

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings, HC 331

Wednesday 7 September 2022

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Members present: Jackie Doyle-Price; Kim Johnson; Kate Osborne; Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

In the absence of the Chair, Kate Osborne took the Chair.

Questions 26-64

Witnesses

I: Professor Cara Aitchison, Chair of Universities UK advisory group on addressing staff-to-student sexual misconduct; Ammaarah Faisal, Student Ambassador and Human Research for Higher Education, Our Streets Now; and John Edmonds, Co-author of “Unsafe Spaces: Ending Sexual Abuse in Universities”.

II: Dr Rachel Fenton, Associate Professor in Law, Exeter University; Dr Melanie McCarry, Senior Lecturer at School of Social Work & Social Policy, University of Strathclyde; and Richie Benson, Universities Project Lead, Beyond Equality.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Cara Aitchison, Ammaarah Faisal and John Edmonds.

Q26 Chair: Good afternoon, everyone. This is the second oral evidence session of the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings. In this session we will look at higher education. For anyone looking online or in the room, the subject matter and the things discussed may be distressing. We have two panels of witnesses today.

Before we start, I want to make a brief comment on the appointment of our new Equalities Minister, replacing the previous Women and Equalities Minister. Women face huge issues of sexism and misogyny, not just around today's discussion of attitudes towards women and girls, but in many other areas, such as the gender pay gap, gender health inequalities, menopause at work, and violence against women and girls. Women's rights, as well as other inequality issues, must and will remain at the forefront of our work in this Committee.

One of our witnesses on our first panel, Professor Cara Aitchison, is appearing on Zoom—welcome. Will the first panel please introduce themselves and tell me how you would prefer to be addressed during the course of our meeting? Professor, will you go first, please?

Professor Aitchison: Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to attend today. I am Professor Cara Aitchison. I am president and vice-chancellor of Cardiff Metropolitan University. I am here representing Universities UK, which is the umbrella body for 140 universities across the UK. I am happy to be addressed as Cara, if that is appropriate, thank you.

Ammaarah Faisal: I am Ammaarah Faisal. I am happy to be addressed as Ammaarah; my pronouns are she and her. I am from Our Streets Now, where I am head of research for the higher education team. We are campaigning to end public sexual harassment as a grassroots organisation. We define public sexual harassment as unwanted sexual advances and intimidating behaviour in public spaces in person and online, including higher education places. This is an intersectionality issue, so we would say that it is targeted mostly towards women and other oppressed groups in society, but can be experienced by everyone, including boys and men.

John Edmonds: My name is John Edmonds. I am the co-author of a book, "Unsafe Spaces: Ending Sexual Abuse in Universities". My co-author, Eva Tutchell, is sitting behind me and might whisper in my ear if she is concerned about the parts she wrote. I am happy to be called John.

Q27 Chair: I will invite Members to put questions to you. Questions will normally be directed to one of the panel to answer. However, if a question is put forward that is not addressed to you but you would like to come in on it, please indicate and I will bring you in as well. I will ask



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ammaarah the first question: how safe do female students feel on and off the university campus?

Ammaarah Faisal: Not safe. It depends on the type of city as well—campus-based unis have different experiences. For city-based unis, we ran a survey in the autumn of 2021 with *The Tab*, which is a student-led newspaper in 80 different student cities. We surveyed just under 1,400 participants across 71 different institutions in the UK, and we found that 500 of those participants who were female students were feeling unsafe in clubs and bars, and on public transport, as well as in university campus areas like the library. They experienced public sexual harassment several times a month or more. That figure goes up when we survey non-binary participants and transgender students as well, with them experiencing greater rates of public sexual harassment and sexual violence generally. It is definitely a problem in the night-time economy and on public transport, but it is also happening on the way to lectures and online, with online lectures and things like that as well.

Q28 **Chair:** John, you estimated that at least 50,000 students are sexually abused in universities in England and Wales every year, possibly more. How did you get to that number?

John Edmonds: We went through all the available pieces of information, some from individual universities and a lot from student union surveys that have been taken—a number of public organisations have done that—but the estimate is unsatisfactory. I am absolutely certain that it is more than 50,000, but we cannot say more because, for reasons that I do not understand, the universities will not carry out an authoritative survey to find out how many, where, who, why and all the other things that we need in order to develop a policy. The policies that have been developed in most universities are based on inadequate information, so we had to fill the gap as best we could. The best we could do—we explain it in great detail in the book—is 50,000 and more. We can find no information at all on the sexual abuse of men. The only information that we found was about the sexual abuse of women, and all the information is partial and, frankly, impossible to extrapolate from with absolute precision.

Q29 **Chair:** Why do you think it continues to be such a huge problem for the universities?

John Edmonds: I have no idea. We have asked UUK several times. We asked the previous president of UUK. At one stage, we were told that UUK does not have enough money to carry out such a widespread survey, but of course we never suggested that UUK should fund it; the individual universities could. On the basis of a survey that took place in Australia, which was very complete and helpful, we reckoned a UK-wide survey would cost about £2,000 per university. We think that could be afforded.

Q30 **Chair:** This inquiry is mainly looking at women and girls, but what has your work revealed about men's experiences dealing with sexual harassment and sexual violence? You have touched on it, but can you tell us a bit more?



