

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Accountability hearings](#), HC 58

Wednesday 15 June 2022

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Anna Firth; Tom Hunt; Kim Johnson and Angela Richardson.

Questions 1 - 71

Witnesses

I: Michelle Donelan MP, Minister of State for Higher and Further Education, Department for Education and Keith Smith, Director of Post-16 Strategy and Analysis, Skills Group.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Michelle Donelan and Keith Smith.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning. For the benefit of the tape and those watching on parliamentary TV, could you kindly introduce yourselves and your position, please?

Michelle Donelan: Michelle Donelan, Minister of State for Higher and Further Education.

Keith Smith: I am Keith Smith. I am an official in the Department of Education. My job title is director of Post-16 Strategy.

Q2 **Chair:** *The Times* Education Commission Report has been published today and—obviously you do not do schools, but you have a strategic overview of skills—it talks about introducing a baccalauréat to replace A-levels. It has a number of other suggestions, and it says, in essence, that the curriculum does not prepare people well enough for the world of work. Can I just ask what your view is? You may have had a chance to at least look at the news reports about *The Times* Education Commission Report, if not the report itself. What will the Government response to it be?

Michelle Donelan: I must admit, I have not yet read it because it did just come out today, but I will do in due course over the next few days and we will, of course, then respond in full. What we really need to be careful of is that we do not confuse things further. As the Government, what we have been trying to do is simplify the options available so that students, and also employers, know exactly what qualifications mean, the level they are at, and the value they can bring to the workplace. Everything we have been doing in terms of our reforms such as T-levels, apprenticeships and boot camps, has been co-authored with employers so that when somebody leaves that training, they are actually ready to hit the ground running in the workplace. Most of the includes a substantial work placement as well. We know A-levels work. We know they are a tried and tested model that people across the globe look to as the gold standard in terms of academia. We have to be careful we do not try and reinvent the wheel all the time as a Government because that takes your eye off the ball and when you look at what we are delivering as a Department, we are ensuring that no matter which option a young person takes, they can be confident all the options on the table are of high quality.

Q3 **Chair:** Last week—*[Interruption.]* Can we turn off computers and phones? Do you mind leaving the room and turning off your computer and phone? Do not come back in with it on, please. Thank you.

I went to visit King Ethelbert School in Kent last week and they do both the international careers baccalauréat and the international diploma baccalauréat. They have very good results, the school is widely recognised to be a very good one by Ofsted, and their argument is that



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the advantage of the baccalauréat, particularly the careers one, is you are doing a wide mixture of academic, vocational and technical and careers learning. I support T-levels, but you still have a binary system; you either do academic education or you do vocational and technical education, but with baccalauréat, you have a much more skills-based system. You still do exams; no one has an argument about exams, and my colleague Tom Hunt is very supportive of exams, but what I do not understand is why the Government are closed to thinking about this? The Secretary of State says he does not want to hug the world. I understand that because there is a lot to repair because of Covid, but that could also be a metaphor for no radical thinking whatsoever and steady as she goes.

Michelle Donelan: No, I think what it means is we are a Government who are determined to deliver and not just make policies, announce them and do reviews; we are actually making substantial changes. If you look at what we have done with T-levels, it is working, and we are rolling out at scale; that is a monumental change. If you look at what we have done with apprenticeships in terms of really raising the bar, employers actually value them. If you look at what we are doing with boot camps, we are upskilling people in a short space of time so they can go and get that better-paid job. These are reforms that are tangibly changing people's lives. We can all stand there and hypothecate as to how we would want to radically change the system, but we have to focus and make sure we are delivering. In my own area, the lifelong loan entitlement, or LLE, is turning the entire way we do higher education on its head and we will be delivering that within two years in terms of when people will log on and then get their account. That is beyond radical. We will be the first country in the world to do that at scale.

Q4 **Chair:** I should have declared I am a member of *The Times* Education Commission at the start, I forgot to do that. Are you basically closing your mind to the thoughts of *The Times* Education Commission in terms of having a much more skills-based education system for students which blends academic and skills, knowledge and skills, rather than just being heavily focused on knowledge-based learning, which A-levels are?

Michelle Donelan: I think A-levels are right for some individuals in terms of the way they focus on academic courses and subjects, and they then prepare an individual to go and do those subjects further, if they want to, at university. They certainly have a place within our system, as do T-levels, which, we must remember, are very rigorous and of extreme high quality; they are not easy by any standards. The students who will be completing T-levels this year will have done an amazing job to get those qualifications that will then stand them in good stead to go on and get jobs or go to university. I am not saying we are closed to other reforms. There will be further policies coming in future years. Absolutely. What I am saying is we have a radical agenda as it is. What we really need to be doing is ensuring that we are delivering, that people know what is on the table and understand what there is, and that we do not



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over complicate the system. It has been a criticism before that the system can be quite confusing for employers and young people to navigate, and that is what we want to really focus on.

Q5 Chair: Okay, let me move on. Last week, in a speech at Policy Exchange, Katharine Birbalsingh, who is now chair of the Social Mobility Commission, said that society should stop obsessing on the number of disadvantaged pupils getting into Oxbridge and should further celebrate children of parents who are long term unemployed getting a good job. Her speech made the case for a broader view of social mobility. As you are probably aware, the Social Mobility Commission is set to publish a framework later this month which will overhaul the way social mobility is measured. Do you agree with Katharine Birbalsingh's comments, and how does the Department for Education assess social mobility in terms of progression to higher and further education?

Michelle Donelan: I saw some of the reports in relation to her speech, and the coverage was slightly skewed based on what she was actually saying. She was saying there is no one definition of social mobility in terms of outcomes so, if you get into Oxbridge and you are the first in your family to do it, that is an absolutely incredible achievement, and everybody should be reaching for the stars and going after their goals. Equally, if you are the first in your family to go and get an apprenticeship, that is just as good. I think she was trying to say, "Let's not say one form of social mobility is better than another", because actually what it is about is people achieving, progressing in life, succeeding in their own personal goals, and the Government enabling that by opening those doors and creating and facilitating those opportunities.

Q6 Chair: I happen to agree wholeheartedly with what she said, but there is a view that Government policy for some time has been just to drive students to Oxford-type universities—although that may be changing under your tenure—and that is regarded as a measure of success.

Michelle Donelan: There has been an obsession in this country over decades that university is the goal for everybody; that we should be pushing everybody toward university and that will be the answer to everything. The reality, however, is it should be based much more on the individual. The state should not be telling people what is best for their lives, it should be opening the doors and creating those opportunities. That might be progressing to further education, it might be doing an apprenticeship, or it may be going to university, but all of those are high-quality options under this Government, and we want to make sure people have those opportunities, they have the information and there is a transparency available so they can make good choices. Certainly.

Q7 Chair: In February, *The Telegraph* reported that out of 24 Russell Group universities, only Birmingham stated all teaching would be in person from now on and 122 out of 147 UK universities were "Refusing to go back to the way it was." The same article stated, "Universities are not declaring



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their new teaching methods publicly on their websites”, and there is no specific course-by-course information on UCAS.

We know the OfS is currently undertaking research on what the right balance is between online learning and face-to-face learning, but is this really acceptable? I just want to know what you are doing about this because we all have student constituents who are writing to us saying they are not getting proper face-to-face teaching, yet still paying whacking tuition fees of £9,000 plus. What are you actually doing about this?

Michelle Donelan: I have been very clear this is not acceptable. What we as a Government expect and what I as the Minister expect is every university back to pre-pandemic levels of face-to-face teaching. Some already did elements online and a lot of them have learnt so much about technology that they can enhance the offer, so if it is in addition to and supplementing, of course we welcome that. That is in the best interests of the student. If it is detracting from face-to-face or a cost-cutting exercise, that is simply not on. Where we have received letters from students or parents or Members of Parliament, I have been personally calling vice chancellors and asking them what they are doing. Those universities have then either told me that they are changing their policies immediately, or that they have one faculty not operating according to the university’s central policy and they are correcting that. We do now have only a stubborn minority of universities that are refusing to get back to face-to-face.

Q8 **Chair:** Do you recognise the figure I quoted?

Michelle Donelan: No, it is a stubborn minority now and, let me be clear, it is completely illogical. If a student can go out afterwards and go for dinner or go to a party or go to the shops, it makes absolutely no sense that they cannot be in a lecture. There is no risk there.

Q9 **Chair:** Okay, if you do not recognise that, there are still 2,763 complaints in total. This was from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator’s annual report in May.

Michelle Donelan: Yes, I think the majority of that was over the last few years. What I am saying is, in the last few months we have got it down to a stubborn minority. What we are now doing is working with the regulator, the Office for Students, which is launching investigations. In the next few months—obviously universities have now completed their teaching; some will resume in September and some in October—the Office for Students will be actively investigating, with boots on the ground, those universities that are failing to get back to pre-pandemic levels of teaching. That is the first time in this country we have ever had investigations into universities in that sense.

