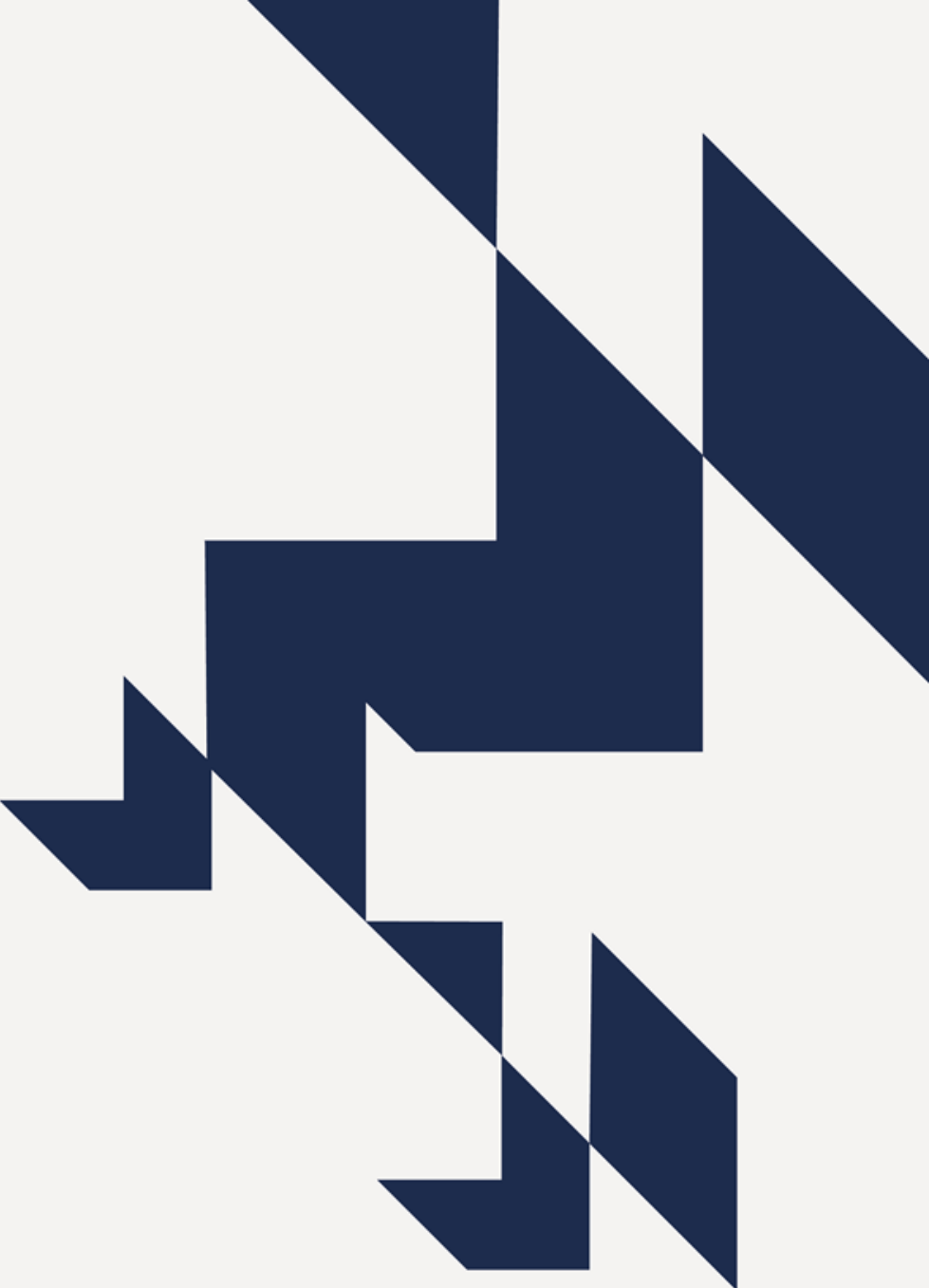


Office for  
Students



# OfS print coverage August and September 2018

# Student mental health



# The i, 13 August

60p

QUALITY, CONCISE - THE FUTURE OF INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM



MONDAY  
13 AUGUST 2018  
Number 2408

**Burka row  
obscures the  
sinister rise of  
the far right**  
Ian Birrell  
P15

@inews.co.uk @theipaper  
theipaper theipaper



**SPORT**

### Premier League


Mané doubles up as Liverpool show their class

Sterling show by City too much for Gunners



### Baby on board

Internet dating as a single mum... how hard can it be?  
P28



## Universities urged to deal with crisis in mental health



» Head of higher education watchdog warns that more must be done to help struggling students

» 'Pressures of expectation' creating challenging environment for young people, Nicola Dandridge tells **i**

» Body to focus on transition period for school-leavers, when students are most vulnerable


EXCLUSIVE - P6

£100m pledge to help the homeless  
P8

Boy pulled alive from plane crash  
P23

**A race to the Sun**  
Nasa lifts off for first-ever solar mission  
P11

**Screen teen**  
Inbetweener Joe Thomas on why he's better as a beta  
P32



PLUS CHESHIRE'S HIDDEN HIGHLIGHTS P21 | MEDIA P37 | TV GUIDE P26 | PUZZLES P40

# The i, 13 August

COVER STORY

## Mental health crisis among students 'must be top priority'

By Richard Vaughan  
EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT

The growing mental health crisis among students must be tackled as a "top priority," universities have been told by the regulator.

Nicola Dandridge, who heads higher education's first watchdog, has ordered universities in England to improve the way they deal with students suffering mental health problems.

Her warning was issued as hundreds of thousands of A-level students prepare to receive their results this week, with the majority of them planning to go on to study at university, shortly after students in Scotland - thousands of whom go on to universities south of the border - learn their Higher results.

While the regulator's remit only covers England, her demands will be watched with interest by the devolved authorities. Ms Dandridge (inset), chief executive of the Office for Students (OFS), told: "This

is a major issue. It is a top priority for us. We're very aware that many students are struggling with issues around their mental health."

The problem of student mental health has come under intense scrutiny in the past 18 months, with a spate of suicides at the University of Bristol in the past two years causing concern.

The regulator acknowledged the issue of mental ill health among students was not just the responsibility of universities. But "there is more that universities can and should do", she said.

"It's connected with the pressures that young people are under, the pressures of expectation. It's a very challenging environment that young people are growing up in now."

Her comments were made after the universities minister Sam Gyimah warned at the start of the summer that universities risk "failing a generation of students" unless they significantly improved their mental health support services.

Mr Gyimah has called on the sector to act "in loco parentis" for their students, to prevent them being overwhelmed by student life and "falling between the cracks". Part of the problem is that the students are legally adult yet most are leaving the support of the parental home for the first time.

The OFS will be paying particular attention to the transition between school and university to ensure students are getting adequate support during their first year, a period when they are at their most vulnerable. Official figures released by the Office for National Statistics showed that student suicide rates had risen by more than a fifth over the past 10 years, with 95 deaths in 2017, up from 77 in 2006-07.

In June, James Murray, whose son Ben killed himself while studying at Bristol, said school leavers going through Clearing should be asked to opt in to a system allowing their parents to be contacted if they are struggling with university life.

According to the Department for Education, around one in four students are using or waiting to use counselling services at some universities, revealing how stretched provision is.



Analysis

## A burning issue but not one universities can tackle alone

Richard Vaughan

Student mental health has become a burning issue in recent years, with Bristol University's vice chancellor

Hugh Brady recently describing it as the "single biggest public health issue" facing the sector. The reasons behind the increasing crisis are hard to pin down as it is part of a wider problem. Part of the problem has been attributed to the rise of



Students are facing more pressures during their studies

social media, and the pressures on students striving for "perfectionism" taking its toll on their wellbeing.

Another potentially significant factor has been linked to the Government's decision to scrap the cap on the number of students that universities can admit. It has led to concerns that universities are lowering their entry requirements to ensure their places are filled, which in turn means students gaining places at the institutions are less able to keep up with the

workload demanded of them. The weight of expectation can then also play a part on young people's wellbeing, placing added pressure on those less equipped to deal with such strain.

