issue.

Financial hardship

We are aware that international students are reluctant to access university financial support such as hardship funding due to the restrictions around their visas and the condition that they must be able to support themselves.

While I appreciate that international students may not be eligible for the Welsh statutory student support package, they can of course benefit from the [significant funding](#) we have provided to Universities in Wales for financial hardship and mental health.

Universities in Wales are proactively taking action to address the financial issues being experienced by international students. Some examples include:

- Pre-loaded credit card for use on campus so that delays in setting up a bank account won't prevent ability to purchase food
- Admissions processes which assess intent and enthusiasm for study as well as financial means
- Accommodation service to help find housing
- Engagement with local communities including foodbanks and other services
- Acting as rent guarantor or referring to third party service

We continue to advise any student that is facing financial difficulties to speak to their university's student union who will be best placed to provide further advice and signpost to alternative support where appropriate.

Visa rule changes

The rise in the number of dependent visas from students wishing to study in Wales has been substantial and has possibly exceeded planning assumptions in local government. Following the announcement on changes to student Visas by the UK Government, students will no longer be able to bring dependents unless studying for research postgrad programmes, and cannot switch to another visa while studying. It is likely these new rules will help alleviate some of the problems being experienced, but as they won't come into

force until in 2024, we recognise in some places there will continue to be local challenges around access to suitable family accommodation and schooling.

Free school meals

Regarding your concern about the impact on students' dependents, in particular their children. Children are entitled to have free school meals if their family receives support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. We would encourage families and local authorities to work together to check for entitlement to Free School Meals under this provision.

In addition, the Welsh Government has written to remind local authorities of their discretionary powers (under the 1996 Education Act) to provide meals without charging if a family does not meet the usual eligibility criteria. The Welsh Government does not specify when local discretion should be used. For example, it could be used where a family has applied for Universal Credit but is waiting for their first monthly payment.

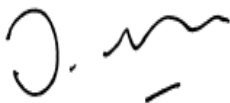
International recruitment

Universities in Wales will have specific objectives when it comes to recruitment of international students due to their operational activity and academic programme.

The Universities Wales International Network is exploring a set of common principles with a view to publication later in the year. It is expected that these principles may include signposting and referral with local authorities, advice and guidance for students, and other approaches to support recruitment and address student need.

I hope that this provides you with reassurances that we are committed to fully supporting our international students and their families when they choose to study and live in Wales.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Miles', with a stylized flourish.

Jeremy Miles AS/MS

Gweinidog y Gymraeg ac Addysg
Minister for Education and Welsh Language