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Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP

Minister of State for Higher and Further Education

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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP

By email: george.howarth.mp@parliament.uk

01 June 2022

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 30 May, addressed to the Secretary of State, on behalf of your constituents, about higher education (HE) reforms and the consultation on minimum eligibility requirements (MERs). I am replying as the minister responsible for this policy area.

The department is committed to putting students, their needs, their ambitions, and their success first. We want to ensure that our entire post-16 education system is delivering quality outcomes for students throughout their lives, and that those accessing student finance to begin level 6 study are well-equipped to succeed at this level. We are seeking to ensure that there are high-quality attractive alternatives to level 6 degrees available, including prestigious level 4 and 5 qualifications and technical education, and that students are accessing the best opportunities for them.

From 1962 to 1980, MERs existed in our HE system, with students required to have achieved at least EE at A level to go to university. In recent years, we have been concerned to see high levels of drop-out rates on some courses, as well as evidence that some universities have been lowering standards when awarding degrees. We are therefore considering if it is right to reintroduce very low-level MERs, with exemptions, to ensure that students are not pushed on to courses before they are ready for them.

In every scenario we are considering, students would have other means of progressing to a degree, including by first doing a foundation year, an access to HE course, by retaking their GCSEs or A levels, or by undertaking a level 4 or 5 qualification, for example, a higher technical qualification. Successfully completing any of these would allow a student to progress to a degree, regardless of their GCSEs or A levels.

We have not proposed to bar anyone from going to university: rather, we are starting a conversation on MERs and asking whether young people should be pushed straight into a full degree, without being prepared for that level of study. We are aiming to ensure that there are many routes to improve a person's career and life opportunities, whether that is making certain that students are best prepared for university through a foundation year or helping them pursue an apprenticeship or further education.

It is unacceptable for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to be pushed onto HE courses that do not improve their career prospects. Evidence shows that students with lower prior attainment are less likely to complete their degree and get a 'good' classification, and more likely to have worse employment and degree outcomes. The aim of the proposed low-level MER is to make sure that those who study at degree level will benefit from it, regardless of their background.

We have consulted on the principle of MER for access to student finance for those intending to study a degree-level qualification. We sought views on what would be a fair and appropriate level at which to potentially set an MER, and on proposed exemptions from such an MER, such as for part-time and mature students, and, for an MER set at GCSE (grade 4 in English and maths), for students with CCC at A level or equivalent.

After our proposed exemptions are applied, 1% or fewer of entrant population would be affected by an MER set at either GCSE (grade 4 in GCSE English and maths) or A level (two E grades). We will, of course, assess responses to the consultation before making final decisions.

I hope that you find this reply helpful and thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Higher and Further Education