And perhaps most crucial of all is the fact that some young people find it difficult to adapt to university life, often living away from home for the first time and away from the support network of family and friends.

It is why the Department for Education, along with the Office for Students, is launching a

review of the transition from school to university, as it is believed this is when students are at their most vulnerable.

While it is clear support and counselling provision must be improved, particularly as institutions are receiving £9,250 for every student, universities will not be able to confront this issue alone.

To get to grips with the mental health crisis there will have to be better collaboration between universities, the NHS and GP practices.

EXAMS

## Unconditional offers could hit A-level results

By Alison Kershaw and Nina Moseley

Top A-level pass rates could drop this year in part because of the soaring numbers of unconditional degree offers handed out by universities, it has been suggested.

There are warnings that the rise in these guaranteed places could mean students have "taken their foot off the pedal", leading to lower overall A-level results.

Figures published by the exams service UCLES last month showed that more than a fifth of teenagers have received at least one unconditional offer this year, amid intense competition between institutions to attract candidates.

In total, almost 68,000 such offers have been made to 18-year-olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland this year, up from less than 3,000 just five years ago.

The issue has sparked concern from ministers and school leaders, who say the practice undermines the credibility of the university system

and puts students' futures at risk. University leaders said they were monitoring trends looking for any impact unconditional offers might have on exam results.

Ahead of A-level results day, Professor Alan Smithers, director of the Centre for Education and Employment Research at the University of Buckingham, suggested the rise in unconditional offers could contribute to a fall in the proportion of examiners awarded an A\* or A grade.

If those given a guaranteed offer "really take their foot off the pedal, they may not be getting the high grades that they might otherwise have done", he said.

The UCLES figures show that 22.9 per cent of 18-year-old university applicants (58,585) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have received at least one unconditional offer this year.

There have been major changes to A-levels in England, with a move away from coursework and modular exams throughout the course.

Last year the first grades were awarded in the first 13 subjects to be reformed in England.

The overall proportion of A-levels (reformed and unreformed) in the UK scoring the highest grades rose last year, up 0.5 percentage points to 26.3 per cent.

But among the 13 reformed subjects, results were down. When comparing 18-year-olds' results, the figures showed that the proportion of A\* grades for these 13 subjects fell by 0.5 percentage points to 7.2 per cent, while A\* and A grades dropped 0.7 percentage points to 24.3 per cent.

A further 11 subjects have been reformed with grades awarded for the first time this year.



Top-level results in the 13 subjects reformed last year were down

UNIVERSITIES

SCHOOLS

A-Level results day



# The Times, 16 August



Rosemary Bennett, Nicola Woolcock  
Biba Kang

Teenagers receiving their A-level results this morning will have more than 30,000 vacant university places to choose from as the number of applicants fell to its lowest level since tuition fees trebled in 2012.

Just over half a million school leavers have sought places, presenting

universities with a challenge to fill their courses. A watchdog has already warned them against offering places to those who lack the academic ability to cope.

If students miss their target by one or even two grades, the chances are high that they will still be offered a place.

Universities are heavily dependent on tuition fees for funding. Most British students pay £27,750 over three years,

leading to significant commercial pressures to fill courses and maximise numbers. Clearing is also expected to be frenetic, both for those who have failed to get into their university of choice, but also those seeking to trade up to go somewhere better.

The elite Russell Group had places on 4,489 courses at midday yesterday. Exeter had spaces on 209 courses including English and mathematics,

Bristol University on 100 courses, King's College London on 100 and York on 199.

It is a bumper year to be a university applicant, in contrast to three years ago when competition was tough and universities could stick to their toughest offers. The dip in applications is down to demographics, with far fewer 18-year-olds than three years ago. Only 511,460 applied for courses compared

with 544,580 in 2015. However, the proportion of 18-year-olds applying to university is at a record high of 38.1 per cent.

Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of the new Office for Students, said it was important that "students have both the ability and the support they need to access and succeed on a degree course". She told *The Times*: "While universities  
**Continued on page 2, col 3**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1  
Scramble for places

often allow students in with lower grades than advertised, it is important they do so with the student's interests at heart."

Lowering grade requirements is often beneficial, for example to recognise how much harder a disadvantaged student might have had to work to get decent A-level grades, but it was not always wise, she said.

"Lower offers are not appropriate for every student and the danger if grades are lowered drastically simply to fill places is that students may not be ready for the demands of the course and they drop out. Anyone offering places through clearing should put the student first," she said.

Experts also warned school leavers not to be persuaded on to a course that sounded similar to the one on which they had narrowly missed out, but was in fact radically different.

Students could have applied to a popular course such as English and be offered a joint honours with another subject, for example philosophy, meaning that they would study English for only half of their degree. Many of the courses available through clearing are joint honours, some with unusual combinations.

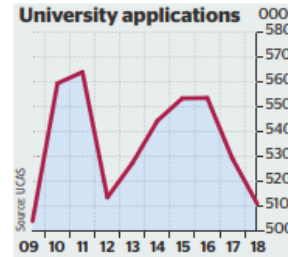
Nick Hillman, the director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, warned applicants to proceed with

caution. "If you are offered a different degree, perhaps because the institution is just trying to fill its courses, that seems unwise. If it's about a university filling holes in their recruitment, there are valid questions to ask. It would be a bit silly for them to have someone on a course they're not suited to," he said.

Universities are increasingly offering "foundation years" for those who failed to make their grades at A level. Students should bear in mind that this will mean an extra year of tuition fees.

This year's A-level students were guinea pigs for newly reformed and toughened up assessment and many complained that the standards were unrealistically high. However, in order to ensure fairness, examination boards say that pass marks will be adjusted to

ensure that similar numbers get the top grades.  
Leading article, page 27



## Weighing up the real value of a degree

Discouraging headlines about higher education shouldn't deter you, says Nicola Woolcock

Anyone who has been paying attention to recent news about universities would be forgiven for questioning whether it is worth the time and expense to become an undergraduate.

What with headlines about snowflake students "no-platforming" controversial speakers, overpaid vice-chancellors, lecturers going on strike and graduates burdened with £50,000 of tuition fee debt, there hasn't been much positive higher education news.

Yet despite the slew of bad publicity, it is worth remembering that many British universities are world leaders. They offer an incredibly diverse range of courses, taught by global experts, and range from intimate specialist institutions to mammoth campuses.

All are starting to come under unprecedented scrutiny, however.

Higher expectations and an extra focus on the bang students get for their buck have been brewing for the past six years, since tuition fees trebled to £9,000. Last year they rose again to £9,250 and some universities confidently expected to be able to charge £9,500 this year — but the brakes have been applied. Ditto the runaway train of vice-chancellor salary increases.

With the government and the new Office for Students breathing down their necks, universities have never been under so much pressure to justify what they offer undergraduates, and they will struggle to hide behind stellar research if the student experience is weak.

For years, universities have used ratings based on research, but ministers introduced a new "teaching excellence framework" rating last year, under which institutions were rated gold, silver or bronze. It is difficult to summarise a whole university into a single rating,

when some departments may excel and others may be mediocre within the same institution. The subject-level framework

that is being piloted may prove more useful.

Potential students are best advised to identify what they would like to study before focusing on an institution. *The Times Good University Guide* is a definitive set of rankings that evaluates entry standards, the student experience and graduate employment prospects, among other criteria. It can be searched by university, subject or geographical area. It also provides a wealth of advice-rich articles.

Not all of those winning plaudits are the obvious contenders; Lancaster is named the guide's university of the year.

Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities have plenty of prestige and outstanding academics, but newer or less renowned institutions are snapping at their heels. Nottingham Trent and Coventry University are winning plaudits for their innovation and focus on teaching, and for turning out employable graduates.

School-leavers can also set their sights beyond Britain: generous bursaries are offered at many American universities; a growing number of Brits are studying in Canada; many Dutch universities teach in English and charge lower tuition fees than institutions in the UK.

