



Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

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20th August 2020

Dear Colleague,

You will be aware that the Government has decided to move to a system of using centre assessment grades to award A level results. We worked with Ofqual to construct the fairest possible model in the circumstances, but it became clear that the process of allocating grades had resulted in more inconsistency and unfairness than could be reasonably resolved through an appeals process.

I want to reassure you that I recognise the implications of this decision for universities and will work with you to explore ways to build more capacity in our system and at an institutional level. I understand that this sudden change will now cause significant challenges for universities. I have spoken to a great number of universities in the past few days as the situation has developed, and I shall continue to work as closely as possible with the sector to support you. We have already announced that, subject to Parliamentary approval, we will completely remove the temporary student number controls policy to help ensure there are no additional barriers to students being able to progress. I also recognise that you are part way through your admissions decisions for the coming academic year and that many students are already contacting you with their centre assessment grades. I know that this will put a great deal of pressure on your admission teams – I will work with UCAS to stress to students that they may not be able to reach you immediately. More broadly, I will work with other relevant bodies – including the OfS and CMA – to ensure that we take a fully joined up approach in these difficult circumstances.

On 18th August I launched a higher education admissions taskforce with various sector representatives so we can work together to tackle the challenges ahead and ensure that students have the support and information that they deserve. I am also writing directly to students today and enclose a copy of this letter.

The taskforce, which will meet daily, will harness expert views from a range of sector and statutory bodies, including Universities UK, Universities Alliance, Association of Colleges, Independent Higher Education, Guild HE, Russell Group, UCAS, Office for Students, the Department for Health and Social Care, HM Treasury and the Student Loans Company.

The taskforce has already provided a helpful forum for government to understand the practical challenges faced by universities and other HE providers. At the first

meeting, UCAS set out their commitment to get Universities the verified results by 20th August. Alistair Jarvis, Chief Executive Officer of Universities UK has agreed to lead work on identifying physical constraints to increasing capacity and potential solutions, and further detail of financial challenges faced by the sector. The taskforce has also highlighted a number of legal and regulatory issues which we are seeking to provide clarity on. We will endeavour to keep you informed of developments.

The interests of students were at the heart of the change in awarding results and their interests must continue to be prioritised. With this in mind, I shall work tirelessly to support you and find solutions, and in return my expectation of you is clear. I know, having spoken to a great deal of providers and sector bodies over the last 48 hours, that you plan to be as flexible as possible and that we all agree that providers should:

1. Honour all offers accepted to date.
2. Honour all offers made and met through the new arrangements for both firm and insurance offers where students would like to take them, wherever this is possible. Where a provider reaches capacity (including in the context of published guidance on COVID-19) and both our joint efforts cannot bolster additional places then providers will see if a student would like a suitable alternative course or offer a deferred place, and where possible try to prioritise those from disadvantaged backgrounds for admission this year.

I would also ask you to be mindful that the results for some students who have taken vocational and technical qualifications such as BTECs and Cambridge Technicals are delayed, when confirming your offers to students who hold these qualifications. This is a difficult time for students and their families, and for universities and staff, and I recognise that universities are doing everything they can to place students. I am also aware that deferrals to next year will create their own challenges and I will continue to work with you on this over the coming year to build capacity. Ultimately, students are my priority and I want to ensure that their aspirations are not curtailed. I do welcome the fact that this has very much been the sentiment that has been expressed so far from sector representatives.

Some providers and stakeholders have raised specific concerns with me about healthcare courses, such as medicine and dentistry. These include how they are controlled, and physical capacity issues over-subscription could cause. I am working closely with colleagues at the Department of Health to ensure these issues are addressed and resolved quickly. For medicine and dentistry, we are lifting the specific cap set on places for these subjects and providers should offer places to students who meet the terms of their offer this year, where clinical placements are available. I will provide additional funding through the Teaching Grant in line with existing per student rates to support the delivery of these courses.

Providers have also raised concerns about offering additional places to students in other high cost subjects, such as veterinary sciences, nursing and STEM subjects. We will provide additional funding through the Teaching Grant to help providers

meet additional costs. I recognise that grant funding supports the additional costs incurred through delivering these courses that are vital to the country's social and economic growth.

I am aware that some providers are also concerned that they could be in breach of the new temporary Office for Students condition, Z3, if they accept students who have not met the conditions of their offer. The Office for Students have been clear that this is not the case; universities can make admissions decisions on the basis of the available evidence for individual applicants, regardless of the outcomes of any appeal that applicants may make. The Office for Students temporary condition of registration on offer-making practices would not prevent such decisions – provided that there are no requirements that students make the university their only choice for the offer to stand.

The Office for Students is working closely with providers to ensure that the admissions process supports vulnerable students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in line with their access and participation plans. However, it will also be seeking to ensure that its regulatory work takes into account the repercussions of the changes to admissions this year. The Office for Students has released a statement on 18th August and will engage further with the sector on this.

I hugely appreciate the support and flexibility you have shown to students who are understandably anxious at this time. I encourage you to contact me or my team if you have any questions or any need further information. It is imperative that providers continue to show as much flexibility as possible in these difficult circumstances.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities