

News story: Universities urged to review 'unacceptable' admissions practices

A full review of university admissions is required to end 'unacceptable' practices some universities use to lure students into accepting higher education places, the Education Secretary said today (5 April).

Damian Hinds is calling for a review of admissions practices after the extent that 'conditional unconditional' offers are used by institutions was revealed by UCAS last year.

A 'conditional unconditional' offer from a university informs students that they are guaranteed a place, but only if they put the university as their first option. This could breach laws designed to protect consumers from entering into a transaction they otherwise wouldn't have.

In letters to the 23 universities using this recruitment technique, Mr Hinds will call on them to end this practice. He will say they are 'backing students into a corner' to accept a place at their institution – trapping them from exploring other options that could be more suitable. A small number of institutions have recently decided to end this practice, and now Mr Hinds is calling for other universities to follow suit.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

It is simply unacceptable for universities to adopt pressure-selling tactics, which are harming students' grades in order to fill places. It is not what I expect to see from our world-class higher education institutions.

'Conditional unconditional' offers are damaging the reputation of the institutions involved and our world-leading sector as a whole. That is why I will be writing to 23 universities, urging them to stamp out this unethical practice.

But I am concerned about the wider picture of how some universities are getting students through their doors, so I am asking the OfS to look at how well current admissions practices serve students and how they can be improved, so we can protect the integrity of our higher education system.

'Conditional unconditional' offers are a subset of all offers with an 'unconditional' component, which have risen drastically across subjects in recent years.

The Education Secretary's concerns over admissions is the final in a series

of interventions in the higher education sector, following announcements made around essay writing services and grade inflation in recent weeks.

In 2018, 34.4 per cent of 18-year-olds from England, Northern Ireland and Wales received a form of unconditional offer whereas in 2013, this figure was just 1.1 per cent. This means 87,540 applicants were given some form of offer with an unconditional component before they sat their final exams at school or college.

In 2018, the University of Roehampton made 1,940 conditional unconditional offers to 18-year-olds from England, Northern Ireland and Wales, representing 65.8% of all their offers made to this group. Nottingham Trent University made 8,380 'conditional unconditional' offers, representing 39.9% of all offers.

UCAS data published last year also shows that students who accept unconditional offers, whether conditions are applied or not, are proportionally 7 per cent more likely to miss their predicted A levels by two grades than students with conditional offers.

Universities Minister Chris Skidmore said:

This excessive use of conditional unconditional offers is not in the best interests of students – and it is worrying to see such a major rise in their use across all subjects.

I know there is a place for unconditional offers, but I expect universities to use them responsibly. They must not be used to place students in a position where they are forced to make choices before they know their respective options. Where institutions are not acting in the best interests of students the Office for Students should use their full range of powers to take action.

The review of admissions practices will be an important moment for the sector to ensure the system works in the interests of students, and provides a truly accurate measure of performance for universities going forwards.

The Education Secretary will be asking the OfS to take a comprehensive look at university admissions procedures, in guidance sent to the regulator setting out his priorities for the financial year.

The scope of the review would be developed in due course. But the Education Secretary would like the OfS to look at ways of improving current practices, including greater access and participation for students from underrepresented groups and disadvantaged backgrounds.