John Edmonds: I'm afraid it's all guesstimates—not even estimates. We managed to set up a widespread network, getting to women victim-survivors, and many of them passed this on from hand to hand, so we could interview more. Although we went widespread, through a number of organisations, not one man came forward. Yet a lot of people said, when we interviewed them, we know there is a problem with male sexual abuse—usually male on male—but we don't have any details of it, and it is even less well reported than the classically under-reported sexual abuse of women.

Q31 **Chair:** Cara, would you like to come in at that point?

Professor Aitchison: Yes, I would. If I may, I will address some of the quantitative issues or the statistics briefly and then say why I think Universities UK and individual universities perhaps have not been focused on the quantitative issue and have instead turned their attention to some of the more qualitative or cultural issues.

Members may know that I was the chair of Universities UK's advisory group developing guidance looking at staff-student sexual misconduct and making recommendations to universities. We published a report in March of this year. It was a fairly comprehensive strategic report and accompanying that was some operational guidance. We had long discussions at the beginning of that work, and that work took us a number of years to complete. Universities UK says it's the most complex piece of work it has ever engaged in, because it involved fairly complex legal issues. But at the outset, we did have a discussion around the table, and around the table were groups representing all areas of universities, so we had the NUS, the staff trade unions, all the professional sector bodies, a number of experts in the field, Rape Crisis and a couple of vice-chancellors, including me. And we decided as a group we would not spend time or money undertaking what we called a prevalence survey. We were sufficiently persuaded that there had been enough small-scale surveys. There had been surveys conducted by, at that time, the NUS and Revolt Sexual Assault that had given rise to data that were small scale but sufficiently robust to persuade us that there was, in quantitative terms, a sizeable problem or challenge that we needed to address. Since that time, there have been a couple of other surveys, including some surveys of staff. So, at the outset of our work, we were all agreed that there is a problem, there is a challenge; we want to address it and we want to get on and do that.

To undertake a national, UK survey—it is probably not worth getting into the details, but it would certainly cost an awful lot more than £2,000 per university. I don't think that is time or money well spent. There is now no dispute across universities in the UK, or across education more broadly, that we have an issue. Equally, I don't think there is now any dispute that we all want to address this. For me and my colleagues, the real challenge is just getting on and doing that, and what we have tried to map out in our report is ways in which we think we can tackle this challenge, starting with—this is part of a wider series of Universities UK reports titled "Changing the culture", and hopefully we will get on to talk about some of

the wider cultural or systemic issues, because this is a multifaceted problem and universities have a very key role to play in changing the culture within their institutions and developing new policies and practices and then, going all the way back to data, in actually revealing and sharing some of the data.

So, we have made great strides in the ways in which we report and record data and we have recently produced new guidance on sharing data. One of the difficulties previously has been that these issues have not been transparent. They have not been shared across the sector. There has been, I think, a mistaken belief that reputations are protected by concealing some of these issues, rather than being transparent in the way in which we tackle them.

I think that we have actually gone beyond the need for a survey. No one disputes that there is an issue. The size of the issue is of some importance, but I, as a vice-chancellor, would be concerned if only one student was affected, and we know that there are many more than just single numbers of students affected.

Q32 **Chair:** Thank you, Cara. I'm going to bring John back in.

John Edmonds: First of all, a survey would not just count the people who have said that they have been abused. It would identify which groups are most vulnerable; in which parts of the country, if there is a difference; in which universities, if there is a difference; and in what social circumstances in universities such things happen. It would produce, as it did in Australia, a mountain of material on which you could base a well-evidenced policy. That is one point.

The second point is that I have looked at every piece of evidence about numbers and the other issues that I raised. Not one piece is satisfactory. Believe me, if we had been able to put forward a combined result that would have been satisfactory, we would not have called it an estimate. This is very badly needed.

Q33 **Chair:** Thanks, John. I have to say that I agree with what Cara said about one being too many, but surely we need to know the scale of the problem. Ammaarah, did you want to come in?

Ammaarah Faisal: Yes. I agree with John. The issues of intersectionality and all the different types of groups of people who are experiencing it are not really being considered in a lot of the surveys that have been done thus far. In order to create change in culture through education and policy changes that include the lived experiences of everyone, we need to be doing research that considers everyone's experiences. Different groups in society face sexual violence in different ways, and it shows up in different ways. In the case of boys and men, it is often not reported, and we will not know how to address that until we take into account their experiences from a first-hand basis.

Q34 **Kim Johnson:** Good afternoon, panel. How widespread do you think staff-to-student sexual misconduct is at universities, and what are the



challenges of successfully addressing that sexual misconduct?

Professor Aitchison: Each university will have data on cases reported, but like all sexual crimes and sexual misconduct we know that this is vastly under-reported. In some senses, that is why I am a little sceptical about the quantitative data. There are other research methods that we can use to gain insight into these issues within universities or across universities, in specific geographical locations or mission groups of universities. I have yet to meet a vice-chancellor who does not think that this is a problem, so I think that we are all agreed that this is a problem. I think that we are all agreed that this happens within our universities. We have almost half of young people going to university. It is important to note that universities are, in a sense, microcosms of wider society, so we would probably be a bit surprised if this was not an issue in universities.

Student-on-student misconduct has been a huge and growing problem over recent years. The report and the group that I chaired was specifically concerned with staff-to-student misconduct, which I think all of us who have been in education for many years will recognise is a long-standing issue. Our work has really been part of that—the wider, changing the culture work. I think that we have made significant progress, in that we now have all vice-chancellors signed up to tackling this issue. If I go back 20 years, there were probably still elements of denial that this was an issue. There is a recognition that it is an issue. There is an acceptance of it. We are all on the same page, trying to tackle this.

What we have tried to do is map out a series of very pragmatic steps that will help organisations to tackle these issues, starting with the leadership at the top. This is about organisational culture. That culture is set at the top. One of the recommendations is that someone in the very top team—you are talking about someone in the top three to half dozen people in the organisation—has specific responsibility for this issue. So there is leadership from the top and then there is a whole series of systems and processes—new policies, new practices—put in place across the organisation that join up policy and practice areas that were previously quite separate.

They were separate because universities are often constructed into systems and processes, in HR terms, that deal with staff that have been completely divorced from student services. We would have different disciplinary processes, for example, relating to staff and students, that didn't really speak to each other and didn't align. We have done a lot of work on developing best practice in how to align these policies and how to enable students to report more readily, including anonymous reporting. There are all sorts of difficulties with that, but anonymous reporting helps us to do a little of what John was referring to, to identify areas and pockets, perhaps, where issues are perhaps a bit pronounced.

There is development of policies, new practices, support systems and a whole range of mechanisms right through from the point at which a student applies to university. We talk about the student journey and that first point of contact—students coming to open days, enrolling, going

through a pre-enrolment period, going through a really robust induction that covers all sorts of issues around informed consent, sexual consent, what they can reasonably expect and reasonably not expect by way of behaviour within their organisation—and making all of this much clearer than perhaps it was previously.

Within my university, we talk about creating a sense of belonging and becoming. In these communities, people have to feel that they have protection under the law, but that is a fairly low bar. We want to create something much more encouraging—an environment in which people can grow and flourish. That is about the culture that we create from the top.

For me, this long series of work that we have engaged in goes right through from organisational culture, strategy and leadership to the detailed pragmatics of how policies are developed, implemented and communicated. One of the things that we have found is that students have previously been very unclear as to where they should go, who they should go to, what those routes for reporting are. Then, when they have reported, they have been less than satisfied with things like the timescale over which investigations take place, the way in which the outcomes of investigations are reported back to them, or worse still, never reported—that kind of reporting into a void and then just losing the student voice. We have tried to tackle all of this.

So, there have been these measures, combined with the slightly different initiatives across the four nations in terms of the use of NDAs—that has been a really significant step. In Wales, all universities have signed up to agreeing never to use a non-disclosure agreement, a settlement agreement, in cases of statutory sexual misconduct. That sounds like a small move, but I think it is a really significant one in terms of the position that universities are now adopting.

Q35 Kim Johnson: Thanks, Cara. You talk about trying to implement and make these policy changes. What evidence is there that there has been any change from what used to be? Who is responsible for ensuring that the policy changes you talk about are implemented effectively and that all universities have a consistent approach?

Professor Aitchison: There is a challenge here, in that universities are autonomous institutions—we have the autonomy to develop our own approaches within the parameters set out through legislation, regulation and then also the different funding or regulatory bodies across the four nations—but I think the change I have noticed over the last few years is that there is now what I see as a very common approach across universities. I think there is a shared intent, aspiration and commitment to tackling these issues in a way that there probably wasn't as recently as five years ago.

I mentioned the importance of senior leadership, and holding senior leaders to account. Boards of governors, university councils and courts now should be holding their vice-chancellors to account for these issues.



We should be reporting the data internally; the mechanism for reporting or collecting that data across the sector, I think, is less well established.

It is important to note that I would not necessarily see an increase in reports as a short-term failing, because we know that when we get things right in terms of reporting sexual crime, the stats around reporting can sometimes go up. I have reports within my own university, which we deal with very robustly, and probably in a slightly different way than my predecessors of a decade or two ago dealt with them. It is all about transparency and accountability—not just up through the university's executive, but through to boards of governors, councils and courts.

Q36 Kim Johnson: Thanks, Cara. I think John wanted to come in on that point.

John Edmonds: Yes. We found a whole list of things that were going wrong. Most of all we found among people in universities, including some very senior people, a great cynicism about the level of commitment that is being given to driving through policies that have been developed. Let me make two points, very quickly.

First, we did a freedom of information inquiry of all England and Wales universities to establish their procedures for dealing with sexual abuse, and we found that a third of those procedures were obviously and deeply flawed. Most of the rest showed some cautious improvements—but very cautious. Many were still not fit for purpose, but some effort had been made, and of course there were some that had obviously done nothing at all.

Some of these procedures have review dates at the bottom and some review dates were 10 and 12 years ago, so that gives you everything you need to know. We need a separate procedure for sexual abuse. It should not be part of any other procedure. We saw procedures that put it in the same category as misusing library books. That is not an exaggeration, and it is quoted in the book.

The other thing is that Cara is quite right: the involvement of the vice-chancellor is essential. The power structures of universities mean that everybody notices if the vice-chancellor is committed to something and everybody notices if the vice-chancellor isn't.

What happened in Leicester University, which is a good model for others, is that after a series of difficult cases, the student union managed to persuade the vice-chancellor to meet 15 victim-survivors. They sat around a table. It was not intended to be a "loud noise" type meeting, but they all told their story. At the end, the vice-chancellor had the sort of impression that Eva and I had when we interviewed victim-survivors—not detached or three paces back, but actually knowing the distress and upset. We met victim-survivors in railway buffets and on park benches because they did not want to be seen with us on campus. If vice-chancellors do the symbolic act of meeting victim-survivors, suddenly things change in the university. They certainly changed at Leicester.

Q37 **Kim Johnson:** Cara, you mentioned NDAs. How widespread is their use in cases of sexual harassment and abuse?

Professor Aitchison: I cannot give you data, partly because of the nature of NDAs, but I can tell you that no university in Wales will ever use NDAs again, and we all have clear statements on our websites to that effect. That initiative in Wales came about partly on the back of Michelle Donelan's initiative for universities in England to sign up to the pledge of not using NDAs.

As I understand it, around half of universities in England have signed that—perhaps more importantly than that, there seems to me to be a very different kind of peer pressure among vice-chancellors. No one would want to be on the wrong side of history, so I think there are many vice-chancellors who are actively committed to this and stand alongside many of the activists who have been looking for change for a long time. There are others who are perhaps less activist, less committed, but who none the less want to do the right thing, not just in terms of legislative requirements but in terms of the moral standing of the right thing.

I would be surprised if we see many of these in future. That is not to say that we will not see any, but I think there will be more and more pressure as we move forward not to use them. The Wales example kind of sets a benchmark for other nations to say, "Can we do the same?"

Q38 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you so much, Cara. Ammaarah, you mentioned the impact of intersectionality and people reporting sexual abuse and misconduct. Can you say a little more about that in terms of the experience you have had and the work that you have been doing?

Ammaarah Faisal: Yes. As we have found research-wise but also anecdotally, talking and getting text for news at Our Streets Now, students and people in society who face greater forces of oppression based on various different aspects of their identity are at greater risk of experiencing public sexual harassment and sexual violence.

For example, we found specifically in the survey we did with The Tab that 94% of the non-binary participants would not feel comfortable reporting incidences of sexual harassment or assault to their university, in comparison with 72% of male students who would not feel comfortable.

Other research has been done. The NUS carried out a survey and looked at the experiences of disabled students, and found that 24% of the disabled students surveyed had a decrease in academic performance after facing sexual misconduct in comparison with 12% of their non-disabled counterparts.

This is affecting students' freedom of movement, right to education and their experiences of going out and socialising as well. Some 71% of our participants had their participation in student life affected based on things such as facing sexual assault on nights out as well as the shortening of daylight hours. Once it gets dark, a lot of the female students in our survey stop going out, including to lectures that might be in the evening in

winter. Students' experiences are affected both academically and socially at universities and in society as well.

- Q39 Kim Johnson:** Just out of interest, has your data been shared with universities so that they become aware of the impact and are able to put some support packages in place to help students—and staff, if they have experienced some of those issues?

Ammaarah Faisal: Yes, we have a student ambassador scheme at Our Streets Now with a set of students, and it fluctuates in terms of numbers based on the year as they have to be students currently at university. They all had our report and disseminated it to their individual universities. We do it in that localised kind of way because at the end of the day the students are at the universities, they know the policies the best, they have their own experiences and they have their own contacts at the universities. We do not have contacts at all the different universities and, as I said, it fluctuates based on the academic year.

Professor Aitchison: I absolutely endorse everything Ammaarah said and I also want to draw attention to international students. We now have more than 600,000 international students in the UK and there are specific challenges there, in part because some of those students are less clear about what they can and cannot rightfully expect or complain about. There are cultural differences. There are cultures among some of our international students with much more deference towards lecturers and less questioning of behaviour.

We need to be mindful of the diversity of our student population and also of the subjects we teach and the way we teach. Although we do not have comprehensive data, we know that there are certain subject areas where sexual misconduct is more prevalent. It tends to be those subject areas where there is closer proximity and more privacy between staff and students—so, with small tutorials, and applied subjects such as music, sport or small lab-based courses.

It is probably worth pointing out that perhaps slightly counterintuitively we believe—and all the surveys have shown—that this is a more significant issue for postgraduate students than for undergraduates. That might come as a slight surprise, but if we go back to that notion of proximity and small groups, that is more likely to happen at postgraduate level, particularly with PhD students. There is a real blurring of boundaries once you get to the level of PhD students, many of whom are also teaching while still being students who are subject to those same power relationships. So there are complexities.

- Q40 Chair:** Thank you, Kim. I will come to you in a minute Cara, but first I want to ask Ammaarah about the barriers around reporting incidents of sexual harassment and violent assault. Can you take us through what you see those barriers are and what might help break them down?

Ammaarah Faisal: There is a huge issue with transparency and inclusivity. Lots of students from marginalised communities are less likely to report. As was said earlier, universities are a microcosm of society:



HOUSE OF COMMONS

those from more marginalised communities have lower levels of trust, as we have seen anecdotally in the media.

