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Treat white working-class boys like ethnic minority, Willetts tells universities. Massive fall in admissions demands drastic action, Universities minister says.

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Universities will be told they should recruit more white, working-class boys in the wake of figures showing a massive slump in applications from men for courses. The Universities minister David Willetts wants white, working-class teenage boys put in the same category as students from other disadvantaged communities and ethnic minorities – as groups that should be targeted for recruitment.

The move has the potential to create conflict with Britain's independent schools if universities – as a result – use it to discriminate against middle-class applicants in order to win favour with the university access watchdog, the Office for Fair Access.

The watchdog "can look at a range of disadvantaged groups – social class and ethnicity, for instance – when it comes to access agreements, so I don't see why they couldn't look at white, working-class boys," Mr Willetts said. He added: "There are now more women who enter university each year than there are men who submit a Ucas [university application] form."

Mr Willetts called this "the culmination of a decades-old trend in our education system which seems to make it harder for boys and men to face down the obstacles in the way of learning. That is a challenge for all policymakers and all parties." He added: "I do worry about what looks like increasing under-performance by young men."

Mr Willetts said he plans to advance the question of including white, working-class boys as a target group for recruitment in university access agreements. If universities fail to deliver their access agreements, they can be refused permission to charge fees of higher than £6,000 a year.

William Richardson, the general secretary of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference, which represents 250 of Britain's independent schools, said reaction would depend on how universities reacted to "tie-breaks" in admissions – where two candidates have exactly the same qualifications.

"We wouldn't expect middle-class girls' applications to be turned down in favour of working-class boys. Each application should be looked at individually."

The latest gender breakdown on applications for university (for 2011) show that girls outnumber boys in medicine and dentistry (10,145 to 7,190), and also in law (19,080 to 13,255). In applying for courses to gain teaching qualifications, they lead by 60,335 to 19,725.

The performance of boys – particularly the white working classes – has worried Ofsted, the education standards watchdog, for more than a decade ever since a report it published bluntly said they concentrated more on fighting and football than on studying.

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