Q10 **Chair:** The figure of 2,763 is the highest number of complaints ever received and 45% of the complaints were related to issues involving teaching supervision and course-related issues. I just want to know what



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exactly happens, in substance, if a student feels they are not getting proper face-to-face learning; what is going to happen? Are they going to be offered a refund? It seems to me there is a very complex bureaucratic procedure they have to wade through in order to get their complaint heard, and I am still not clear what proper compensation that student is getting if they are not getting proper face-to-face teaching. I am not quite clear why some universities can be open for business conferences—which is a huge revenue source for them—and cannot be open for proper face-to-face teaching.

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree on this one and that is why I have been tackling it head on. Often it is just one rogue faculty in that university, but that is one rogue faculty too many because these students are paying £9,250 in tuition fees. It is also a big investment in time, and they deserve better than this. That is why the OfS is launching investigations and it is why I call universities every time I get a complaint. If you have some more, I am happy to follow them up.

Q11 **Chair:** I am just trying to understand what happens to an individual student who is not getting the right face-to-face teaching; what can he do to get his money back?

Michelle Donelan: In that scenario, the individual could make a formal complaint to their university if they were not satisfied, and often that does lead to a resolution. If they are still not satisfied, they could go to the body called the OIA—the Office for the Independent Adjudicator you referenced a moment ago—and that can lead to fee refunds, as we have seen.

Q12 **Chair:** Do we know how many students have gone through that and how many have had refunds? Are you monitoring that?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, we have had over £1million given out to students during the last year.

Q13 **Chair:** Do we know how many students have gone through that system and have been able to get their money back?

Michelle Donelan: We can write to you with the proportion from the OIA there. Obviously, as I said, some of the students have done the complaints scheme within their individual institution first of all and might have resolved the situation. During the pandemic, universities turned everything on online overnight and they managed to continue educating their students. Nobody had to repeat years, unlike in Scotland where they had to repeat an entire year for dentistry because of the pandemic. We managed to avoid that here because of the hard work of our universities and our lecturers. We now have no restrictions, and we should have no restrictions in our universities, and they should be getting back to pre-pandemic levels of teaching. I just want to be careful we do not confuse the two because we are now in a very different scenario, and it is important to distinguish between them.



Q14 Chair: My colleagues are going to ask later about disadvantaged groups, but if I could just ask about that now for a minute. The headline figures are that more disadvantaged students are going to university than before, but underlying that headline figure it does not look so good. We know that pupils eligible for free school meals at age 15 are much less likely to progress into higher education; that is 26.6% compared to 45.7% of non-eligible pupils in 2020. We know that students with SEN support or EHC plans are much less likely to go into HE compared to pupils with no reported special educational needs; 8.4% for children with SEN, 20.8% for children with EHCPs and 47.5% for children with no additional needs. For 19 to 21-year-olds looked after by local authorities—we are doing an inquiry into education and employment outcomes for children in care at the moment—just 6% of those children are in higher education, 22% are in education other than higher education and 41% are not in education, employment or training. They are pretty grim statistics. What are you doing about this?

Just on the looked-after children, the Department's own statistics last year found the progression rate to higher-tariff universities for those children has remained at 1% since 2009. Those are children looked after continuously for at least 12 months. Just 1% are going to the higher-tariff universities. Some grim figures underlying the headline figure. We also know there has been a shocking decline in part-time students going to university. As the Minister responsible for this, what is your drive to reverse it?

Michelle Donelan: My key goal is on outcomes, in terms of where that leads. If we compare from 2010, disadvantaged students are now 82% more likely to go to university than they were so we have come a long way.

Chair: They are not going to the higher-tariff ones, and they are more likely to drop out.

Michelle Donelan: That is the point I was going on to. We have been very focused on getting in as opposed to getting on, and that is why I asked for the access and participation plans to basically be ripped up and rewritten. Universities have to do these in order to be eligible for student finance and the focus was heavily skewed on getting in: bums on seats. That does not help anyone, but instead encourages students to enter courses they might not complete, that might not lead to graduate jobs, and then do not actually achieve real social mobility. As I said, one thing we are working on is the access and participation plans. They have been ripped up and we have a new access and participation director.

The other thing I have done is last week announce a student support champion, Edward Peck. This is the first time that role has ever been created, and he is responsible for really disseminating best practice and getting universities to really focus on the engagement students have in their university and using different types of initiatives to support that. That also highlights trigger warnings for things like mental health and



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helps them to really provide wraparound support to enable a student to continue with their studies and then go on to graduate and get a good job.

The other thing is that disadvantaged students are more likely to enter courses with poor outcomes, so we are really cracking down on those courses. As I said before, the first time ever we are having investigations by the regulator, Office for Students. They have just launched an investigation into eight universities on business and management courses which are letting students down at the moment.

Q15 Chair: What are you doing about these cohorts I mentioned that are not even getting into university at all and, by the way, are not even going on to do apprenticeships either? The figures I quoted are quite grim. A tiny percentage of children in care, despite the bursaries and so on, do apprenticeships. We know that very few disabled students do apprenticeships as well, so it is not just university. What I am trying to understand is, what is the significant part?

It is wonderful, Edward Peck is a great man. Again, I must declare being an honorary professor of that university. It is a great university. But what I want to understand is, are you thinking every day, "Right, I want to get these most disadvantaged students either into university or to be doing apprenticeships?" I have quoted you the figures. The current system is not benefiting those students. They are losing out. It has gone up from 39% and now 41% of children in care are not in education, employment or training. There is one statistic after another. You have overall strategic overview of this; what is the Government policy to sort it out? White working-class boys and girls on free school meals, again, are the lowest ethnic group except for Gypsy and Roma children in terms of going to university.

Michelle Donelan: Let us take care leavers first of all. The figures are not good enough. It is as simple as that. I used to be the Minister for Children and Families, and the first thing I did in this role was set up a group with university representatives to talk about care leavers and what they were going to do in order to rectify those figures. We had spin-off meetings from that, and that is the very first thing I commissioned as the Minister, because I care deeply about that subject. You are right. It is not just about getting into university, it is about getting onto courses that deliver and give them good outcomes, or about getting onto apprenticeships.

We also have a new quality mark which has been developed that four universities are trialling, which really badges that they are doing a good job on this. I have met several universities that are doing a good job and I have met others that have not prioritised this group and this cohort. That is why, again, I go back to the fact that we are ripping up access and participation plans and we are also asking every university to work with schools to help lift standards. It is too late to do some of this stuff when a student applies; it is about working to support schools and the



children in those schools to lift their aspirations and their attainment earlier to be able to achieve the results you and I want to achieve. There is no one magic silver bullet to this. There is no one answer where I could say, "We will do this and this will be the panacea". It is about lots and lots of different interventions and initiatives to support this cohort of individuals who have had one of the hardest starts to life.

- Q16 **Chair:** Do you have an objective or target of how you would like to see the improvement in terms of these most disadvantaged cohorts I have cited, whether it is white working-class boys and girls on free school meals, whether it is special needs pupils, children in care or disadvantaged students in terms of their income? Do you have an objective or target or a number for how much you would like to see improved? Everything you have said sounds fine, but there does not seem to be anything substantive like a major programme primarily focused on these groups, these most disadvantaged cohorts, to make sure they can climb that education and skills ladder of opportunity.

Michelle Donelan: I would refute that because I think what we are doing has been quite radical in terms of the new appointment we have made, the ripping up of the access and participation plans, the real focus on outcomes, the focus on opportunities in all areas, the lifting the bar so that if a young person from one of those backgrounds picks a course, no matter what that course is—an A-level, T-level, going off to university later on—they can be confident it is of high quality.

In terms of targets, we are working with the OfS, which is consulting on thresholds so every university course will have to have a completion rate of at least 75%, every university course will have to lead to graduate jobs of at least 60% and that will help all of those individuals.

Chair: I agree with all that.

Michelle Donelan: You will have seen the MacAlister review as well, which set a target of doubling the number of care leavers going to university by 2026, and we are working on our Government response to that as to how we would make that achievable.

- Q17 **Chair:** Do you accept that recommendation?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, we do accept that recommendation, but I think it is broader than that, is it not? It is not just about university; it is about making sure care leavers go into good opportunities. It might be apprenticeships; it might be universities.

Chair: You have 40% not even getting any kind of education at all; 41% leaving care, not getting any type of education.