There are also degree apprenticeships, where tuition fees and some living expenses are paid by companies, which also offer part-time work. These are still relatively low in number — fewer than 5,000 were available last year compared with the 511,000 applicants for degree courses this year.

It is best to see tuition fees not as a loan, but a tax. While the average student will graduate owing £50,000 including living costs, many will never repay the full amount. From this year repayments won't start until the graduate earns at least £25,000, and the debt is cancelled after 30 years.

One key point is that, with a fall in the school-leaver population, teenagers are in a strong position. Universities are falling over themselves to secure students; unconditional offers are at record numbers. Those doing worse than expected in their A levels should not despair, and those with better than anticipated grades are in a remarkable position. Good luck!

# The Times, 16 August



## Degrees of Excellence

As sixth-formers collect their A-level results, many will be looking forward to a world-class higher education. Universities have to ensure they are not disappointed

Higher education in this country has suffered a serious reputational kicking over the past two years. Furious debates about tuition fees, endless stories of overpaid vice-chancellors, warnings from lecturers about the impact of Brexit, dismaying revelations about mental health support on campus and the bungled establishment of a new universities regulator, the Office for Students, have all left a bitter taste.

Yet today, as sixth-formers across the country discover their A-level results, there is a little more optimism in the air. This year it is a buyers' market for students. At the start of the day there were 30,716 degree courses with spaces. This is because the volume of university applications is at its lowest since 2009, thanks to a dip in the number of 18-year-olds, and it means that universities are competing to attract students.

In the past, universities have too often responded to such competitive pressure by lowering the bar for entry, trying to pull in students with lower offers. It would be far better to attract students by offering a better education than any of their rivals. This is what the present system of higher education in England was designed to foster. When the cap on tuition fees was raised by the coalition government, it was hoped that sixth-formers would shop

around and choose the course that was right for them, and universities would respond to varying demand with varying prices.

In practice, a true market has failed to develop for two reasons. First, nearly all universities charge the maximum they are allowed to, fearing that if they tried to undercut any competitor by offering cheaper courses, applicants would assume they were second-best. The second barrier to marketisation has been the tyranny of institutional prestige, built up over centuries. Pictures of beautiful old buildings and lists of illustrious alumni at Oxford, Cambridge and other Russell Group universities are hard to shift from the national psyche, and they carry with them the presumption of a good education, whatever the rankings and statistics say.

Yet it should be possible for insurgents to build their brands. Across the Atlantic, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has become one of the most respected universities in the world in just over a century, earning its reputation on results and merit alone. Likewise Stanford, despite being outside the Ivy League and founded in 1891, is now every bit as competitive and esteemed as older institutions such as Harvard and Yale.

British universities should be copying their example. If they will not compete on price and

cannot compete on history, they need to compete on quality. Too many rest on their laurels, failing to give students adequate or timely feedback and teaching them in groups so large that students have little dialogue with subject experts, not to mention some dangerously slipshod pastoral care.

The new "teaching excellence framework", under which universities are awarded money for good teaching, is helping. When its first ratings were published last year, more than half of the Russell Group fell short of a "gold" standard. Some improved their teaching and moved up the league table, but others traditionally seen as beacons of excellence have failed to shine. As important as a change in financial incentives will be a cultural shift. University lecturers need to value their pedagogy, and not see it as an irritating distraction from their research.

The problems should not be overstated. Higher education is among Britain's proudest exports, and British universities are rightly thought to be some of the finest in the world. They produce important research, make a valuable contribution to public life, and make a positive difference to graduates' earning power. If sixth-formers are optimistic, they have every reason to be — but universities must not let them down.

# The Times, 17 August

## Hard-up universities take candidates who didn't make the grade

Nicola Woolcock  
Education Correspondent

Universities were said to be dropping their offers by several grades yesterday as all but six Russell Group institutions offered vacancies through clearing.

Experts said that some universities unable to attract enough students could be "close to broke" as a result.

The combination of a school-leaver population falling by 2.5 per cent and more competition between universities freed from caps on undergraduate numbers means that students are in a powerful position this year.

