

Professor Sally Holland

Children's Commissioner for Wales

Anne Longfield OBE

Children's Commissioner for England

Bruce Adamson

Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

Koulla Yiasouma

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

Sent by email

19 August

Dear Professor Sally Holland, Anne Longfield OBE, Bruce Adamson and Koulla Yiasouma,

Thank you very much for your recent letter dated 16 August and apologies for the delay in responding to you. The recent, rapid change in government policy regarding the awarding of A Level grades and the impact this has on university admissions has altered the content of the response I was due to send you yesterday, and as you may have seen from our media statements and interviews over the past few days, there are still many issues for the sector to work through with the support of government.

We are acutely aware of the distress and difficulties caused by Covid-19 for children and young people – the rites of passage missed, the social isolation and mental health challenges, and many examples of personal and family tragedy. It is therefore with deep regret that applicants, their parents and guardians, and schools and teachers have faced such uncertainty around results day, and why universities are determined to do all they can to get applicants settled as soon as possible, supporting them as they return to learning after many months of lockdown and help them focus on the next step in their education.

Since we were first made aware of the issues the use of the Ofqual algorithm caused, Universities UK has encouraged its members across the UK to put the interests of students at the centre of admissions decisions and are confident that they have done so. We absolutely share your concern that it was the most disadvantaged students that were particularly vulnerable to downgrading, and potentially less well-resourced for the appeals process, and this is simply not right.

The UK Government's decision (and those of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish governments) to use centre-assessed grades (CAGs) rightly addresses the inequalities suffered by many students from disadvantaged backgrounds due to the individual anomalies produced by the original algorithm. However, it does also present significant challenges to universities and, specifically, admissions teams that are working incredibly hard to be able to accommodate offer-holders at their chosen university or help find alternative courses suitable for applicants in a fast-evolving situation.

CAGs must now be made available to schools, students and universities as soon as possible and in a consistent way that does not lead to remaining places on popular courses being filled by some students before others have had the chance to provide evidence of their CAGs.

We are seeking urgent clarity from the UK Government about the course of action that should be taken in cases in which the number of students that now meet the conditions of their original offers exceeds course capacity. Universities are being as flexible as possible, however they must also ensure sufficient availability of accommodation, wellbeing and mental health services, facilities and staff, and adherence to 'Covid-secure' guidance. For regulated professions such as medicine and dentistry, places are also currently capped by the government which clearly poses issues.

We have written to the Westminster Education Secretary, Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP, and are engaging with his departmental officials in order to secure the support universities need to maximise fairness for a generation of young people, and maintain their financial sustainability in the face of late changes to student recruitment patterns.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julia Buckingham". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a long, thin horizontal line that extends across the width of the signature area.

Professor Julia Buckingham
President, Universities UK

The voice of universities

Chief Executive
Alistair Jarvis

Universities UK
Woburn House
20 Tavistock Square
London
WC1H 9HQ

telephone
+44(0)20 7419 4111

twitter
@universitiesuk

email
info@universitiesuk.ac.uk

website
www.universitiesuk.ac.uk

Company limited by
guarantee and registered
in England and Wales
number 2517018

Registered charity number
1001127