

# Universities told not to alter applicants' offers

Universities should act to maintain the stability of the university admissions system to ensure students' best interests are safeguarded, the Universities Minister has said today (23 March).

Michelle Donelan is asking providers to refrain from changing their offers made to undergraduate students for the next two weeks, such as converting conditional offers to unconditional offers or changing entry requirements.

Since exams were cancelled – including A levels, BTECs and other Level 3 qualifications – a small number of universities have changed a significant proportion of their offers to undergraduate students from 'conditional' to 'unconditional' in a bid to secure their attendance for the 2020/21 academic year.

This practice risks destabilising the admissions system, increasing financial uncertainty and volatility for all institutions at a time when universities are already facing significant pressures.

The Minister is urging universities to act responsibly to maintain the integrity of the higher education system, and avoid actions which might not be in students' best interests, simply to maximise their intake over other universities'. The Minister's message aims to create a period of stability and support the financial health of the system as a whole.

Universities Minister Michelle Donelan said:

We are facing unprecedented circumstances as a country, but it is essential that we create a period of stability for both students and universities.

As universities seek to secure attendance for the next academic year, I would ask them to refrain from changing existing offers to unconditional offers as it risks destabilising the entire admissions systems.

We must also look out for students too, who in these uncertain times may be feeling anxious about their futures. I want to reassure students that we will provide them with the grades they need. No student should feel pressured into making a quick decision which may end up not being in their best interest.

I am asking for a two week pause while we work with the sector over this period on admissions arrangements.

Supporting the announcement on university admissions, Office for Students

chief executive Nicola Dandridge said:

It would be quite wrong for any university or college to respond to the coronavirus crisis by making unconditional offers that may undermine the sustainability of the university system and increase the financial pressure on other providers.

Many universities and colleges have been responding to the enormous challenges of coronavirus with innovation and ingenuity. But it is critical that every university and college puts the student's interest first in these difficult times.

So, I want to make it very clear to any university or college – and its leaders and governors – that if any university or college adjusts any offer to students, or make any unconditional offers, during this two week moratorium we will use any powers available to us to prevent such offer making on the grounds that it is damaging to students and not in their interests.

Universities UK Chief Executive Alistair Jarvis said:

Universities are doing all that they can to support students with great examples across the country. It is important that these efforts are not undermined by inappropriate admissions practices increasing worry and pressure for applicants.

It is vital that the admissions process remains fair, consistent, and in the best interests of all students – who have a right for their work and performance to date to be fairly reflected.

We support today's call and believe universities will respond positively to ensure that no student feels rushed into a decision at what is already a difficult time.

The request from the Universities Minister will apply to unconditional offers being made by universities, as well as existing conditional offers being amended.

The two week period will allow time for further advice to given to students and providers about how the new system of awarding A-Level grades will work, and how the admissions arrangements will work.

The Government's priority is to ensure affected students can move on as planned to the next stage of their lives, including starting university, going on to employment, or starting an apprenticeship in the autumn.

Students who accept an unconditional offer will be able to release themselves as part of the UCAS self- release process to explore other options during Clearing. This process was introduced last year to support student choice and

promote flexibility, and nearly 30,000 students used this functionality.

Work will continue between the Government and the higher education sector over this two week period to provide further clarity on the best way to support applicants and HE providers to ensure that the admissions system remains fair and equitable.

While this request applies to institutions in England, government would welcome other nations to follow the same approach.