Michelle Donelan: That is why we commissioned that review. It was a manifesto commitment; we know there is a problem, and we must do better. I work very closely with the Minister for Children and Families who is very dedicated to this agenda. I absolutely agree with you: this cohort



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of individuals do deserve those opportunities. We have some fantastic initiatives, like universities mentoring these individuals. The other thing I am doing in the next few weeks is a letter to all care leavers outlining all the amazing opportunities there are and really trying to lift aspirations and encourage them. We know that works because we piloted a letter of that nature and looked at the results and the results are astonishing. This is something I am on. Absolutely. There is more work to be done.

Q18 Chair: It would be good to have a plan, even if you write to us afterwards, to see how you are binding some of the things you have said, how you are going to address the fact that these most disadvantaged cohorts are not benefiting from skills education or higher education, and also just what the turnover plan is to improve this because it is getting worse. It is not getting better. I just find it very depressing. A year ago care leavers was 39% and it is now 41%. The children with special educational needs, for example, what are we doing for them to make sure they get into university or do apprenticeships?

Michelle Donelan: I do not think the problem is necessarily getting worse. If you look at care leavers, the proportion going to high-tariff universities has gone up by 25%. It is not enough. It is not. I am not sitting here saying that this is good enough.

Chair: It is getting worse because a year ago it was 39% of care leavers, and it is now 41% not in education, employment or training.

Michelle Donelan: Yes, I was talking specifically about higher education.

Chair: We are talking about both because you have a strategic overview of it. I am going to talk about antisemitism in a minute, but I think, Tom, you have a question.

Q19 Tom Hunt: I have a question. It is a bit random, but I visited Morocco recently as part of a delegation and I went to the King Mohammed VI University, which is a polytechnic university—I guess it is a bit like MIT or an institution like that—so the Government and businesses are fundamental in shaping the courses and curriculum offered at that university. It seems to work very well in terms of linking up young people there with opportunities that actually exist: the high-paid jobs in the economy. I welcome what we are doing in terms of the business improvement, the LSIPs for further education. I know many universities are very defensive to some extent, understandably, about their autonomy and their independence, but I was just thinking: are the Government giving any serious consideration to perhaps looking to have more of a role and getting involved with the types of courses our universities deliver to ensure skills are provided?

Michelle Donelan: I would argue with dictating the curriculum; the key thing is not the Government having the role, it is about universities working hand in hand with businesses because they are the ones who are going to need the skills and we need to ensure these graduates are work-



ready to fill the skills gaps we have. Universities will have a role in these local skills improvement plans you reference; it is really important they have a seat at the table there.

The other thing we are doing is launching LLE; the only way that will be successful is if universities are working with employers so when they offer a module, it really will lead to somebody getting a promotion or a better-paid job or reskilling and upskilling into a different sector. I am currently working on a conference to showcase some of the opportunities available if modular education can really take off and having business leaders taking part in that conversation. Some universities are excellent at working hand in hand with business, some of them have a journey to go on, and we are working with them to make sure they are really plugged into their regional economies and, of course, nationally as well; a number of them will service more of the national economy.

Q20 Tom Hunt: Thank you very much, Minister. It does seem there are many good examples, but, sadly, I do think there are still too many examples of universities that, to use the phrase that came up earlier, take the bums-on-seats approach, and it just seems to be about them making money and acting as a business and not always thinking about what is in the interests of the local economy and servicing the local economy.

Michelle Donelan: Yes, so having the thresholds in place will dramatically change that, because that will mean students do have to go on and get a graduate job. They cannot do a degree that does not lead them anywhere. Having the investigations into courses that are not leading individuals anywhere will also help. On 25 courses in this country over 50% of individuals on them either do not finish the course or do not go on to get a graduate job. That is simply not acceptable and that is why we are acting to make sure students are not being hoodwinked onto courses that do not deliver.

Q21 Chair: I want to move to antisemitism before I pass to my colleagues. I just want to start off by saying personally, I speak for myself here, I strongly support and thank you and the Secretary of State for all the work you have done on this, and I think it is appreciated by the Jewish community.

King's College London published the latest Antisemitism Barometer study—that is a survey of the British public's views towards Jews and a poll of the Jewish community—and almost all British Jews, so that is 92%, believe antisemitism in universities is a problem, and only 2% believe it is not a problem. The Community Security Trust published an annual report on anti-Semitic incidents, saying there were 44 related incidents in 2020 and 128 in 2021. The CST's director of policy said the number of incidents reported hit record levels in 2021 and is continuing to rise this year. Are Jewish students, and the Jewish public in general, wrong about the threat of antisemitism at our universities and if not, what more can be done to build on the work you have been doing to address this problem?



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Michelle Donelan: I certainly do not think they are wrong. The stories I have heard are from students first hand who have experienced these horrendous incidents and also the plethora of groups that represent them and work with them. I think it is absolutely atrocious that in today's age students even have to be concerned about antisemitism when they should have the freedom to enjoy their university experience and also to focus on their academic studies. That is why we took such radical action in terms of the NUS, to really crack down on that where we had seen a sustained pattern of behaviour over years and that simply could not be allowed to continue. If we look at those universities that have signed up to the IHRA definition, when I began as Minister, I think it was in the 20s; it is now over 100 who have signed up to that. Now that is not necessarily the cure-all, because we know universities can sign up to that, and unless they embed it within everything they do within their university, then they could still end up with instances. This is something we are working on with the National Union of Students and CST organisations. We also held a summit this year chaired by myself and the Secretary of State.

Q22 **Chair:** I genuinely, as I said, really appreciate the quick response as well from both you and the Secretary of State on these issues. The previous Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, said he had asked officials, and I quote, "To consider options, including the director of the Office for Students, to impose new regulatory conditions of registration and suspending funding streams for universities at which antisemitic incidents occur and which have not signed up to the IHRA definition". He also said, "Where antisemitic incidents take place at a university and the institution fails to respond properly, it may be appropriate to consider applying sanctions, including monetary penalties". Will the Government impose financial sanctions or other sanctions on those universities who have so far failed to adopt the IHRA definition?

Michelle Donelan: Two things there. We are nearly at all universities signed up. The second thing is I have asked the Office for Students to introduce a new registration condition that will cover issues like sexual abuse, sexual assault, harassment and bullying, and it would also cover antisemitism, so the repercussions of that could mean fines of up to £500,000. That could ultimately mean losing degree-awarding powers, and they are working on the scope and what exactly that will look like as we speak.

Q23 **Chair:** Are you saying there will be financial sanctions or not?

Michelle Donelan: There will be a new registration condition that will cover all issues including sexual assault, sexual abuse, harassment, bullying—

Chair: And the IHRA, the document—

Michelle Donelan: Not in terms of IHRA adoption, but about the actual problem at root cause in terms of bullying, harassment—all of those



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things will be in this registration condition. As soon as that is fleshed out, I can, of course, share that with the House and the Committee. As I said, we have made substantial progress in terms of those signing up to the IHRA definition. I believe what the former Secretary of State was saying is if universities did not sign up, we would look at forcing it to happen.

Chair: Is that still the thought?

Michelle Donelan: It is on the cards, but I believe we are going to do it without having to do that.

- Q24 **Chair:** I welcome your decision to sever relations with the NUS following the troubling allegations of antisemitism within that organisation. As you will know, a representative from the NUS did not attend our Committee in March, and since then, the Charity Commission has opened an investigation into NUS's charitable arm following a letter to the regulator from myself and the Campaign Against Antisemitism. You said enough is enough and the NUS will not have a seat at the table until you see real change. What is the real change you expect before you recommence engagement with the NUS? The NUS has launched an independent investigation alongside the Union of Jewish Students. How, if at all, will the outcomes of that investigation influence the Department's review into re-engagement with the NUS?

Michelle Donelan: A few things on this. Some people said to me, "Well, why have you done this when they have launched that investigation?" My response is they have done reviews before. Anybody can launch a review, can they not? What we are after here is tangible action that means Jewish students can go to university without worrying about antisemitism or the behaviour of the NUS, which then filters into their campuses. We are not outlining exactly what that will look like. What we are saying, actually, is that the Jewish community and the leading Jewish stakeholders in this, like the Union of Jewish Students and others, need to be content when the outcomes of the review are published and that they have also been implemented. That is what I will be doing; working with them to make sure that the proposals of the review are enough and that they are also being implemented, which is the key thing.

- Q25 **Chair:** You have called for Civica, which oversaw the NUS presidential election, to investigate whether the newly elected NUS president was eligible to stand. Are you able to update us on this?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, we received a letter back from them and, disappointingly, they stand by their position that she was eligible and there is nothing further they can do on this. But that is just one of the things we have done.

- Q26 **Anna Firth:** Thank you, Minister, it is a pleasure to see you here this morning. I would like to ask questions, please, predominantly around student finance and value for money and also the alternative student finance scheme. But if I can start off, please, by saying how much I



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welcome your announcement to cap the interest rate on student loans at 7.3% to avoid it going to 12% which would be a terrible burden on students. However, you will be aware that parents and savvy students will know that is twice as high as many mortgage deals and that base rate is currently around 1%. Can you assure us this morning that that is the very lowest your Treasury colleagues can propose, and why is it so much higher than a mortgage rate, please?

