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at Buckingham University, said: "Personal statements are an open door to cheating and should be scrapped. Universities should admit on talent and they need to devise the fairest possible means of spotting talent."

The practice of making lower A-level entry offers to pupils from ethnic minorities and poorer households or postcodes is spreading, although such students at some universities are less likely to complete their courses or achieve a first.

Ucas said about 75% of universities, including the Russell Group – the UK's top 24 institutions – are now using such "contextual information" to admit students, compared with about 40% in 2011.

Bristol and Warwick make lower offers to candidates from areas where pupils do not usually go to university. Typically a standard offer of three A grades to study English is reduced to an A and two Bs.

Private schools are increasingly worried that such practices are keeping some of their better qualified pupils out of the top universities. "I share the concerns of parents who spend a lot of time and effort getting their children ready [for degree level education] when such students feel unfairly rejected," said Williams.

Last year 4,559 suspect personal statements were detected by Ucas. Williams warned that plagiarism or asking others to write them could count as fraud. "The idea that you could begin your university career on the basis that you have cheated is really quite appalling," she said.

According to Ucas some students have clearly had no help. Last year one wrote: "Twice a week I attend marital arts classes." Others said: "I think of myself as a worm hearted individual" and "It was a catch 12 situation."

Additional reporting: Matt Mathers



A starling enjoys a bright spring day in Hailsham, East Sussex, yesterday. Temperatures reached the high teens in the south

Twitter allowed Christchurch trolling

Jon Ungoed-Thomas

The former prime minister of New Zealand was accused by a Twitter troll of staging the Christchurch massacre in which 50 people died – but the social media giant refused to take down the defamatory post.

Helen Clark, who led the country from 1999 to 2008, said it was totally unacceptable that the platform had refused to remove the post when she complained. She is among international figures calling for a crackdown on social media after the Christchurch shootings were live-streamed on Facebook.

She said: "You can't let social media platforms get

away with this and say none of this is our responsibility."

Clark, 69, said Nick Clegg, the former deputy prime minister who is Facebook's head of global policy and communications, had been in touch with her in the days after the killings and was keen to visit New Zealand as a representative of the company.

The massacre at two mosques in Christchurch during Friday prayers on March 15 exposed Facebook's failure to block illegal and violent material, although footage was later removed.

Clark, who has been in London for a conference of the democratic policy forum Club de Madrid, said she had been accused in a tweet early

on Wednesday evening of staging the massacre after she posted comments about female activists on trial in Saudia Arabia.

The tweet from the account @move2zen stated: "Shame on you for staging a shooting and fooling the entire world. May Hell be your final resting place."

Clark immediately complained to Twitter, but the company said there had been no breach of its rules. "This is preposterous. All I can say is that they have no rules because anything goes," she said.

Clark said the international community was "playing catch-up" in efforts to regulate the material on social media platforms. Social

media could be a "powerful force for good" but action was urgently needed to combat illegal and extremist material, she said.

Twitter permanently suspended the account from which the tweet was sent after being contacted by The Sunday Times.

@JonUngoedThomas



Replying to @HelenClarkNZ @womenarebric

Shame on you for staging a shooting and fooling the entire world. May Hell be your final resting place.

5:02 PM - 27 Mar 2019



The tweet aimed at Helen Clark that Twitter said did not breach its rules

over the past six years, according to research published this year.

Several theology departments are closing becoming smaller. The report, from the British Academy, reveals that there were about 6,500 fewer students on theology and religious studies degree courses in 2017-18 than in 2011-12.

Sir Diarmaid MacCulloch, professor of the history of the church at Oxford and presenter of BBC television's A History of Christianity, said the decline was worrying because a deep understanding of religion could help avert sectarian conflicts and attacks, such as those led by Isis.

MacCulloch, who is a fellow of the academy, said "Christianity is being supplemented by the teaching of Islam, Buddhism and other religions – not pushed aside but supplemented."

"The curriculum change away from Christian strengths to Islam and other religions reflects our nation we have a multi-faith country which needs a first-class understanding of its religious profile to make it work properly."

Sir David Cannadine, president of the academy, said he was concerned to fall in the number of students studying theology and religious studies.

"Never has an understanding of our spirituality and the role religion has played in navigating the challenges we face," he said. @siangriffiths6