That is one big issue—there are low levels of trust. Only 16% of the nearly 1,400 students we surveyed would feel comfortable reporting and over half of them would not trust their university to handle a claim of public sexual harassment appropriately. In the short term, we need to improve reporting processes. Universities need to have full time accredited independent sexual violence advisers on hand to be able to support students. Their reporting processes need to be visible and accessible.

Long term, at Our Streets Now we would recommend a shift towards a cultural change and focus on education and preventive measures as well so that we are putting things in place before harassment and misconduct incidents happen at all, emphasising healthy social norms and healthy relationships through educating the student body. There needs to be a longer-term focus as well.

Chair: Cara, could you be brief please?

Professor Aitchison: Sorry—you mean in relation to the question?

Q41 **Chair:** Sorry, yes—what you see as the barriers and how we can break them down.

Professor Aitchison: It is about having a flow chart, almost, through a university so that a student knows at the first point of access who they should complain to, or speak to, at the first opportunity. They need to know how that operates and is managed through, perhaps, student services.

When it comes to the clustering and accessibility of services within universities, it is about physical location and being able to see what is available and when—that there are people you can go to 24/7 in universities, particularly those with lots of halls of residence. We need to build up trust and confidence across the university that reporting is made easier and something will be done when reports are made.

Q42 **Chair:** Thank you. John, if you could be brief, please.

John Edmonds: Yes, I will. Ammaarah mentioned cultural problems, and we uncovered large numbers of those. The laddish culture in some universities is extraordinary—usually based in sporting clubs, fuelled by alcohol. Perhaps the nature of their previous education had given them impressions of entitlement that they should not have had. That needs to be addressed absolutely head-on.

There is another extremely important cultural issue that we talk about in the book. We were surprised—startled—by the number of staff-on-student sexual abuse cases that we came across. Much more important even than that was the fact that so many of the people who talked to us identified individual senior academics who had a reputation for sexual abuse and for grooming fresher students in particular. As they said to us, everybody knows their names—we now know their names—but nothing is being done



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about them. Complaints have been made and those really have to be dealt with in a major way.

The last point I want to make is that the fact that almost every university—90% of them anyway—do not discipline teachers for having sex with their students means that there is an air of laissez-faire about the whole issue that has been contradicted if we are going to have a new culture. We have suggested—something like 10 universities have now done it—that contractually you must not have sexual relationships with someone for whom you have supervisory responsibility or responsibility for any sort of management or teaching. That seems to me such a basic thing that ought to happen immediately. It is symbolic, but also important in itself.

- Q43 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Cara, the Department for Education has said that it continues to work closely with Universities UK on implementing its changing culture framework. What does this working relationship look like, and do you think that it is delivering effective results?

Professor Aitchison: As a Scot working in Wales, I am not always best qualified to speak about England, but what we have seen over recent years is a pretty strong alignment across all four nations and their regulatory or funding bodies in education on the work of UUK on changing the culture. I think that we are all pretty much on the same page here. I guess universities are very keen, as autonomous institutions, to manage their own affairs and get their own house in order, but reasonably expect some intervention if they do not manage to do that.

Where we got to with Michelle Donelan and the use of NDAs was probably a helpful nudge, but it stopped short of something that was made compulsory or part of the regulatory framework. The work that we have been doing recently is not just on staff-to-student misconduct. This is the fifth or sixth in a long sequence of work. I think you met my peer David Richardson around racial harassment a few months ago. There is significant change across universities, but it is right that the Office for Students, and its equivalents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, keep a watching brief on all of this and intervene when they feel that it is appropriate to do so.

- Q44 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** In June 2022, the former Universities Minister confirmed that they would be going ahead with a new condition of registration. Obviously, there has been a regime change, so we are not clear whether we are going to continue with that, but let's say that we are. Do you agree that this condition of registration will have the teeth to effect change?

Professor Aitchison: I think it is a difficult area, for all the reasons that we have been hearing about this afternoon. If that condition were implemented, I do not think that it would be terribly problematic for universities to sign up to that. How you then monitor compliance perhaps raises more issues, but as I say, I feel more confident about this issue now than I have at any time during my very long career. I think that we have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

finally turned a corner. That is not to signal any amount of complacency, but I do think that there is an absolute will to change this. Some of the evidence that John was reporting on recently I guess predates the guidance that we produced in March. We have seen universities make pretty rapid progress since then, but it is right that everyone keeps a watching brief on what we are doing.

- Q45 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Again, with the charter specifically, obviously we have quite a lot of legislation. We could definitely improve it in terms of violence against women and girls. What we are finding is that often when we have legislation and increased sentencing it does not necessarily make a difference, because if it does not go to court, there is no point in having an increased sentence because the perpetrators are never actually going to face that. Should a charter be implemented, do you think that universities would actually be held to account, and that we are likely to be able to go that far in terms of sanctions such as fines and perhaps even deregistering a university? Do you think that it will be taken that seriously?

Professor Aitchison: Ammaarah made a good point about prevention rather than addressing these things after the event. Universities are very much about growth and development. We are all about carrots, not sticks. The preferable solution is very much for universities to take control of their own affairs and do the right thing. If, at this moment in history, that requires some additional intervention, so be it, but my genuine hope is that we will move through a period over the next few years where, if we were having this conversation, we might not think that was as necessary as we do at the moment.

