

Government plans for post-qualification university admissions

Students in England could receive university offers only once they have obtained their final grades under proposals to change the current admissions system, the Education Secretary has announced today (13 November).

Outlining his intention to consider post-qualification university admissions, Gavin Williamson said the Government will consult on proposals to “remove the unfairness” that some groups currently face due to inaccurate predicted grades.

UCAS data for 2019 shows 79% of 18-year-olds in the UK accepted to university with at least 3 A levels had their grades over-predicted, whereas 8% were under-predicted.

The admissions system in England – whereby students choose universities, who then make offers based on predicted grades – can work against high achievers from disadvantaged backgrounds whose grades are more likely to be under-predicted. Research from UCL’s Institute of Education showed almost a quarter of high-ability applicants from lower-income households had their results under-predicted between 2013 and 2015.

Under this current admissions system a whole raft of damaging practices have also emerged, such as the widespread use of unconditional offers.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

We should celebrate the fact that we are seeing record numbers of disadvantaged students going to university, but the current admissions system is letting down the brightest pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

By using predicted grades it is limiting the aspirations of students before they know what they can achieve.

We need to explore how to change a system which breeds low aspiration and unfairness. That is why we are exploring how best to transform the admission process to one which can propel young people into the most promising opportunities for them within higher education.

It has been a challenging time for the education sector, but Covid-19 will not stop this Government from levelling the playing field and empowering students to have the very best opportunities to succeed.

Disadvantaged students are more likely to ‘under-match’ and enter courses

below their ability than their advantaged peers. Under-matched students are then more likely to drop out of university, get a lower-class degree and earn less in employment.

Moving to a system where offers are made after students have received their results could also put an end to the soaring use of unconditional offers, which sees students being encouraged to accept an offer which may not be in their best interest, and can leave them unprepared for university study.

A level students who accept an unconditional offer are 11.5% more likely to miss their predicted A levels by three grades or more and are more likely to drop out of their course.

Education sector groups, including UCAS and social mobility charities such as the Sutton Trust, have highlighted the benefits of moving to post-qualification admissions. A recent poll by the Sutton Trust found that two-thirds of young people think this would be fairer than the current system.

Clare Marchant, Chief Executive of UCAS, said:

We support the government taking a serious look at reforming the admissions timetable, which we have been doing over the last few months with universities, colleges, students, and schools.

There are different approaches to reform, so it's right for any consultation to be open minded and have the aim of levelling up fairness for students. Importantly, the consultation will provide an opportunity to address any unintended consequences of such major change, as well as practicalities for higher education providers.

Professor Graham Virgo, Senior Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education), Cambridge University said:

The University of Cambridge welcomes the government's decision to consult on reforming the way students apply to university, particularly through the adoption of a post-qualification admissions system. The University will work with the government towards the shared goal of establishing a system that will better enable our brightest young people, regardless of their background, to access university places that match their ability.

Leora Cruddas, chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts (CST) said:

CST supports the Secretary of State's decision to consult on post-qualification admissions. While there is much to consider in terms of the detail of these proposals, it is important that we pause to consider the impact of our current arrangements, particularly on

students from the most disadvantaged communities.

The Government will look to set out proposals for consultation in the coming months, inviting views from schools, colleges, and universities to make this work in the best interests of students. This will be a collaborative process to explore how post-qualification admissions could work in the UK and whether this will improve social mobility and the experience of students. This will not affect university applications for 2021 and the Government will assess different options once the consultation is complete.

The consultation will also provide an opportunity to look at wider improvements to admissions. This includes reviewing the use of personal statements, when those from state schools are less likely to have support writing their statement and relevant work experience to include, and ensuring students can make more informed choices about further and higher education.

Lee Elliot Major OBE, Professor of Social Mobility, University of Exeter, said:

Applying to university with actual A-level grades is a reform that would enhance social mobility as it would sweep away the barriers, from poor advice to low expectations, that for too long have stymied the prospects of poorer students.