

News story: University sector rises to challenge from Education Secretary

The Education Secretary has today (22 May) praised action taken by universities and companies after he challenged them to protect quality in higher education, while defending his right to speak out after being accused of making unlawful interventions.

Damian Hinds recently challenged the sector to do more to end the use of essay writing services, curb artificial grade inflation and stop using questionable student recruitment techniques.

Since being challenged by Mr Hinds in March to stop processing payments for online essay writing services, PayPal has committed to ending this function, which will reduce the number of students cheating at university.

In a further move to maintain the quality of our higher education sector, Mr Hinds also called for an end to the 'unjustifiable' steep rise in 2:1s and firsts awarded by universities, who have since stated their commitment to tackling grade inflation to maintain confidence in the system.

The Education Secretary has now welcomed that at least 15 universities ended or pledged to review their use of 'conditional unconditional' offers, which they stated following his letter to institutions expressing concerns over these practices.

In the last six weeks, 19 of the 23 universities challenged on their use of these offers have written back to the Education Secretary – with the majority making positive commitments – which he maintains is an acceptance that the practice is often not in the student's interest.

Preserving the reputation of the quality of England's higher education is in the interest of all universities, many of which attract thousands of international students. Universities will want to be sure that their competitors are respecting student interests in their recruitment practices, and not using less reputable means to increase numbers.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

Our universities are world-class and world-leading, with four ranked among the top ten across the globe. At the heart of that global reputation is a trust in the quality and high standards of the education provided – this reputation is hard won and should be fiercely protected.

That is why I am delighted by the actions taken so far to rise to the challenge of preserving that quality. I wholeheartedly support PayPal's decision to withdraw services from essay-writing firms that are exploiting university students. This is a big step forward

towards beating academic cheating but we now need more organisations to follow suit – it is their moral duty to do so.

I also welcome the responses from the universities I wrote to regarding their use of ‘conditional unconditional’ offers – particularly those who have informed me that they have ended this practice or committed to reviewing it.

The Education Secretary’s letter to 23 universities expressed his concerns over their practice of making ‘conditional unconditional’ offers to students, which means they must eliminate their other choices and put that institution as their first option. This recruitment technique could be influencing consumers to enter into a transaction they otherwise wouldn’t have.

When a university makes an unconditional offer, it guarantees the applicant a place regardless of what A level grades they obtain, which can remove the incentive for students to aim as high as they possibly can. It is a so-called ‘conditional unconditional’ offer as the requirement to obtain certain grades is removed in return for you making the offering university into your first choice.

Mr Hinds’ concerns were enhanced by the finding that 18-year-olds who received an unconditional offer were more likely to miss their predicted A levels by two or more grades.

Today, the Education Secretary has rejected some vice chancellors’ claims that his comments on how universities operate their admissions could be unlawful, and has defended his right to make his views known on the issue.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds added:

Prospective students should have a choice of where they study, but ‘conditional unconditional’ offers entice them to restrict their choices, in favour of one university. I maintain this is bad practice: bad in the end for both students and universities, and urge universities using them to stop.

While I am pleased that many university leaders are taking the issue seriously, it is a shame there are still some trying to justify practices which are damaging the integrity of our higher education and students’ interests.

I make no apology for speaking out as I have done. I could not stand idly by watching questionable practices spread and educational standards slide. Universities are making billions of pounds in public funds, as well as students own contributions, and I have a responsibility also to sixth form teachers, who want all their students to have the same incentive to reach their best. It is my job to make sure the education system works to help everyone make the most of their potential, and I am not afraid to get my hands dirty for this.