- Q46 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Thank you very much, Cara. I will turn to our other two panellists and ask this. How do you feel that universities perpetuate gender inequalities? We'll start with Ammaarah.

Ammaarah Faisal: As John said, there is a huge lad culture at universities in things like sports societies. At certain universities, these are more important; they are given more attention, and the power imbalance that is perpetuated within lad culture is prevalent there and has been adopted throughout secondary school. That is where we need to be putting education in early. The general power imbalance in the hierarchical structure of universities, being male-dominated spaces in a lot of ways, does perpetuate a gender imbalance. Again, this is where we need to be blanket-policy educating society, but also, universities are bodies that are literally set up to educate a vast group of people. That is what they are best placed to do. Adding things like consent education, bystander awareness and awareness around public sexual harassment into education at universities shouldn't be too much of a stretch, given that that is what they are set up to do.

- Q47 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** You have mentioned bystander training programmes. How do you think that would help?

Ammaarah Faisal: The crucial aspect with bystander awareness is that if, say, everyone in society is bystander-trained, people are recognising what

public sexual harassment may look like in advance and would not go and perpetrate it themselves, but also, if you are going through it, you are aware of how other people may be perceiving things. Awareness generally is very low for things like public sexual harassment, and courses such as that just help raise awareness, help educate the student body and society in a preventive way as well.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Thank you. Sorry, Chair, I went slightly over with my questions.

Q48 **Chair:** That's fine. I'm afraid I now have to end the time with this panel. Thank you all for coming along and giving your evidence today. If there is anything else that you would like to submit to the Committee, please do that in writing. Thank you very much.

John Edmonds: It is sad that the three of us have to meet here. Ammaarah obviously has a great deal of information. We have a mountain of information. We have offered it to UUK. There have been no takers. Can the three of us just get together and share some of the information?

Chair: Maybe you can arrange that outside of here, John. Thank you.

John Edmonds: I wanted to say it in front of everybody here.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Rachel Fenton, Dr Melanie McCarry and Richie Benson.

Q49 **Chair:** Now we can hear from our second panel. We have Dr Rachel Fenton on Zoom. I will ask the members of the second panel to introduce themselves. Please tell us how you would like to be addressed. I will start with you, Dr Fenton.

Dr Fenton: Hi, I am Rachel Fenton. I am an associate professor at the University of Exeter and I have been very involved in working in bystander intervention, the prevention of sexual violence, at universities for the last few years. I have also been looking at legal obligations and at what is happening in terms of a response when things are reported.

Richie Benson: Good afternoon. My name is Richard Benson—pronouns: he/him—but you can refer to me as Richie. I am the universities project lead at Beyond Equality, an organisation set up to engage men and boys in gender justice. What that means is unpacking masculinities, preventing gender-based violence and promoting gender equality.

Dr McCarry: Good afternoon. Thanks very much for inviting me along. I am Dr Melanie McCarry—I am happy to be referred to as Melanie. I am based at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland. I have been invited here to talk about the work we did in Scotland called "Equally Safe



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in Higher Education”, for which we developed a toolkit. I am happy to talk about that and related issues.

Chair: Thank you very much. As with our first panel, I will invite Members to ask you questions. If the question is not directed at you but you would like to come in, please indicate. Back to you, Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

- Q50 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Thank you, Chair. Melanie, do you believe that there is a culture in higher education preventing violence against women and girls from being taken seriously?

Dr McCarry: Yes. I think it is historical and it is ongoing just now. We are dealing with institutions that, from the get-go, were not set up to invite women to be there in the first place, and historically we have been fighting against that. If you look at the cultural background, there are very gendered hierarchies—vertical and horizontal hierarchies—of where women are employed, the roles they are in, the gender pay gap and the types of subjects and disciplines you will find them working in, and that falls through to the subjects that students are still very much segregated by. A lot of women take the softer sciences—the social sciences—and there are more men in the traditional earth sciences. That is the institutional context.

We have a lot of young people coming together, as has been referred to—communities of people, where you have young people who are away from home for the first time and access shared living. They are coming from backgrounds where, unfortunately in our society, there is a lot of pornography—a lot of young people believe they are getting educated; their sex ed is actually through porn—so there are very misunderstood ideas about what sexuality is and what sexual relationships are. So, you have this whole amalgam of young people and students and a society in which there is still gender inequality.

- Q51 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Are there any other ways in which universities help to perpetuate gender inequalities?

Dr McCarry: I suppose, in terms of both staff and students. As I said before, there are kinds of segregations in where staff are located and the types of jobs that they do, and in the way that this type of work has often been left to individuals to pick up. We know that there is chronic under-reporting, but there is quite a lot of disclosure, and it tends to fall to certain female members of staff to receive those disclosures. Then, as I said, there are the student cultures, and I do not think the universities have done enough to tackle the culture around appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

- Q52 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Thank you very much. Rachel, I want to ask about rape myth acceptance. With the earlier panel, we touched on bystander training programmes. How can such training programmes help to reduce rape myth acceptance?

Dr Fenton: My work has been around developing and evaluating bystander programmes and writing the first programme—together with



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Helen Mott—for the university sector. Because we wrote the programme based on evidence, it is a lengthy eight-hour programme. Part of diminishing and changing people's attitudes is looking at rape myth acceptance.

