

From the Office of the Permanent Secretary



To: NI School Leaders

27 May 2021

Dear colleagues,

Higher and Further Education Admissions Cycle for Academic Year 2021/22

As you will be aware, admissions processes for Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) have been the source of much commentary and disruption since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Last year saw significant confusion in the admissions process, when the Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) moved to make early 'unconditional' offers to prospective students. While the HEIs intended for this move to provide comfort and reassurance for its prospective students, the actual outcome was one of significant disruption to the tertiary education sector, as the resulting increased numbers of local university students (level 6) created significant negative displacement on 'HE in FE' (levels 4 & 5) provision in the FE colleges (FECs). Moreover, the move locally to offer significant numbers of 'unconditional' HE places was at odds with the actions of HEIs in the rest of the UK, who maintained the standard approach of making offers post-results in August, thereby creating cross-UK inequity.

In order to ensure a more coherent approach this year across NI, in line with the rest of the UK, a Tertiary Education Group was established to discuss admissions, and other related issues. The Group brought together the Principals of the FECs and the Vice Chancellors of the HEIs, along with officials from the Department for the Economy, and I can now confirm that the Group has agreed that no early, 'unconditional' offers will be made this year.

Instead, offers will be made in August, post- results publication, and therefore in line with NI's normal, pre-pandemic admissions approach. This will offer several advantages, namely: alignment with the rest of the UK and the equity that follows; better 'protection' of the NI 'HE in FE' market and reduced displacement, which will in turn contribute to addressing local skills needs at those levels; and clarity and certainty of approach for prospective students at what is already a stressful time for them.

In order to address this final point, I should therefore be grateful if you could please communicate this agreed admissions approach with your school students. This will ensure that prospective students are provided with clarity on the process, and will not feel the same pressure to accept 'unconditional' offers that many will have done under last year's approach. Moreover, it will provide them with reassurance that the same admissions approach is being taken across the UK, and therefore no NI student will be at a disadvantage compared to students from other UK jurisdictions.

Yours sincerely

Mike Brennan
Permanent Secretary
Department for the Economy