Michelle Donelan: You cannot really compare it to a mortgage because they are very different. A mortgage requires you to have some equity at the beginning. It also requires you to keep up with those payments no matter what, and it requires you to pay it off in full eventually, whereas with a student loan, if your income drops below the threshold, your payments stop. It is linked in terms of how much you actually earn. If at the end of the term length you have not finished paying it off, it is completely written off, so it is a very different product in that sense. I do want to be clear about this, when we talk about this interest rate. There was some confusion among young people, who thought their monthly repayments were going to go up by that amount. I think it is really important to spell out that it will not affect monthly payments at all; it will just affect the total amount that is owed. We know 75% of those at the moment are actually going to pay back that amount, so I just want to clear that up because people can get very worried about that. But this is the average in terms of what inflation is set to be.

Anna Firth: Thanks.

Michelle Donelan: Sorry, I will be snappier.

Anne Firth: Thank you very much for that. I get the point about no collateral, but students will still consider that actually they are on the hook for 40 years.

Michelle Donelan: Well, 30 at the moment, but changing to 40.

Q27 **Anna Firth:** That is longer than most mortgages. You have told us, of course, that the idea of this is that universities will be steering these students into graduate jobs. In other words, the whole thing is predicated on the basis that they will be in jobs where they will be paying it off. What I want to just be clear about is that the current failings of the student loan system are not being visited on the students of the future with this very high student interest rate.

Michelle Donelan: We are talking about the ones who have already graduated. We know that 75% of those are not going to pay back their student loan. In terms of all the reforms we are doing, they are, if you like, the graduates of tomorrow because we are trying to tackle head on the fact the taxpayer funds 44p in every pound and these courses are not delivering people into graduate jobs and achieving real social mobility. That is why we did a very radical response a few months ago in response to Augar.



Q28 **Anna Firth:** Do you see my point that if the system is not working and students are not going into graduate jobs and paying it back, the interest rate on those student loans will therefore be higher? It is very important the taxpayer does not end up bearing the burden of the system not working.

Michelle Donelan: Well, yes, but that is pegged to inflation, which is a global problem and is not of the making of this Government, and that is the heart of why this is going up. But what we wanted to do was cap it so it had the least impact possible on our graduates, and it was an unprecedented move. We have never capped it by that amount before, so that is certainly something we took the action on, and we delivered.

Q29 **Anna Firth:** I have students in my patch and obviously it is a manifesto commitment to look at this. I just want to be very confident the Treasury have looked at this and this is the very best they can do.

Michelle Donelan: I think you might be confusing a few things here. The thing we have done, and which was a manifesto commitment, was about reducing interest rates. In our response to Augar we said from next year, students from 2023 will pay RPI only. That means any graduate in the future will only pay back in real terms what they borrowed and not a penny more. That, I believe, is really right and it shows we are delivering on our manifesto.

Q30 **Anna Firth:** I want to move on then to value for money for students because we have heard a lot of evidence before the Committee, some of which has already been put to you by the Chair, from both students and universities about the lack of face-to-face tuition. I have heard you say today it is now only a stubborn minority of universities, but when we were taking evidence, the figure quoted by *The Daily Telegraph* was 122 out of 147. If it is only a stubborn minority of universities now, do you agree with me that it would be very helpful for students for it to be a requirement that universities publish, alongside the cost of the course, how many face-to-face hours the student will get and also how much an Open University course would cost by comparison and how many face-to-face hours they would get at the Open University, which also does offer some face-to-face tuition? That way, students could make a proper informed choice and, of course, they would have the evidence on which to make a very valid complaint if it was falling beneath that.

Michelle Donelan: We have to remember that universities do have responsibilities under consumer legislation to their students to be upfront and transparent about what they are going to receive when they make this substantial investment. I wrote to universities making that point clear and, to me, that means they are very clear about how that course is going to be taught, and the proportion of face-to-face versus online. The Secretary of State has been equally quite vocal on this, and I have launched a transparency drive in our universities because I want to do much more than what you just said. I also want them to be putting on the face of every page of the prospectus where they list a course, or



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every tube advert where you see all these claims of amazing things if you go to that university, what their completion rates and their graduate outcomes are.

Of course, I do want to enforce this face-to-face element as well so what we are doing is starting with a voluntary ask for them to be transparent, focusing on the completion in the graduate outcomes, then, if that does not work, we will move to seeing if we have to enforce that and looking at this issue around the way courses are taught if this stubborn minority does not disappear. I do think the investigations we are going to see in the autumn will make a big difference as well; making sure universities are held to account if they are treating students and putting them on a separate track to the rest of society.

Q31 Anna Firth: I am very, very pleased to hear the efforts you want to make to ensure universities are incentivised to offer courses that are going to lead to graduate jobs because that seems to be the link that is currently missing. At the moment, as soon as a student gets their university place and their student loan, the fee is paid by the Government to the university and then there is no obligation on the university to actually ensure that student has the best opportunity to get into a proper student job that will actually pay the money back for the taxpayer.

Michelle Donelan: It is not good enough that the taxpayer is paying 44p in the pound. It is not good enough that 75% will not be paying it back. That is why we were so forthright in our policy on Augar, it is why we are constantly focusing on outcomes. Getting in is not the objective here, it is getting on. It is about real social mobility, not, as I call it, lazy social mobility. At the same time, let us not talk down our universities. We have four of the world's best universities. For the last 20 years, our universities have produced a Nobel Prize winner every year, so we have some amazing world-leading universities, hence why we beat our target to attract international students 10 years early. Do we have pockets of problems? Absolutely. And that is what this Government are really driving on, because I want to ensure every student, no matter which university they go to or which vocational course they do, can be confident it is high quality and is going to get them where they want to go.

Anna Firth: Absolutely. And, with respect, I do not think it is at all about talking down our universities, it is about ensuring they are providing value for money.

Michelle Donelan: Absolutely.

Anna Firth: It is actually quite shocking that the average UK university student ends up with over £50,000 of debt, compared to an average of \$28,000 in the United States.

Michelle Donelan: What I would say is, somebody has to pay. There is no such thing as state money, it is taxpayers' money. If the student is not paying then the taxpayer is paying, the vast majority of whom did



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not go to university, so I do not think that is fair. What we want is if you are paying for that, then actually it is delivered for you and it was an investment in your own education and your own future that pays off. If you are paying into it, it pays off.

Q32 Anna Firth: I think we are in furious agreement on this, and I completely agree with the aspiration of a target of 60% of university students getting into graduate jobs. Over what sort of timeline would you expect that target to be achieved, bearing in mind 60% is still quite low?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, so I would envisage that is the starting target and we continue to lift it up. We are working with the regulator, and they have launched a consultation on this that will be concluding and then they will be reporting back. This is change that is happening imminently.

Q33 Anna Firth: Two more quick questions, if I may, before I hand over to my colleagues. Concerns have been raised around the impact that minimum eligibility requirements for student finance may have upon disadvantaged students and, of course, we are talking about the possible requirement that you have certain maths and English levels in order to obtain your student finance. That is the first question; I would like your view on that. The second question is around alternative student finance; consultations began for this to be brought in in 2014, so the question is, when is this going to be brought in? This is something we raised with the Secretary of State when he came before us previously.

Michelle Donelan: Okay, so if we start with the latter first. We are committed to delivering alternative student finance. It is a massive change. It would cost at least £10 million to do, and that is not the running costs of running two systems, that is the set-up costs, and it is a big change. We gave ourselves the powers to do this in the Higher Education and Research Act, which I believe was 2017. We also consulted in work with groups on how you do it, but, as I said before, we are turning the entire higher education sector on its head by delivering LLE, the lifelong loan entitlement, and that has massive ramifications in terms of student finance and maintenance and all of these products, which would then mean we do have to really deliver alternative student finance in tandem with that because these are two big changes. When we launched our consultation on LLE a few months ago, we asked a question in regard to alternative student finance. We have been going through those consultation responses. It closed just over a month ago. We will be coming back with our formal response in the next few months, but I do think it is right we deliver the two radical changes together to make sure it is deliverable.

On minimum eligibility requirements, this was misreported slightly in the media because what we have said is there are a number of different ways you can do this. We used to have minimum eligibility requirements in this country until 1980; you used to have to get, I believe, three Es. One of the things we have consulted on is individuals getting two Es at A-level because I think this is the right thing to do because what we are doing in



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this country is we are pushing young people on to university courses before they are actually ready and all that does is set them up to fail. That does not help them. It does not help anybody. What we should be doing is really promoting the options to get them ready; things like foundation years. That is why we are also looking within that package to cap the cost to really grow them as an option.

