

7th October 2020

Ms. Lynne Neagle
Chair
Children, Young People and Education Committee
Welsh Parliament

Dear Ms Neagle,

Arrangements to support students in light of COVID-19

Thank you for your letter of the 29th September in which information was requested in relation to the steps being taken by universities to support students studying in Wales.

The university carefully planned the delivery of higher education in the academic year 2020/21 and has in place a detailed management plan which sets out our approach to the management of safety, risk, our delivery and support. The plan is provided with this letter and contains details on our operating models and risk assessment processes and plans.

In relation to the specific questions raised in your letter the following provides a summary of our approach or activities.

The COVID-19 measures you have taken in relation to your own accommodation, and how you have worked with Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSAs) and private landlords (NB please refer to arrangements for both term and vacation periods)

USW halls of residence welcomed students throughout September over an extended period to stagger safe arrivals, reducing numbers onsite and in residential areas. Flats with a shared kitchen are classed as households and information to students around this has been provided in welcome packs along with email messages about regulations and expectations of standards of behaviour in collaboration with the police liaison officer.

Separate accommodation blocks for international students arriving and needing to self-isolate have been allocated on a short term arrangement and supported with a 'soft-landing' catered option. Flats have been filled to 50% occupancy (3 rather than 6) which we believe will help with the management of any Covid 19 cases during the quarantine period. International students have been provided with advice through direct communication and via our [webpages](#). This advice includes advice before they leave for the UK, when they arrive in the UK and advice for self-isolation. Students have received regular welfare calls during the quarantine period.

USW continues to work productively with private providers, Unite in Cardiff and Campus Living Villages (CLV) in Newport, who are sharing information with students about how they will be helping them to keep safe. CLV have implemented measures to support USW students arriving from abroad, accommodating early arrivals free of charge.

Also, if a student has to self-isolate whilst in their accommodation (at any point) they can text the 24 hour contact centre who will call the student to offer support with shopping/refuse removal/collecting medication along with guidance around testing requirements and other government guidelines. Unite have a number of measures in place to manage students safely which align with the Universities minimum requirements and can be viewed [here](#).

We have recognised that the first few weeks of new household groups forming mixed may produce a number of specific challenges in relation managing Covid-19 safe behaviours. Initiatives to develop responsible student self-management for students in USW halls include:

- An online mandatory welcome talk outlining expectations and sanctions for students who put themselves and others at risk
- Students are issued with a [site user guide](#) that summarises all restrictions, guidelines and regulations
- Live Q&A sessions accessed by parents and students. The questions posed have been around bubbles in halls; how the intake will be managed safely; what measures have been put in place to keep students safe on campus; what happens if a student becomes unwell with Covid-19.

How we intend to support – or have been supporting – all students (on and off-campus) who have needed to self-isolate, including how you would support large numbers self-isolating at the same time in a dignified manner (i.e. the provision of food and drink that meets dietary requirements, medicine, mental health support and other essentials)

A prominent feature of messaging to students is the link to the [USW Track and Trace](#) information providing details on what to do if they develop symptoms or test positive for Covid-19.

A daily meeting led by the PVC for Research and Student Experience and attended by Professional Service leads, Human Resource and Faculty Chief Operating Officers considers the reported numbers of individuals with positive Covid-19 diagnosis, immediate support interventions and any patterns of contagion to inform conversations with relevant TTP authorities and report to HEFCW/Welsh Government.

Currently students in halls have a catered option involving delivery of meals. In addition, there are self-catering packs available to purchase which are delivered and these include options for various dietary requirements and preferences.

The provision we have in place for identifying and addressing student hardship

Student hardship has, and is likely to continue, to be exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. A fund has been allocated to support student hardship. Remote appointments are available and there is a telephone enquiry service every weekday morning.

Digital hardship is being addressed with a multifaceted approach with options including:

- Purchasing a discounted laptop / desktop / monitor or tablet
- Application to a digital hardship fund for students who need financial assistance to purchase required IT equipment

- Short term & longer term loan equipment

Our approach to working with students on COVID-19 measures and actions, including self-isolation

The University and the Student Union have worked in partnership to develop and provide information to new and returning students to be clear on the opportunities and expectations for engagement, on and off-site. A comprehensive communication schedule has, and continues to send frequent, all student emails, target messages to new arrivals, regular Newsletters for international students and update [web information](#) with the latest information. Our [website](#) contains a range of information and FAQs for students. Communications from course teams have kept students informed about what to expect around the delivery of their courses and provide reassurance and point of contact for questions. In addition, a dedicated mailbox was established to supplement the enquiry service for students with questions specifically relating to the Covid-19 pandemic.

How we are working and integrating with the public health and civil contingencies machinery within your local authorities and local resilience fora (to include confirmation of whether you have on-campus testing facilities for students)

How we have engaged – and are engaging – with the local population, in particular where you have campuses in rural local authorities

The University is connected to a range of partner organisations and is involved in Welsh Government groups in terms of informing the advice provided to Higher Education Providers in Wales. Our Executive Team link to Universities Wales, HEFCW, Universities UK and the University Alliance where information and good practice is shared and discussed. Each of our faculties and professional support areas, are also well networked with their sectors, including Professional & Statutory Bodies and other Universities in Wales and the UK and are actively sharing good practice. The University has also formed part of the [Advance HE Creating Socially Distanced Campuses and Education Project](#). The University has also issued periodic updates to our key stakeholders and partners, such as our political stakeholders, to keep them informed of our operations and plans.

In addition we are linked to and regular meet with local councils, local health boards, Public Health Wales and other relevant organisations.

Throughout the summer USW was represented on the HE partnership group in Cardiff involving SW Police and local council. This continues to be an active forum for discussion on managing student behaviour through which the collaborative initiative of the Student Behaviour Contracts was agreed to address Covid-19 regulation breaches in the community. USW is represented on the Cardiff and Vale Incident Management Team HE/FE Subgroup which is currently meeting weekly to consider IMT process and escalation thresholds along with specific interventions.

Recommendations we believe the Committee could helpfully make to the Welsh Government to improve support for universities, staff and students.

The University has been pleased with the range of guidance available and appreciates that the challenge is a changing one. Our request would be a swifter communication of change and consultation on guidance to ensure that we can all work together to support learners in Wales at this challenging time. One of the largest challenges is

the negative publicity about students in Wales and possible transfer of infection and a message that notes that Universities in Wales are working in partnership with the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales on keeping people as safe as possible would be advantageous. For future consideration we would wish the Welsh Government to consider the impact on tomorrow's graduates who will be instrumental in post pandemic recovery.

I trust that the above information, with the accompanying management plan, assures the Welsh Parliament of the University's plans for the support of its students during the Covid-19 pandemic. If you have any further queries or areas that require further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Prof. Julie Lydon
Vice Chancellor