Rape myth acceptance is to do with the misbeliefs around sexual assault and violence—particularly rape, but also sexual harassment—that situate the victim as having done something wrong, and that seek to exonerate the perpetrator from their wrongdoing. Those are ideas such as, "Women lie about rape," "She provoked it; she brought it on herself," "He couldn't help himself; it's just male sexuality," and, in particular, false allegations and the idea that women lie. We found in some research that we did that incoming undergraduates particularly believed in the myths about women lying. That was the "most believed in" by both male and female undergraduates—that women lie about rape. We also found that the second most believed myth was that men can't really help it—that they didn't really mean to and that rape is just something that happened by accident; it was just a mistake.

A bystander programme—at least, a bystander programme that is done in depth, as we think it should be—will look at rape myth acceptance as part of that change process. Part of what we would say is about the noticing and awareness is about attitudinal change as well. There may be a whole range of things, but rape myth acceptance is certainly one of those attitudes that we would seek to change within a lengthier programme. It is one aspect of what a bystander programme should do.

It should take you through noticing, awareness, sense of responsibility, sense of motivation to act, and then a whole set of skills to be able to act in a given situation. On the way through that process, you are also getting people to reassess their own attitudes; those attitudes are really important because they allow men, as many of the perpetrators, to get away with what they have done and to be excused for it, and they inhibit disclosure—they stop women believing them as well, and they stop women getting the support, because they may self-believe, and then they won't disclose and they won't get the mental health support that they need, and they certainly won't go to the criminal justice system or the university.

Q53 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Do you have any examples of where it has been successful or where we have seen people implementing it and there being an overall cultural change and people willing to move forward and do more?

Dr Fenton: Do you mean with bystander programmes generally, or particularly around rape myth acceptance?

Q54 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: With bystander programmes generally.

Dr Fenton: Yes, absolutely. We conducted a review of the literature before we wrote the programme for Public Health England. There is an evidence base, but it is predominantly coming from the US, because they have been doing this kind of work for a lot longer. There is a 20 to 30-year evidence base that we used to develop the initial programme, and we

have evaluated the programme and we have found significant reduction across a range of measures, including rape myth acceptance, which is one of the measures that is commonly used to see whether it is successful.

That work has been rolled out in some form nationally, and internationally, and has been used as a basis for other institutions to develop their own bystander programmes, and there has been some evaluation work. We found that it translated really well for English universities and it has been used in other places. It has been rolled out, for example, in Ireland and other places, including being a template worldwide. There is a body of evidence, but it is still an international body of evidence rather than a UK body of evidence.

What I would like to mention is that we did a study that is not yet in the public domain, but we are happy to send you a copy, where we interviewed staff working at an array of universities. We had 134 university staff answer the survey. It was a survey and interviews. We wanted to see whether they were implementing the Universities UK 2016 agenda for change, which includes bystander intervention.

We had 134 staff, representing at least 53 universities across the sector. What we found was that the intervention initiative, which is the bystander programme I was referring to, was used as the main basis for universities that were doing prevention work, but many had made it shorter, some were putting it online and some were bringing in other materials and making it cover other things as well. In a way, that goes to your first question: is it being taken seriously enough?

I think it is really telling that violence against women and girls is not seen in itself as something of sufficient magnitude that universities need to just look at that. There is very little implementation, very little sustainability, very little resource. We found in this study that there is still a great deal of senior management who will not take this on, who don't want to look at it—and when they do, they dilute it with other things: "Oh well, we can't just do violence against women, because that is not enough in itself. We have got to implement something else with it; or we have got to just give an hour or pretend it's a one-off session; or we do it, but we can't embed it." We found that many staff were saying, "It needs to be embedded, but we can't embed it within the curriculum because there isn't the commitment, the resource, or the kind of cultural change needed at university level to be able to do this." Also, exactly as Melanie said, it is primarily done by volunteers: 30% of the people we interviewed were there doing this work on top of their workloads because they had personal interest. So, it is a mess, I think I would say.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Thank you. That is all my questions, Chair.

Q55 **Chair:** Rachel, you mentioned the bystander intervention programme and the various places it has been rolled out. Last year, your colleague Dr Helen Mott told us that universities are not taking it seriously. How would you encourage more universities to take it up?



Dr Fenton: That is a really difficult question, because when Helen and I first wrote the programme, the Government wrote to all vice-chancellors—this was back in 2015 or 2016—asking them to look at it and to take it up. That was for Government Departments. Now we are in 2022. It has been part of the guidelines constantly, and yet we are still in a position where we are not really seeing roll-out, or if there is roll-out it is diminished roll-out. We do not really know what universities are doing, or whether it is just a tick-box one hour, or it has been put online as some kind of tick box. It is not being taken seriously.

That might be because everything has to have teeth. Everything out there at the moment is guidance, or something that the OFS or UUK would like people to do, but none of it has any teeth. Senior management do not see this generally as something that is their problem, or as something that they have to do. Where we are seeing change, that change is coming as a result of external factors and it is coming through actual reputational damage—for example, the universities that were implicated in Everyone's Invited. That is the kind of catalyst that will lead to some form of change. I do not think that the catalysts are coming enough from within the sector, because of no teeth, no obligation, not enough of a strong push and not being part of a senior management portfolio; it is still just dependent on individuals, and of course individuals change jobs—they move on. It is not part of the “have to do”, and it really has to be part of that.

