

Cylchlythyr | Circular

Unconditional offers in 2020/21 and 2021/22

Date: 22 March 2021
Reference: W21/10HE
To: Heads of higher education institutions in Wales
Principals of directly-funded further education colleges in Wales
Response by: 03 May 2021
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This circular provides a summary of unconditional offers made since the Minister's correspondence with UCAS on 7 April 2020 regarding admissions in Autumn 2020. It also provides a letter from the Minister for Education requesting that institutions refrain, until 30 September 2021, from making unconditional offers to students which are not in line with standard offers for those who have not already gained appropriate qualifications. Finally, it includes a request for information on the basis on which institutions make unconditional offers, and on how progress and continuation of students is monitored, to be provided by **3 May 2021**.

If you require this document in an alternative accessible format, please email info@hefcw.ac.uk.



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Introduction

1. This circular provides a summary of unconditional offers made since the Minister's correspondence with UCAS on 7 April 2020 regarding admissions in Autumn 2020. It also provides a letter from the Minister for Education requesting that institutions refrain, until 30 September 2021, from making unconditional offers to students which are not in line with standard offers for those who have not already gained appropriate qualifications. Finally, it includes a request for information on the basis on which institutions make unconditional offers, and on how progress and continuation of students is monitored, to be provided by **3 May 2021**.

Background

2. [Circular W20/13HE](#) noted that on 25 March 2020 the Welsh Government Minister for Education in Wales had written to UCAS expressing concern about the potential risks associated with an increase in unconditional offers from higher education institutions to prospective full-time students as a result of the current coronavirus outbreak. On 7 April 2020 Welsh Government issued a moratorium to institutions in Wales from making unconditional offers that were not in line with standard offers for those students who had not already gained the necessary qualifications. This ran to 1 May, and was subsequently extended to 4 May 2020.
3. Following the end of the 2020/21 admissions cycle HEFCW wrote to institutions to note that we were carrying out a review of unconditional offers, to evaluate compliance of institutions with the Ministerial request. Recruitment prior to the moratorium date was not included in this review.
4. We noted the numbers of unconditional offers made by each institution during the moratorium period (8 April-4 May 2020), and afterwards (4 May – A level results day +28), and requested a breakdown of these offers to indicate the basis on which they were offered (eg portfolio, exams taken previously, A level results etc).
5. Information on the different types of offers that may be made to students is available on the [UCAS website](#).

Outcomes

6. One institution had made a small number of offers on a fair admissions basis relating to the institution's policy on unconditional offers. The scale was small (fewer than 35) and therefore did not warrant further action. Another institution had allowed applicants with unconditional offers to change their course choice, which was in line with the moratorium.

7. HEFCW considered the outcomes for each institution and requested more information as appropriate. We concluded that no further follow-up action was required.

Letter from the Minister for Education

8. In January 2021 HEFCW received a letter from the Minister for Education regarding admissions (**Annex A** refers). The letter expressed concerns at signs of an increase in unconditional offers from some higher education institutions. Therefore the letter asked HEFCW to monitor unconditional offers for 2021/22 and requested that institutions refrain, until 30 September 2021, from making unconditional offers to students which are not in line with their standard offers for those who have not already gained appropriate qualifications.
9. HEFCW and Welsh Government recognise the autonomy of institutions in this area, and therefore our engagement is from the perspective of ensuring that offers made are in the best interests of students.
10. Unconditional offers made to students already meeting the requirements for admission (including through portfolio, prior assessment or through recognised skills and experience gained through employment), will be exempt from this request.
11. We recognise that universities make a number of unconditional offers every year to recognise particular individual circumstances that may have impacted negatively on an applicant's academic performance. The report by Steven Schwartz *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice (2004)* set out key five principles for a fair admissions system that we think should continue to underpin admissions practices, including as they relate to unconditional offers, as follows:
Fair admissions should:
 - be transparent;
 - enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential;
 - strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid;
 - seek to minimise barriers for applicants;
 - be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.
12. The University UK [Fair Admissions Review](#) was published in November 2020 and also made a number of recommendations, including:
 - ending 'conditional unconditional' offers;
 - the production of guidance on the acceptable use of unconditional offers;
 - a new code of practice to maintain standards;
 - greater transparency, consistency, and standard indicators to support contextual offer-making

- and a proposed switch to post-qualifications admissions (PQA).
13. Institutions should take account of these publications in making any unconditional offers. Institutions may also find it helpful to consider the UCAS [Unconditional offers: guidance for providers](#), which includes [good practice considerations](#), and QAA advice and guidance on [Admissions, Recruitment and Widening Access](#).
 14. We will continue to monitor unconditional offers made by institutions for 2021/22, in accordance with the Minister's request. When we request information about unconditional offers, institutions should make us aware of the numbers and basis of such offers, and ensure that their records and decision-making are transparent and consistent.
 15. We will also continue to monitor progression and completion data for the 2021/22 recruitment cycle. We will expect institutions to put in additional resources to ensure that all students admitted to the institution are appropriately supported.
 16. Institutions should not issue **conditional unconditional** offers to prospective students. These are offers which are conditional at the point of offer and adjusted by the provider from conditional to unconditional if that provider is selected as an applicant's firm choice. Similarly, institutions should not issue **conditional low** offers to prospective students. These are offers where a condition of a low entry tariff is set provided the provider is selected as an applicant's firm choice. These offers can destabilise the system, and put undue pressure on students to accept an offer that may not be in their best interests. Likewise, institutions should not engage in any other admissions behaviour that would destabilise the sector, such as expanding intake numbers beyond forecast projections.

Request for information on unconditional offers

17. Institutions are requested to provide the following information to HEFCW by **3 May 2021**.
 - The basis on which the institution provides unconditional offers to applicants;
 - The means by which the institution monitors the progression and continuation of students given unconditional offers.

Further information and responses

18. For further information contact Dr Cliona O'Neill (email cliona.oneill@hefcw.ac.uk). Please submit responses to quality@hefcw.ac.uk.

Assessing the impact of our policies

19. We have carried out an impact assessment screening to help safeguard against discrimination and promote equality. We also considered the impact of policies on the Welsh language, and Welsh language provision within the HE sector in Wales and potential impacts towards the goals set out in the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 including our Well-Being Objectives. Contact equality@hefcw.ac.uk for more information about impact assessments.