

# **Vulnerable Students Stakeholder Group**

#### 24 June 2020 Note to Cascade

The structure of this meeting was more fluid than usual, having been convened solely to provide updates on the COVID-19 situation as outlined below.

# **Independent Team update**

Turnaround time for assessing evidence stood at 15 days with peak period approaching. Having more upskilled assessors was helping to relieve some pressure, and more training was scheduled for upskilling on independent status. More case workers were due to join the team. Current circumstances meant that students were not necessarily expected to approach their HEPs to have their application forms physically signed. Instead, they could have the form completed by their HEP who could then submit it from the academic email address. SLC was considering awarding Independent status for the full duration of study.

# FIPAM update

An initial sift of HEPs websites had found no evidence of information on student finance messaging. HEPs were therefore being asked, through The Office for Students, to follow up on this. Some HEPs had contacted students directly. NNECL's good practice guide was being promoted.

Guidance on studying abroad was awaiting government approval, and would be circulated to HEPS when available.

## **SLC** update

There had been significant upskilling in SLC's workforce which had led to internal colleagues being brought onboard to support processing. External new recruits could not be actively sought out at present due to lockdown restrictions.

## **Welsh Government update**

Technical amendments to some regulations would come into force from 1 August, affecting maintenance loans and distance learning provisions.

## **NUS** update

NUS was meeting ministers for England and Wales with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator that day. A decision on national interventions was not forthcoming. Some groups of students would inevitably be impacted by pandemic limitations more than others, and there were particular concerns over summer funding.

#### Q&A

The suggestion of a practitioner-to-practitioner article seemed worth pursuing. NASMA members had received a presentation on the Estrangement declaration, with emphasis on abandoning the previous format. Issues with the Estrangement form had largely been resolved.

An FOI request had been submitted to allow Stand Alone to share data on Estrangement numbers more widely, and a decision on this from SLC was pending.

## **Chair handover**

David Malcolm was thanked for his hard work and contributions across multiple stakeholder groups over several years, as chair and otherwise. His departure represented a significant loss to all parties. David had always particularly enjoyed his involvement in the VSSG, and had witnessed many tangible improvements during his tenure. He expressed his own thanks to all bodies and representatives for their work and support, and hoped to cross paths with VSSG colleagues again.

In the absence of any other business, the meeting was closed.

Next meeting: Thursday 10 September 2020, venue and format to be confirmed.