Only five years ago they were turned away if they slipped a grade, but institutions can no longer afford to be as picky. While those in clearing are asked for particular grades, there is thought to be more flexibility than ever.

However, Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of the Office for Students, told institutions not to give places to candidates without the academic ability to cope.

One candidate who narrowly missed his grades for Edinburgh was contacted later to say he could still have a place. Another school-leaver tweeted that she had been offered a place to study geography at Queen Mary University of London despite "missing out on my grades by so much". Another tweeted: "So I missed my grades. As stressful as today has been, I've still been lucky enough to be offered my course at four amazing universities."

Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, said: "Universities keep their cards close to their chest. Some of them want some types of students more than others, for example if you're English it's easier to get into a Scottish university through clearing than if you're Scottish, because Scottish numbers are capped by the Scottish government [which pays for students]. All universities have targets they want

to hit, otherwise they'll be losing money or staff will be underutilised."

Some courses that charged £9,250 a year in tuition fees subsidised other courses, he said, which meant other degrees and the institution would suffer from low numbers on one course.

"Universities have to make sure they

have the right staff in place before the academic year, they have fixed costs," Mr Hillman said. "There are some universities which if they have a bad clearing round this year, they'll be close to broke financially."

"In London there's a very difficult market; you have big international universities like UCL, so newer institutions in urban areas, that have already lost part-time and mature students [will] lose young students on top of that. If you reduce the tariff [entry grades], eventually that starts hitting league table positions and drop out rates."

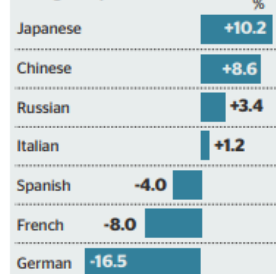
He said that universities setting out expected grades on websites or in clearing might have some wiggle room with grades, he said. "People who pick up the phones will have leeway," he said.

The number of courses with spaces at Russell Group universities fell by 500 from more than 4,300 on Wednesday night, to 3,800 by 5pm yesterday. Places were still available to study classics at Warwick and chemistry at Bristol.

Universities opened their clearing call centres from 7am and took thousands of inquiries, as students found out whether or not they had been accepted on their course. Almost nine out of ten were accepted by their first choice.

Sheffield University said: "We have 70 people manning the phones at the call centre and 40 making offer calls, with capacity having increased by 50 per cent compared to two years ago."

### A-level modern languages Change in uptake 2017-18



Source: Joint Council for General Qualifications



# Launch of access and participation consultation



# Daily Mail, 7 September

## Universities face fines in drive for equality

UNIVERSITIES face fines or closure unless they set 'tougher targets' to recruit more poor students under proposals announced today.

They will be expected to offer more incentives for disadvantaged students, like lower entry grades and invitations to special summer schools.

Amid fears that some universities are still only open to those from wealthy families, the new Office for Students (OfS) is planning the the biggest shake-up of

By **Eleanor Harding**  
Education Correspondent

entry requirements since 2004. The plans, if adopted, would make all universities obliged to comply as the watchdog has the power to fine or deregister institutions.

**Chris Millward**, OfS director of fair access, said: 'Everyone with the talent to succeed in higher education should have equal opportunity to do so, but that's not currently the case.'

# Times, 7 September

## Tough targets on poor students

Universities will be forced to set tougher targets to recruit poor students and ensure that they achieve good degrees and jobs (Nicola Woolcock writes).

Institutions will be judged on what they achieve, not how much they spend on trying to widen access. Those that

fail could have their annual fees capped at £6,000, instead of £9,250, or be fined.

The move is among changes to improve equality announced today by the Office for Students and could be introduced next year. **Chris Millward**, the new regulator's director of fair access, said universities

would be expected to set ambitious targets and declare how these would be achieved. Those with weaker targets would be more closely scrutinised.

Oxford and Cambridge were formally warned by the watchdog this summer over their access for students from poorer homes.

# Telegraph, 7 September

## Universities face tougher diversity targets and fines

By **Camilla Turner** EDUCATION EDITOR

UNIVERSITIES could be punished unless they give a higher proportion of top degrees to black students, under new proposals from the regulator.