We can also promote them into access to university courses or resitting their qualifications and make sure they are in the best position to then succeed. We have also said if we introduce these, we will very clearly have—which is obviously subject to the consultation so I do not want to pre-empt that—exemptions: things like mature students. We also asked what other exemptions would you have? Part-time students. If you take those exemptions into account, it would have been less than 1% of students who went to university this year would have fallen into scope of this minimum eligibility requirement. When we look at completion rates and we look at the students who drop out, we really have to question whether those students were ready to go to university. Are we, as a society, doing them a disservice?

Q34 Anna Firth: I agree with you there, but the question surely must be, why is the university offering them places in the first place if they do not have the qualifications to really be able to take advantage of them? The first thing you were answering about the alternative student finance scheme, it is great to hear there is a consultation, but here we are now, eight years after this was promised. Surely now we can have some sort of time frame by when this will be in place.

Michelle Donelan: Well, in essence, we do because with LLE, individuals will be able to log on to their online account akin to a bank account, see what they are eligible for, which will be £37,000 that they can draw down to achieve modules and then be able to spend that from 2025. What I am saying is we are linking the two together because this is a massive change in terms of LLE, but it is also a massive change with alternative student finance because every touch point has to be Sharia law compliant.

Q35 Anna Firth: The date is 2025?

Michelle Donelan: Well, that is when LLE launches, and we have said the two need to be in sync.

Anna Firth: That is 11 years after it was promised, but if that is the date, at least it is good to know a date.

Chair: Kim, you have a question.

Q36 Kim Johnson: Good morning, Minister. Just picking up on the point about student finance. We know the repayment threshold has been lowered and the repayment period has been extended, but those middle earning graduates are likely to pay more because of that. Do you see that as an unfortunate consequence of changing the system?



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Michelle Donelan: No, I think it is a fairer system. It is a fairer system for the graduates and a fairer system for the taxpayer. As we have spoken about at length today, the taxpayer is subsidising 44p in every pound. This will lead to them only subsidising 20p in every pound. It will mean every graduate does not pay back more in real terms than they actually borrowed. Surely that is fairness.

Chair: Tom, you have some questions on freedom of speech.

Q37 **Tom Hunt:** Thank you, Chair. Concerns have been raised about how universities balance competing rights when the Bill is enacted—for example, defending freedom of speech while also complying with equality law. I just want to know what steps the Department is taking to address this issue.

Michelle Donelan: Yes, universities at the moment have to balance competing duties, including equality law, and they will still have to do that in the future but the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill provides for a director who will produce comprehensive guidance, so they will have more support in knowing where that line is, so it will actually help them to make that decision. What they cannot do is overinterpret the Equality Act and hide behind that to stifle free speech.

Q38 **Tom Hunt:** Thanks very much, Minister. I think the amendments were made quite late in the day with regard to foreign influence. In particular, we had some concerns with China, and I think there is a £75,000 threshold that has to be declared if they receive investment. Some of our allies seem to be exempt from this. I just wanted to know, to what extent is this something you are concerned about? Is it something which is just an insurance, or is it something you are actually pretty concerned about? Do you think there has been a deliberate strategy by China to try and limit free speech at our universities and potentially promote their own agenda?

Michelle Donelan: I think this is about transparency. Transparency should be at the heart of all we do in terms of our work as a Government with the general public, but also so students and staff and everybody can see where the money that is going into our universities is coming from. It certainly prevents potential problems, so it is, in essence, a preventative mechanism and ensuring we have that transparency will assist everyone.

Tom Hunt: I guess that is quite reassuring. Thank you, Minister.

Chair: Anna, you wanted to come in on degree apprenticeships.

Q39 **Anna Firth:** Thank you very much. I would like to ask you one question on T-levels and one on degree apprenticeships. In Southend West we have the South Essex College, which I have been to see, which is an excellent institution. One of the challenges regarding T-levels they have talked to me about is the 45-day placement with employers, which is very, very difficult, particularly for small employers, to cope with. If there was more flexibility around the way employers can be linked into the T-



level programme, that would be a big help in terms of expanding T-levels. The principal of the college explained that, for example, college-based assessments could be done and the student could do their work at college but then the employers could be brought in at the evaluation stage. That would avoid the necessity for students to spend every single one of those 45 days actually off the college site and on the employment site, and would be hugely helpful in terms of rolling T-levels out.

Michelle Donelan: I think that would be quite damaging for T-levels because one of the key USPs of T-levels is that 45-day placement which gives them tangible experience in the workplace to apply the skills and the knowledge they are acquiring in the T-level and then sets them up afterwards to either go on an apprenticeship or straight into a job or to university. I think it is really important we protect the 45 days. You are quite right in terms of flexibility. That is why we have introduced some flexibility, especially needed in the pandemic, including some of it being able to be blended, and individuals doing placements with multiple employers so they do not have to spend the whole 45 days with one employer. Don't forget, it does not have to be 45 days in one chunk, it can be done in separate chunks, but I think it is really important they get that hands-on experience. We have been working with businesses to promote T-levels and promote the value to their business of taking those individuals on for 45 days and what it can lead to for them.

Q40 **Anna Firth:** In that case, are the Government taking into account some of the unforeseen, perhaps, financial burdens that occur? For example, where a student is on a construction site, they will have to pass certain exams, small tests, in order to show they have the safety awareness to be on that site, a bit like a registered reps exam in the City, and that is a cost of around £450 for that business. If they do want students to have that full 45-day experience, are the Government prepared to put the money that removes the barriers for small businesses?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, we have had a financial award of £1,000 per employer that takes a T-level student, and we will be announcing the future of that shortly. Some of those certificates and the different things they have to have to be able to do these placements are hoovered up already in the T-level. Certainly.

Q41 **Anna Firth:** Would you undertake to keep that £1,000 after the—?

Michelle Donelan: We will be reporting back on that shortly so I cannot really say any more at this stage, but it is important we do not price employers out of having T-level students, and that we do not set up any barriers for employers in terms of taking T-level students but of course, there is a huge benefit for employers as well. We know we have massive skills gaps in this country and by engaging with our business community to help us fill those skills gaps, they are ultimately the ones who benefit.

Anna Firth: It is a brilliant scheme, but let us not make perfection the enemy of the good. For small businesses, the 45 days is a large amount



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of time. But I hear what you say.

Michelle Donelan: You can split it between different employers.

Q42 **Anna Firth:** I get that, but that has other challenges associated with it. I want to move on now to degree apprenticeships.

Degree apprenticeships, again, are a brilliant concept which we want to see succeed but they are not currently being sold sufficiently well by schools or by universities. If you go on to any website for a sixth form college or a school, they will all have sixth form evenings when they invite students and parents into the school. Those evenings still predominantly focus on A-levels and the route to university and UCAS in particular; there is a lot of education and help for parents to understand how to go through the UCAS system. Do we need to have the equivalent of a UCAS system for degree apprenticeships?

Michelle Donelan: You can apply for degree apprenticeships via UCAS, but on non-degree apprenticeships like level 3 you cannot. You certainly can for degree apprenticeships because they are run with universities. In the time I have been Minister, we have doubled the number of degree apprenticeships on offer. I want to double them again within the next two years. Last week I announced £8 million to help universities with the start-up costs and also incentivise them to do more degree apprenticeships because what we really need is that choice there for students. Yes, we have more universities doing them, but we need choice in different areas with different businesses across the country.

Anna Firth: But the point here is that UCAS is so well known and so well associated—

Michelle Donelan: You can use UCAS to get a degree apprenticeship.

Anna Firth: That must be publicised more.

Michelle Donelan: If you wanted to go and do a degree apprenticeship, you would go via UCAS because it is via the university, so I think that bit is known. Your point around accessing colleges and getting the message out in our schools, that is something we have been working very hard on. We beefed up the Baker clause in the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. We also have a careers review led by Sir John Holman, and that is looking at how we can really support individuals into careers and start younger; start at primary schools as well.

Q43 **Anna Firth:** I agree, Minister, but I am touring schools in my constituency of Southend West at the moment and they are excellent schools, but there is still a massive accent on telling me how many children from the secondary school have gone to university. As yet, no one school has told me about their degree apprenticeships. It is something I have to probe.



Michelle Donelan: So that is twofold, is it not? One, it is creating more volume of degree apprenticeships so when you go to a school, more of those students have those opportunities to get a degree apprenticeship so they flag it up more. Secondly, it is about really reinforcing this message that university is not just about academic study; it can be about degree apprenticeships. We are also going to make it much more flexible with LLE, or it may be about not going to university at all, and that is certainly the key message coming out of our Government. That is why, in the skills Bill, we worked with Lord Baker and we beefed that up, but we are very live to this issue. I think the message is hitting home. It does in my own constituency; parents would bite your hand off at the opportunity for their child to do a degree apprenticeship to learn, earn, and be debt free. They are an amazing opportunity.

