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Circular

## Course Length

**Date:** 22 February 2011  
**Reference:** W11/08HE  
**To:** Heads of higher education institutions in Wales  
Principals of directly-funded further education colleges in  
Wales  
**Response by:** No response required  
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This circular reiterates the Council's position on course length outlining that measures should be taken to ensure that the average length of first degree courses did not increase. It notes that any extension in course length will impact on the student finance budget and provides details of arrangements which have been put in place to monitor changes.

This document is available online, in large print, Braille, on CD and on audio CD and cassette. Should you or someone you know require this in an alternative format, please contact us on (029) 2068 2225 or email [info@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:info@hefcw.ac.uk).

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Lywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru  
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## Course Length

1. The Council's current position on course length was set out in a circular in 1999 (W99/4HE). A copy of that circular is attached. This indicates that, prior to the establishment of the Welsh Assembly Government; the Welsh Office 1992 position was that measures should be taken to ensure that the average length of first degree courses did not increase. Following a process of consultation and analysis, the Council determined that there had only been small changes to enrolments on four-year first degree courses and consequently no penalties would be applied but that trends would be monitored, with the introduction of penalty procedures if this were warranted.
2. In the light of the intention to control the student finance budget, and therefore the number of full-time undergraduates, we have investigated more recent trends in enrolments on four or more year undergraduate degree courses. We have found some evidence of a small increase in the number of four year degrees in the past five years, though changes in data reporting in that period mean that conclusions are not clear cut.
3. Any extension in course length will impact on the student finance budget. We would therefore like to reiterate the position set out in the 1999 circular and put interim arrangements in place to cover the period whilst the current cohorts progress through the system. These will comprise the following
  - i. Because of the implications for the student finance budget, those institutions which wish to extend the length of any undergraduate full-time courses should seek HEFCW permission first;
  - ii. We should continue to monitor the length of courses with a view to the possible introduction of penalty procedures if appropriate.

## Further information

4. Please address any queries regarding this letter to Celia Hunt (tel 029 2068 2222; email [celia.hunt@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:celia.hunt@hefcw.ac.uk)) or Hannah Falvey (tel 029 2068 2240; email [hestats@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:hestats@hefcw.ac.uk))

## ***HEFCW Circular W99/4HE***

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### **Four Year Degrees**

*To: Heads of Higher Education institutions in Wales*

*Further information: Frances Good (01222 761861)*

*Publication date: 13 January 1999*

*Response date: No response required*

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In December 1992, the Welsh Office indicated that measures should be taken to ensure that the average length of first degree courses did not increase. In May 1994, the Council consulted the sector on ways in which this might be done (Circular W94/30HE). In the light of this consultation, the Council decided to institute procedures for penalising institutions which allowed the average lengths of their undergraduate degree courses to increase (Circular W94/81HE). Data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) would be utilised in order to monitor trends in average course length. The analysis of trends would start with students first enrolling in 1994/95.

In August 1998, institutions were asked, through Circular Letter W98/65HE, to provide a breakdown of figures extracted from the HESA Student Record so that the Council could undertake an analysis of course lengths with the intention of determining whether the lengths of degree courses were increasing in Wales.

The data provided have now been analysed to establish:

- whether there has been an increase in the overall numbers of new entrants to first degree courses involving four or more years of study;
- whether the number of new entrants to such courses as a proportion of all undergraduates starting in the corresponding year has been increasing;
- the subjects studied by students on courses lasting four years or more.

The analysis suggested that there had only been small changes in enrolments on four-year first degree courses. In some institutions there had been a slight upward trend over three years but others fluctuated or showed a downward trend. There was no evidence to support a view that the lengths of first degree courses in Welsh higher education institutions were increasing overall. Where institutions were offering four-year first degree courses, the subjects of study were, with a few exceptions only, in science and engineering.

The Council has considered the outcomes of this exercise and decided that no penalties should be imposed on institutions at present but has indicated that trends should continue to be monitored with a view to the introduction of the penalty procedures if this is warranted.

Yours sincerely