The Office for Students (OFS) has announced plans to overhaul its guidelines for boosting diversity in higher education, in what it says is the "biggest shake-up" since 2004.

If institutions fail to comply with the regulator's new "tougher" national targets for increasing the number of disadvantaged students, they could be penalised through a fine or even deregistered.

**Chris Millward**, the OFS director for fair access and participation, said that universities will no longer be able to "mark their own homework" on their plans to up their intake of 18-year-olds from poor backgrounds.

Instead, the new regulator plans to set a series of national targets that all universities will be expected to meet.

These will not be limited to targets for admitting more school-leavers from

deprived homes, but will also include addressing the gap in degree attainment between black and white students. There has been an almost 50 per cent increase in the number of black and ethnic minority students in England between 2007 and 2016.

Some 78 per cent of white students graduated last year with a first class or upper second class degree, compared with just 53 per cent of black students.

Qualifications before attending university, although a key factor in degree outcomes, do not explain the differences between ethnic groups, according to data analysed by Universities UK.

In a consultation document, published today, the OFS sets out a number of areas that universities should work on, such as combating the higher drop-out rate among poorer students compared with their middle-class peers.

Mr Millward said: "Universities have always set their own targets, and have used different measures of success. They were kind of marking their own homework. We are going to set clearer national targets."

# Nicola's speeches



# Telegraph, 8 September

## Students who work in summer likely to get better jobs

By Camilla Turner

UNDERGRADUATES need to work during their summer holidays if they want to get a job later on, the head of the university regulator has said.

Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of the Office for Students, said that undergraduates needed to make the most of all their long holidays by undertaking work placements or internships.

This will improve their employability and increase the likelihood of securing a "rewarding" job once they leave university.

In a speech at the National Graduate Recruitment Conference, she said: "Many employers are now offering degree apprenticeships and this is important. But we also need more work-placement opportunities."

She said that many students who do not work before university "face a cycle of internships – too often unpaid – before they are able to get lasting graduate employment".

Over a fifth (22 per cent) of graduates are unemployed six months after they complete their degrees, according to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

# Daily Mail, 8 September

## Summer jobs key to a career, students told

By Eleanor Harding  
Education Correspondent

STUDENTS need to work during the holidays to avoid being trapped in a 'cycle' of unpaid internships as graduates, a watchdog chief warns.

Nicola Dandridge, head of university regulator the Office for Students, said gaining work experience while studying is key to securing a rewarding career.

One in five university leavers is still not in graduate employment six months after they finish their degrees, official figures show.

Mrs Dandridge warned that those who graduate with no work placements on their CV are often forced to undertake a 'cycle' of unpaid internships afterwards.

Those on non-vocational courses and people who have no industry contacts would particularly benefit from work experience, she said.

Speaking yesterday at the National Graduate Recruitment Conference, Mrs Dandridge called on universities and employers to improve access to work placements and internships for undergraduates.

She said: 'It cannot be right that so many students – especially those in courses with little vocational element and those without the right networks – have no access to good work placements and/or holiday internships while they are stud-

ying. This means they are more likely to face a cycle of internships, too often unpaid, after they graduate before they are able to get lasting graduate

employment.' A report by social mobility charity the Sutton Trust earlier this year estimated 40 per cent of around 70,000 internships undertaken a year are unpaid. With living costs of more than £1,000 a month in London and £800 a month in Manchester, the trust warned this was pushing many 'less advantaged' people of out their dream careers.

Mrs Dandridge said research shows that half of students went on to their first employment in their home region – but had worse outcomes on average.

'The numbers of students from the most disadvantaged groups entering professional jobs is lower than it should be given their qualifications,' she added. 'An important reason for this can be a lack of contacts and relevant employment experience.'

She said there needed to be more focus on outcomes for

graduates from poorer backgrounds, adding that employers had a 'responsibility to increase equality of opportunity'.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency shows that 22 per cent of graduates are not in graduate employment six months after graduation.

Even after three-and-a-half years, 15 per cent are not employed in highly skilled jobs.