Anna Firth: I do not think parents or secondary age children know enough yet about degree apprenticeships and nor do I think there are enough degree apprenticeships available. But I am very pleased to hear the direction of travel.

Q44 Chair: Can I just ask a question on the degree apprenticeships? First of all, I welcome that £8 million announced in the last couple of days, if I am not mistaken, to boost them. I know you personally support that. Going back to my question on disadvantaged students benefiting from these things; if you look at the overall figures first of all, the number of degree apprenticeships, as I understand, have gone from just over 15,000 to 19,500 in the last couple of years, which I think is a really great increase.

There is evidence to suggest that disadvantaged pupils are not fully accessing these degree apprenticeships. I am very happy non-disadvantaged students are doing them because I have always wanted apprenticeships to be for everybody, but nevertheless, I want disadvantaged pupils to benefit. The Sutton Trust suggests the proportion of degree apprenticeships who are older and more affluent has doubled. What is the Government doing to ensure pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are encouraged to do degree apprenticeships? What specific measures do you have in place to really give them this incredible opportunity that you and Anna have highlighted?

Michelle Donelan: Just on your stats, it is over 39,000 now in terms of degree apprenticeships so we are making good progress on that. Of course, we want the opportunities to increase hence why we have done that incentivisation fund, and also why I am working to reduce the regulation that can be a barrier to universities putting them on. With more opportunities they will be available to more, but we do not want the most switched on in society to be the only ones who benefit from these. Of course not. We are currently producing a pack for teachers so they can understand and really know the pathways for the technical options for pupils and can sell degree apprenticeships as a gold standard opportunity for all.



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Q45 **Chair:** That is great. I am sorry, I had 2020/2021 stats, so it has dramatically improved, that is really good. Did you say 39,000? Of those 39,000 degree apprentices, how many are from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Michelle Donelan: I can write to you with that figure. It is not good enough.

Q46 **Chair:** Do you know, very roughly, what percentage that would be? Keith, do you know?

Keith Smith: No. We do track disadvantaged students. We have had targets on that in the past. In answer to the question you put to the Minister previously, is it something we are tracking? Yes, it is. We have not set a specific target for that, but it is something we track and we report on for the reasons you have highlighted

Chair: Would you have a very rough idea? Is it 5%?

Michelle Donelan: We can write to you with the figure. You are hitting the nail on the head in the sense that the figures are not good enough, and that is in part to Anna's point about making sure teachers are fully versed on what these opportunities are and that they are available for everybody. It is about making young people aware about them. It is about raising the promotion with parents. But to do all of that, we do need those options to really be vast and across the board, and that is what we are doing.

Q47 **Chair:** As I say, I am very happy that all students are doing degree apprenticeships because it increases the prestige of apprenticeship skills and you create a domino, or cascade, or virtuous circle, but one of my key arguments for degree apprenticeships was that they give opportunities to disadvantaged students who do not want to take out a loan. We highlighted figures before of disadvantaged students who are not benefiting from higher educational skills, and I think degree apprenticeships offer that answer, so, given that there is low take-up of disadvantaged students at the current time, as I understand it, if the Sutton Trust figures are correct, why not have a specific programme directed at disadvantaged students to make sure they are offered those and understand those opportunities are available to them?

Michelle Donelan: Every university has to do an access and participation plan, which we talked about before, and I have asked for them to be ripped up and rewritten. One of the key requirements that will have to be in those is their plan on degree apprenticeships; for their support for disadvantaged students and working with local schools, and not just about getting them in, but then their support to get them on. Every university will have a plan that will encompass some of that.

Q48 **Chair:** What about at school? They are going to apply at school or at FE college.



Michelle Donelan: That is why we are producing the pack so that teachers have all the information at their fingertips, and they properly understand. If you think about it, a lot of teachers went through the very conventional routes, so they do not necessarily have that first-hand experience of some of these other routes that are now available. We need to empower and inform teachers so they can then empower and inform their own students. That is certainly something that we are doing.

Q49 **Chair:** Whenever I speak to companies, they still talk about the bureaucracy involved in degree apprenticeships. In our current inquiry into post-16 qualifications, we heard in Norway intermediaries support smaller businesses to share apprentices. Indeed, whenever I talk to employers about this, they say the unnecessary bureaucracy and barriers to entry for smaller firms are the big disincentive for them offering and supporting degree apprenticeships. How would you respond to that?

Michelle Donelan: A lot of the colleges and universities will take charge of that bureaucracy, if you like, so that it is not on the employer. That is certainly the model used by some of our excellent providers, including Exeter College, where I was just a few weeks ago. We want to reduce the bureaucracy across the board. If you look specifically at degree apprenticeships, I am calling a meeting between the three regulators in this market. If you are doing a degree apprenticeship, obviously you are accountable to OfS, and have to work with IfATE and also Ofsted, so that is three bodies; that can put off a university. What we are trying to do is streamline the process and make it as easy as possible. Not only are we giving the financial incentive but we are trying to remove some of those barriers because, like you, Chair, I passionately believe in the power of degree apprenticeships, especially in terms of the opportunities they offer for social mobility for some of our most disadvantaged, to catapult them into their potential career.

Q50 **Chair:** Why not have an objective that universities will be offering 50% of students going to university over the next 10 years doing degree apprenticeships?

Michelle Donelan: As a society, we are very focused on targets when it comes to universities and that sometimes can be to the detriment of actual outcomes. I think the state needs to stop telling people what is in their best interests, allow individuals to have the options on the table and make sure that all options are of high quality. I want universities to be offering more degree apprenticeships. Yes, I do. I want the quantity there to be a real valid choice, certainly, but we do have an autonomous system and because we have that autonomous system with universities having the freedom that they need to really direct courses and make decisions, we have four of the best universities in the world. We have a world-renowned higher education system, so it is certainly working. I would not want to be—

Chair: The state tells universities loads of things; you just talked about how you are ripping up the access plans and starting—



Michelle Donelan: That is very different from interfering in their curriculum and telling them they must do this amount of courses.

- Q51 **Chair:** The state has a strategic view that we need more skills. So why not, whether it is carrot or stick, I do not mind how it is done, tweak the funding to universities? If it is your goal to have more degree apprenticeships and particularly benefit disadvantaged pupils, why not tweak the funding and have serious objectives to make it happen rather than just hoping it is just going to magically evolve?

Michelle Donelan: We certainly have not just hoped. I have announced £8 million which is an incentivisation fund. That is tweaking the funding. We are reducing the regulation. We have also said in their access and participation plans, they need to have a clear plan for degree apprenticeships and bolstering them, but we do have an autonomous system in this country with our universities. It is one of the world's best in terms of higher education. Let us not dismantle that. Let us work on that, build on that, and make sure we are outcome focused.

Chair: Kim, if you want to ask all your questions now.

- Q52 **Kim Johnson:** I just wanted to pick up on the Chair's point about SMEs, particularly SMEs in disadvantaged areas, and being able to offer the required length of work experience. My colleague Ian would be here and stating those issues. How do degree apprenticeships get developed in those disadvantaged areas with SMEs?

Michelle Donelan: One thing we need to remember as well is the degree apprenticeship is a job. The majority of the time is in the workplace and, of course, to grow the volume of degree apprenticeships, like any apprenticeship, you need those jobs, you need that employer buy-in, so, that is fundamental to the skills that the individual gets. Absolutely, we need businesses to recognise the benefits of it, but the employers I speak to, including in my own constituency, sing the praises of degree apprenticeships to grow their own within the company. The time that they invest in that individual can really pay dividends for their business.

- Q53 **Kim Johnson:** Next question is around disadvantage. The last time you were here you were talking about how you were going to tackle the disparities for ethnic minorities and the outcomes in HEIs. I just wanted to know what progress has been made in that area.

Michelle Donelan: If I remember correctly, we were talking particularly about black students who are more likely to get into university than white students, but they are also more likely to not complete their study. There is a 17.4% gap in terms of good degree outcomes, so white students are more likely to get a 2.1 or a First. That goes to the heart of all the work I have been doing around making sure it is not just about getting people in. That is not job done. That is not real social mobility. Real social mobility is making sure they finish their course, and they are given all that support, hence why we have announced the student support



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champion that really focuses on the engagement. But then they graduate and they get a good degree and they go on and they get a graduate job that they would not have got had they not done that degree. All of that work is supporting the problem that we talked about the last time I came to the Committee.

