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Number of UK students applying to university slumps for second year in a row

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The latest figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) show a slump of 18,047 (or 5.6 per cent) on the previous year - when figures again fell as a result of the introduction of fees of up to £9,000 a year. They follow the highlighting in today's *Independent* by Universities minister David Willetts of the slump in applications from males. It prompted him to suggest that white working class boys should be targeted for recruitment by universities in the same way as students from disadvantaged areas and ethnic minorities are.

In an interview with *The Independent*, Bill Rammell, a former Labour Higher Education Minister, warned: "The real risk is that we are at a societal turning-point. "The generation-long understanding of the benefits of higher education could be ebbing away. It's like a super-tanker turning. Once started, it gains momentum."

He issued a "call to arms" - urging ministers to mount a "Government-led, university sector-backed" campaign to promote the benefits of a university education.

He added: "There are mixed messages from the Government who seem to be promoting apprenticeships as an option. We need to make it clear it is not an "either or".

Apprenticeships and other options should not be promoted at the expense of university courses."

Sally Hunt, general secretary of the University and College Union, added: "We have heard many warm words from the Government about greater efforts to make university appeal to more people but the bottom line is that hiking up the cost is likely to have an impact on people's decisions when it comes to further study."

Meanwhile, a leading Labour MP praised Mr Willetts for raising the issue of encouraging more white working class boys to opt for university - but warned it was too little, too late.

Graham Allen, MP for Nottingham North said: "Where Mr Willetts needs to rethink is to tackle this problem 18 years earlier than the point of admission.

"The answer here is early intervention. "There are no quick fixes - only patient long-termism starting with babies and their parents to help develop the social and emotional bedrock that will allow my white working class kids to do just as well on their own merits as middle class kids can."

In an article in *The Independent* today, Mr Willetts argued for a campaign focusing on parents - persuading them of the merits of their children going to university and convincing them no-one had to pay upfront fees for courses.

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