



**Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP**  
Secretary of State

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Sir Michael Barber  
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7 June 2019

Dear Sir Michael,

**Strategic Guidance to the Office for Students – additional priorities for  
Financial Year 2019/20**

My letter of 27 February 2019 indicated that I intended to provide supplementary guidance to the Office for Students (OfS) on matters relating to higher education quality. This letter contains supplementary guidance on a number of issues on which I would like to see the OfS focus its efforts, in order to tackle risks to the world class quality of higher education in this country. As well as giving guidance on those other issues, I have taken the opportunity provided by this letter to make some observations on unconditional offers that I thought the OfS would want to be aware of.

**Grade Inflation**

The OfS should support and challenge the sector to eliminate artificial grade inflation and to ensure that consistent standards are being applied across the sector. The OfS report in December 2018 was welcome, as is the work by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) to protect the value of degrees and ensure public confidence is maintained in the results students receive. It is my clear expectation that the OfS should directly challenge providers where it finds clear evidence of artificial grade inflation. I expect the OfS to use the full range of its powers to address any disregard of sector-recognised standards.

I was pleased to see that one of your Key Performance Measures (KPM18) relates to this priority. I encourage you to make the target you set for this measure ambitious.

## **Essay Mills**

The OfS should take a visible lead challenging the sector to eliminate the use of Essay Mills. Higher education providers should be taking action to stamp out this practice. I would like the OfS to work with the other members of the UKSCQA to ensure that the sector has the support it needs, and that it is taking firm and robust action to ensure that this threat to the integrity of our higher education system is being tackled.

## **Unconditional offers**

The steep rise in unconditional offers across a wide range of subjects is disturbing. I have been particularly concerned about the 25 or so universities who made conditional unconditional offers in 2018 (cases where a university makes a conditional offer, but lets the applicant know that it will make this offer unconditional if they make it their firm choice). It is good to see that a number of them have responded positively to the letter I wrote to them in April. The OfS Insight Note of January 2019 raises the possibility that some recent admissions practices may constitute “pressure selling” and indicates that the OfS will further investigate. We have already agreed that you will keep me informed about this work as it progresses.

## **Admissions more broadly**

I also agree with the OfS’s assessment that the rise in unconditional offers may be symptomatic of wider issues within university admissions processes, and that there is a need to establish whether current admissions processes serve the best interests of students. I would, therefore, endorse the OfS’s stated intention to conduct a review of the admissions processes, taking into account students’ experiences, as well as that of all other relevant stakeholders. We have already agreed that you will keep my officials informed as it progresses and to share your findings.

## **Quality assessment of apprenticeships**

The OfS has an important role in making sure that level 6+ and degree apprenticeships are high quality. I am pleased that you have developed an approach to the quality assessment of level 6+ apprenticeships delivered by non-registered providers and that this will be implemented during this academic year, to sit alongside your responsibility to regulate quality of provision in registered providers. This should result in a robust regime that measures high quality on and off-the-job training and tackles poor performance. You should work closely with Ofsted on this approach given their responsibilities for assurance of other apprenticeship provision and their experience in this area.

The outcomes of the quality assessment reviews should be transparent and enable apprentices, employers and the Department to identify where providers are not

delivering high quality training. This will allow the Department to take appropriate action where poor quality training is being delivered. Together we will review the success of this approach later in the year to make sure it is effective.

A robust end-point assessment and a strong quality assessment regime that oversees it is critical for the success of the apprenticeships programme. We are working with the Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education (the Institute) on how external quality assurance could be made simpler. I expect the OfS to continue to work with the Institute to deliver this objective.

Finally, I wanted to thank you for the ongoing work of the OfS in helping to deliver our goal of a world class higher education sector where every student with the talent and potential can access a fulfilling and enriching experience, whatever their background. I have every confidence that you will continue to improve the outcomes for all our students.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Damian Hinds". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**Damian Hinds**  
**Secretary of State for Education**