Q54 Kim Johnson: The Chair mentioned financial sanctions if universities did not provide the level of support or were found to harass and bully students. I know the EHRC report in 2019 and Universities UK identified some really worrying high incidences of racial abuse and harassment in universities. Would those universities be subject to the same level of sanctions you were talking about in terms of antisemitism?

Michelle Donelan: In terms of the report you reference, that was a very comprehensive report. If I remember correctly, it was 0.01% of the student population in terms of the incidents, so they are very low. My own view is that universities do crack down on racism and it will not be tolerated. If there was any evidence that anybody had of cases, I would urge them to alert me to it. I am certainly not reserved in coming forward and calling up vice chancellors and calling out bad practice; racism should not be tolerated. Nor should bullying. Nor should harassment of any form.

The Office for Students did a minimum statement of expectation earlier last year; it wrote to all universities and said they needed to reach this bar as a minimum, and every university is committed to that. As I said before, we are actually working with them to introduce a new registration condition which will cover things like sexual abuse, sexual assault; we have seen some horrendous cases on that hence my work on NDAs. It will also cover harassment, bullying and these things that are certainly not acceptable for students or staff to experience.

Kim Johnson: Both of those reports identified that students and staff did not feel that their cases were being heard and dealt with effectively enough in universities.

Michelle Donelan: Well, like I said, I think it was 0.01% of the student population. I mean, that is obviously too many—any cases is too many—and universities do have to have processes to deal with these cases, and then a student or a staff member could expediate it outside, depending on the severity of the case. That is why the Office for Students did its statement of expectations, and it is why we are introducing the registration condition. Students and staff should not have to be worrying about these kinds of things, they should be able to enjoy learning or teaching in our higher education institutions.

Q55 Kim Johnson: My next question is about students with a disability and the fact that a lot of students are not feeling supported at the moment. Given that universities are not receiving an increase in resources in line with inflation, what needs to happen to ensure that students with disabilities are supported effectively in universities, Minister?



Michelle Donelan: When we responded to Augar, we announced £900 million of taxpayers' money going to universities; that is the biggest settlement they have had in a decade, so we certainly are investing in our universities. Every university has a responsibility under the Equality Act to ensure there is access that is equal for all students, whether they have a disability or not. I was very vocal on this in the pandemic as well, because I was acutely aware that when content went online it might have hindered the abilities of students with certain disabilities to continue with their studies. I very clearly said it had to be accessible then as well as now. There was a Government report on disability in the round last year, and as a result of that, universities have been trialling a passport. Basically, a passport follows the individual in terms of what their needs are. Four universities have been doing that so far as a trial.

Q56 **Kim Johnson:** Are you worried that universities, because of the cost of living and the increase in inflation, are going to be looking at making cuts in these essential services to support students?

Michelle Donelan: Absolutely not. They have a requirement under law in terms of the Equality Act, and it would not be in their own interest to do that. They do want to support their students, and they are going to need to do so because of the thresholds that we are introducing and the work of the student engagement champion that is working on student support will be about how students need to be monitored better and given that support throughout their time in education. Some of the things they may be experiencing may be as a result of a disability or it may be what is going on at home, etc. It is about looking after the well-being of the student as well.

Q57 **Kim Johnson:** My next question is about teacher training. Since the pandemic, we have heard and we have seen that there has been a significant shortage of teachers and 40% of teacher training providers are successfully gaining accreditation. How many HEIs do you think will disappear as a result of that, Minister?

Michelle Donelan: It is not about HEIs disappearing, that was just the first round of that. There is another opportunity in a few weeks for them to either reapply or apply. A lot of them did not apply in the first round. If they never pass the accreditation, or they choose not to, it does not mean they have to stop providing teacher training, it just means they have to partner with an organisation that has been accredited so that we can have confidence in the system and those that are going to educate the next generation. It is all evidence based, and it is based on the great deal of work that has been done to ensure that that teacher training is up to a similar par.

Q58 **Kim Johnson:** My final question. You spoke of looking at investigating the NUS in terms of antisemitism, I would like to know what work has been done to investigate the chair of OfS for sitting on a platform for known right-wingers.



Michelle Donelan: Well, there is nothing wrong with being right wing, but in terms of what the OfS—*(Interruption.)* Well, so let us unpack what the allegation was. The OfS chair did a video message to a conference, and he was not aware of who else was going to be at that conference. There was a journalist with outrageous views who attended that he was not aware of before. He did not endorse that journalist at all, and he did not go there in his capacity as OfS chair, he went there in a personal capacity. He is, of course, also a peer and a Conservative one.

Q59 **Angela Richardson:** Good morning, Minister. Two completely unrelated questions. The first one is about mental health, which you briefly touched on in your opening answers. We know that the Covid pandemic sparked a mental health crisis amongst students. In 2020 you announced very significant funding to help tackle that. Are you able to track the number of students who are presenting with mental health concerns? What are the numbers, and does the current funding that you are putting in place through your working across Department with the Department for Health and Social Care—also, offers for students that are being put in place—match the current needs and also the future needs as we think about the cohorts coming through who were doing A-levels and GCSEs during the pandemic, so that we are able to look after them?

Michelle Donelan: This is one of the things that really worried me when the pandemic struck because we know that students, I would argue young people in fact, were more impacted by the pandemic than other generations. It was particularly tough for them and will have presented them with other challenges that might have led to mental health concerns. That is why, with the Office for Students, we launched Student Space; a £3 million platform to provide some of that extra support. Now that was intended just to be a programme for when the pandemic was around. We have actually kept it going and that, I think, is the right thing to do to support students. We have mentioned the student support champion as well, who will be helping universities to see the red flags and the trigger warnings, and act much quicker to support students.

You talk about the transition from college or school to university and personally I think that is a very difficult transition in a normal time, let alone with the repercussions of the pandemic. That is why I dedicated £50 million for universities to spend on initiatives to support mental health, specifically related to the transition, and that has continued. It was not just a short-term pandemic issue. There has been a lot of media coverage, and quite rightly, of incidences of suicide in our universities and very, very tragic cases. I held a roundtable on this with university leaders and with the ONS and asked them to publish the statistics on this every year so that there was clarity about what is happening. Those rates have gone down in the last four years. They are less than the same age group outside of HE, but obviously there are too many and even one is too many. That is why I am really determined that we keep up the momentum and the focus on mental health. If we do not look after students' mental health, the rest of it just all goes by the wayside.



Q60 Angela Richardson: Suicide numbers are one thing, and it is absolutely tragic. What about the cases of students presenting in the first instance? Are you able to keep a track of those numbers?

Michelle Donelan: I do not think we could ever keep a track on that because that would include students who might go to their doctor, or who might not tell their university. That is very personal information. I would not really want to get into the business of acquiring so much information. You can have information overload and the bureaucracy you are then putting on to universities can mean that they cannot just get on with the job of assisting.

Q61 Angela Richardson: You do need the evidence, the data, in order to be able to fund things adequately, do you not?

Michelle Donelan: We know the data in terms of the cases of that age group that present to NHS services. Obviously, we would not know which proportion are at university and which are not. We know the data of the reliance on university services. We also know the data of the Student Space and the number of students they have helped, which is well over 200,000.

Q62 Angela Richardson: My second and unrelated question is this. We took evidence on the Public Accounts Committee on Monday from the Food Standards Agency chief executive. This is about regulation post leaving the European Union. She raised the point that we have a shortage of vets in this country and that 95% of their vets who work for them actually come from abroad. It is not just that, it is obviously medical students as well. Will you consider raising the cap on the number of places for vet students as you did do in the pandemic, so that we can home grow our own skills base rather than having to rely on people coming from abroad for these particular sectors?

Michelle Donelan: For a long period of time we have been too reliant on vets coming from abroad. That is something that I have spoken to Minister Eustice about. We do have record numbers, I believe, studying veterinary medicine at the moment and equally medicine. On the cap in regard to doctors, the issue is, of course, the placements and making sure there is the volume of high-quality placements they can do. That is something I know the Department of Health constantly works with and reviews, and that would be a decision that would be led by them. I believe we have removed the cap on veterinary medicine, but I can report back to the Committee on that.

Q63 Chair: Can I just go back to this issue? I appreciate most of our universities do a wonderful job, and we absolutely should respect that and should be proud of it, but in terms of this issue about encouraging universities to do degree apprentices, the London School of Economics found that apprentices in their 20s earn anything between £1,000 to £7,000 more per year compared to their graduate counterparts. That was a study done last year.



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There are other studies that suggest now, in some areas, apprentices are earning more than graduates and they are more likely to get employment. Only 5% of apprentices are left jobless within a year of completing training, compared to 16% of university graduates. We know that many graduates are leaving university and not getting graduate jobs. Given what you have said and your strong support for degree apprenticeships and the very welcome extra funding, surely there could be more that you could do using the levers of Government to encourage universities to take on degree apprenticeships?

