

Coronavirus (COVID-19): letters to the manufacturing sector, November 2020 to January 2021

These letters thank those in the manufacturing industry and its supply chain for their success in continuing to manufacture, supply and export goods, including goods essential to our critical national infrastructure, despite the challenges of COVID-19.

They emphasise that the industry can and should continue to work during the current period of restrictions, and follow government guidance on safe working.

Coronavirus (COVID-19): letters to the construction sector, November 2020 to January 2021

These letters thanks those working in the construction industry and its supply chain, including product manufacturers, merchants and professional service, for their success in continuing to deliver projects despite the challenges of COVID-19.

They emphasise that the industry can and should continue to work during the current period of restrictions, and follow government guidance on safe working.

Hammersmith Bridge Taskforce meeting, 13 November 2020

News story

Joint statement on progress made by the taskforce at its meeting on 13 November 2020.



The seventh meeting of the Hammersmith Bridge Taskforce was held today, 13 November 2020.

It was chaired by Transport Minister, Baroness Vere. Attendees included the Project Director Dana Skelley plus representatives from the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames, the Greater London Authority, Transport for London (TfL), and the Port of London Authority.

Dana Skelley, speaking on behalf of the Hammersmith Bridge Taskforce, said:

The taskforce held another productive meeting today. Further to the extraordinary funding and financing package agreed between government and TfL, we're pleased to report that TfL will shortly be instructing contractors to carry out immediate mitigations work on the two western pedestals. This is being delivered as part of the overall bridge stabilisation work package.

The taskforce also held constructive discussions around the draft business case recently submitted by TfL following close working with the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. The business case remains a work in progress. When finalised, it will set out not only the strategic case for repair, but also all the elements needed for successful project delivery, including procurement approach, governance arrangements, affordability, funding profile and contributions, and individuals' responsibilities.

The taskforce further noted the progress made by TfL in taking forward the temporary ferry service, following publication of the Prior Information Notice (PIN) to interested parties on 5 November. We remain confident that the ferry will be operational by spring 2021.

Finally, the taskforce discussed the potential for further controlled river passages to enable the planned movement of vessels at pre-designated times, based on detailed risk assessments.

Planned dates are in discussion for later in November and early December and details on these will be publicised as soon as possible. Public safety remains the highest priority so further changes will only be made when the bridge owners determine it safe

to do so in line with the advice of expert engineers – it remains unlikely that more regular river use will resume until stabilisation works on the bridge have taken place. We'll provide further updates on this as soon as we can.

The Hammersmith Bridge Taskforce was set up by the Department for Transport in September 2020 to work towards safely reopening the Hammersmith Bridge. The taskforce is chaired by Baroness Vere and includes representatives from TfL, London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, London Borough of Richmond upon Thames, Network Rail, the Greater London Authority and the Port of London Authority.

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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 predicated 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.

Statement on media freedom in Egypt

Press release

Statement on media freedom in Egypt from the undersigned members of the Media Freedom Coalition's Executive Group



The undersigned members of the Media Freedom Coalition's Executive Group express concern at the continued restrictions on media freedom in Egypt, including the recent arrest and intimidation of individuals associated with journalist Khaled el-Balshy, editor-in-chief of the news website Darb. In particular, the Coalition is concerned by the arrest of Kamal el-Balshy, brother of Khaled, on September 20, 2020. The Coalition urges authorities to allow journalists in Egypt to practice their profession without fear of arrest or reprisal.

Canada, Germany, Latvia, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom

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