Michelle Donelan: I knew you would want me to do more.

Chair: It is because you say the state—

Michelle Donelan: Well, let us look at what we have done—

Chair: Hang on. There is a state argument. On my side of the House, of course, all of us believe there is a limited role for the state, but we use the state for things when it suits us; the levers of Government when it suits us. There are many things the Government are doing in education that are all about the state improving lives for people. If you do not want targets, that is fine, but unless the strategic direction of the Government is to have many, many more students doing degree apprenticeships, perhaps the increase will be welcomed, but it will not be as much as it might have been.

Michelle Donelan: There are a few things there. My points about the state were about the fact that I do not think the Government should be telling people what they should be doing; they should be creating the opportunities and enabling them to progress and succeed in life. That is why I think we need to move away from 50% or 60%, or whatever, of young people need to go to university, which is ridiculous. It is like plucking figures out of air, and we could do the same thing on degree apprenticeships, but I am not sure it would help. What I am actually doing is tackling at root cause the problems and the reasons. But after several conversations and work with universities, I am getting to the bottom of what is stopping them expanding their provision and there are a few reasons.

One is the start-up costs; they have to hire people to foster those relationships with the businesses, set them up, get their heads around the regulation and work out how it all works. That is why I have done the £8 million. Another thing is that regulatory burden of working with three regulators so I have commissioned that meeting and we are going to reduce the regulatory burden and make it more streamlined. I had a meeting with the University Alliance just the other week, a roundtable of their providers to hear how we could do that. Then the other thing is about really encouraging them and hearing from other leaders in the sector as to what they have done, how it works. I went to Manchester Met University a few months ago, and they do an amazing job with degree apprenticeships; they are one of the leaders. The person who runs



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their programme is absolutely excellent and has agreed to talk to the rest of the sector and explain how she does it and the benefit to their local economy and the individuals and also for universities to hear some of their awe-inspiring case studies of how it can transport and form individuals. I have heard about those studies on my visits.

The biggest provider of degree apprenticeships in this country is actually the Open University who I visited just last week; it is doing an incredible job on this. I think the way we grow the number of degree apprenticeships is looking at what is holding universities back at the moment, what is stopping that growth, why some businesses are reluctant to engage in them, and then actually tackling it at root cause rather than setting an arbitrary target.

Q64 **Chair:** Okay, so what about universities that are closed to the idea completely? Oxford, for example, has said no to degree apprentices. Do you say, well, they are autonomous, they can do what they like?

Michelle Donelan: I do not think I have ever said universities can do what they like.

Chair: You have, you said they were—

Michelle Donelan: I never used that form of words, but they are autonomous in law. That is a fact.

Q65 **Chair:** If you are saying they are autonomous, then they can choose, so if a university closes the door to degree apprentices, is that something you think is fine?

Michelle Donelan: I think every university should be thinking about offering degree apprenticeships. I think we need to remove the barriers for them doing that, including financial and regulatory. We need to inspire them to do that by not just me saying you should do it, but hearing from their fellow peers in other universities as to how they have done that and hearing from students and graduates of degree apprenticeships in terms of the real benefit it makes for their lives.

Chair: I agree with everything you said, but if they still say, “No way, José”, what is your view? Do you just say, “That’s fine, that’s up to them”?

Michelle Donelan: I do not think we should have a one-size-fits-all where every single university in this country does the same thing in a carbon copy. Absolutely not. That would not make any sense. What we need to achieve is that when a young person, or somebody in later life, wants to go to university and they look at the options, it is not just one degree apprenticeship that is on offer or two or three at a university in very specific areas, but there is a plethora of them at a range of universities, and they have a real valid choice. That is the important thing, surely.



Chair: You would encourage, though, Oxford and the—

Michelle Donelan: I would encourage them to look at it, but let us move away from this obsession of thinking it is all about Oxbridge. The majority of students do not go to Oxbridge.

Q66 **Chair:** No, but that happens to be an example of a university that is closed to degree apprentices, and others are. I said at the beginning I agree strongly with what you and Katharine Birbalsingh have said about this. Absolutely. I am just trying to understand whether or not you believe some of the Russell Group universities or these kinds of universities that are not doing degree apprenticeships, although many are, should be doing it and should be encouraged to do so.

Michelle Donelan: In the time I have been Minister it has doubled, not just across the board in terms of universities but actually in Russell Group universities. We have 13 Russell Group universities who have now put on degree apprenticeships. I want to see a greater volume of those degree apprenticeships in those universities so that there is a real valid choice. I want every university to consider offering degree apprenticeships. I want to remove the barriers to enable them to do so. They are a fantastic opportunity for individuals. It would be incredible if Oxbridge offered them. But like I said, the majority of students do not go to Oxbridge. Let us not focus on every university being a carbon copy of the other. Let us focus on enabling individuals to have really good choices, including degree apprenticeships.

Chair: As I said, I am not focused on everyone getting forced in any shape or form. I do not hold that belief at all, you know me very well, but I do believe that if Oxbridge—I know Cambridge offers postgraduate degree apprenticeships—does this, it does create a cascade of prestige about apprenticeships in general. Personally, I would be delighted if those kinds of universities were offering degree apprenticeships and just hope very much that the Government would encourage them to do so.

Michelle Donelan: Thirteen of the Russell Group are, and they have increased dramatically over the last two years, and we will be seeing more movement on this in the next two years, including in the Russell Group, because there should be choice across all tiers of universities. They should not be just available in one tier of universities.

Q67 **Chair:** With you having been a member of this Committee previously, I know you believe in this passionately as well, so I take heart from what you say. It is my mission in life to have as many students as possible doing degree apprenticeships. Just very finally, the Chancellor has announced the apprentice levy review; what about reforming the levy so that businesses could use more of their levy if they hired apprentices both from disadvantaged backgrounds and in skills that the country needs? Three qualifications: one, they are disadvantaged, two, they are hiring them as degree apprentices and, thirdly, that they do them in skills that we have a deficit in, so it is not all about management degree



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apprentice or whatever it may be. What is your view on that and what is the DfE's feed in to the Treasury in terms of the apprentice levy review?

Michelle Donelan: We can certainly feed in your pitch there. Definitely. We are looking at this with the Treasury and working with them. It is obviously a Treasury lead, but we are working with them on this review because we have seen a decline in business spend on investment in skills. We know we have skills gaps. As a Government, we are doing lots of things on the skills agenda; we need businesses to be doing the same, and that is why we are looking at the levy and what more we can do to make it flexible so as to incentivise more spending of it in the right way.

Q68 **Chair:** Do you have any views you can share?

Michelle Donelan: I do not really want to pre-empt the review.

Chair: You must have some views, and we will keep it secret here.

Michelle Donelan: I am sure you will, but it is really important that we do incentivise and enable businesses to spend on skills. Absolutely. What we need to do as well is, of course, ensure that nothing we do damages the great progress we have made with apprenticeships and the growth of apprenticeships, and they need to be our two overriding objectives within this reform.

Q69 **Chair:** The number of young people doing apprenticeships needs to be improved, would you not agree?

Michelle Donelan: It has increased from this time last year dramatically, but yes, we need to make sure they are a real valid option so that when young people leave school or college they can go on an apprenticeship or further education or university.

Chair: When do you think you will be able to share with us your thoughts on the reform of the apprenticeship levy?

Michelle Donelan: As I said, that is a Treasury lead. I believe it is aligned to the next fiscal event. I think the Chancellor will probably announce that rather than me to the Education Committee, I am afraid.

Chair: You will be feeding in some thoughts, will you not?

Michelle Donelan: I will come back after that.

Chair: Okay, thank you. We have one more question from Kim.

Q70 **Kim Johnson:** There is a growing number of 18-year-olds in the population and no sign of university places going down. With the proposed legislation changes and the reduction in the number of university places, do you think there is going to be a massive impact on more disadvantaged students who want to go to university because of these changes?



Michelle Donelan: Yes. To be absolutely clear, we are not, and we never, ever said that we would reduce the total number of students going to university. That is something that this country did before in the form of a student number cap. What we have said is that we know we have these pockets of poor quality within our higher education sector. We have spoken at length about that today, but at the moment they can continue to grow and often at the expense of the good-quality courses. One of the tools that the regulator has in its toolbox, we believe, and I think this is right, should be to cap the growth of those poor-quality courses whilst universities sort it out and make sure they are delivering for students. That is what we are doing. We are not capping the overall volume of individuals who can go to university.

Q71 **Kim Johnson:** You do not see an impact on disadvantaged students gaining places?

Michelle Donelan: I do not think disadvantaged students would be served by going to poor-quality courses. Nobody benefits from going to a poor-quality course.

Chair: Thank you very much for sustaining questioning and we look forward to seeing you at a future date. We appreciate all your answers and wish you and your team well.