Even with this more recent study, we still found that the staff on the ground in universities were reporting that their senior management do not have the understanding—they do not understand the scale of it or what needs to be done. They are still frightened of reputational damage if they do do something. There are lots of excuses for why they do not need to do anything. My own view is that it needs to be put much more on an obligation footing for it to be taken seriously, unfortunately.

Dr McCarry: May I just follow on from Rachel's point? We worked with Rachel and Helen to develop the bystander training for a Scottish context. It is part of our toolkit recommendations. It is the only training that was evidence-based and evaluated to show both attitudinal and behavioural change. What is happening is that, as an eight-hour programme, universities do not want to invest the time or the financial resources to support that. What we see is that they buy in one-hour online training, or material that they call training, and then they say that they have done the bystander work or consent training, but often it has been outsourced to organisations that do not have expertise in violence against women and girls. This is a really significant issue—it is being diluted down and it has become part of a general anti-harassment-type model where they are tackling umpteen different issues. So, we are losing expertise and we are shortening it to a one-hour, usually online format, then letting students believe that they have been trained or have an awareness of the issues. That is really dangerous and in some regards worse than doing nothing, because it allows universities to say that they are doing something, while what they are doing is often inadequate. I reinforce that point.



Richie Benson: I would say that what is actually taking place in universities is a minimum standards approach. We need to be moving a long way past that. Minimum standards, as we have just heard, can be really dangerous. What we are trying to do is bring in a whole other piece that sits even before bystander intervention training. It is an awareness piece. It is an education, understanding and empathy building piece of what sits between intention and impact. We hear all these conversations about cancel culture, but really we need to get into consequence culture of actions and behaviours, particularly of lad culture in sports teams and universities, which are often perpetuating this enabling culture.

It is about really getting into minimum standards. What we are trying to do to promote gender equality—engaging men and boys in gender-based violence prevention—I think is minimum standards. That is not ambitious work. Some universities are proactively doing the work. Some of them are reactively doing the work, but if you want to have a conversation around consent, every university student at some point has done consent training—an online workshop, or whatever it is—yet we still have a problem. It is because we are not looking at the attitudes and behaviours in a context that is relevant to those students and what really applies to them.

Q56 **Chair:** If I can stay with you, Richie, can you tell us a bit about your work with young men in universities, and the challenges that you face in changing their attitudes towards women?

Richie Benson: Yes. I think there is quite a big knowledge and awareness piece of young men thinking about, maybe for the first time, and unpacking in intimate spaces, the impact of their attitudes, the words that they use and their behaviours. I think a lot of young men like to think of themselves as not part of a problem or as a good guy, but what are they enabling through not challenging anything and not challenging their peers—not being accountable for their own actions or behaviour, but not being accountable for their peers? I think every male university student would say, “My friends are the good guys. They’re not the problem.” If everybody’s friends are the good guys, who is perpetrating these behaviours?

Our work is to really bring in an awareness and understanding of the impact of behaviours. There is still a level of cognitive dissonance. A lot of men we work with know that there is a problem. They are not saying that it is not there. You even see hashtags like #notallmen. That is a really dangerous hashtag, in so many ways, but it is not denying that there is a problem; it is saying, “There is a problem; I just don’t want to be associated with it.” I think the work is also in getting men and boys to understand that they need to play a part in turning that wheel—not being bystanders but being allies. If it is making people angry enough to tweet “#notallmen”, then there is a reason people are getting angry, and you can use that anger. I just think that a lot of men and boys have never been invited into these conversations. They have never really reflected upon their behaviours.



Q57 Kim Johnson: Thank you. Picking up on that point, Richie, what do you think needs to be done to enable these young men to change their attitudes towards women, and what positive examples do you have of where that has happened?

Richie Benson: Part of the problem comes from men being socialised to believe that public spaces are men's spaces. That is also echoed from research that we do, with research from the University of Liverpool, in online spaces as well. Men believe that they are men's spaces. I think what needs to happen is interventions. We work in schools as well. We work really early with boys in a teenage capacity to start to unpack these conversations. I think it was said earlier that for a lot of young men and boys, a lot of relationship education comes from pornography. When we reach university age, it is starting to unpack existing ideas, attitudes and behaviours.

A key word here is "compassion". There is a lot of shame involved in these conversations, particularly for young men recognising the impact of their behaviours, maybe for the first time. We cannot remove shame from the conversation, but we do not want to use it as a tool for anything. It is about really compassionately working with wherever these behaviours and attitudes come from. How can we start to be accountable? How do we start to keep our peers to account? It is that collective idea. I think it is about early intervention with education, particularly in sports teams' cultures. On top of that, it is the bystandership. I think there are a lot of men at universities who have good intentions and do want to do something, but there is a lot of fear involved in not knowing the best thing to do, getting it wrong, escalating it, or being that guy who challenges things all the time.

That has gone well in multi-year relationships we have with a lot of universities where we go and work every year. They pick up on the way we work with young leaders, such as sports reps, welfare officers and student sabbatical staff, and the way they disseminate and take these conversations forward in communities, which empowers more men to get involved in this work as male allies. I do not sit here with data to say, "This is where we have seen a positive change," but the engagement of men in these conversations—to come forward and be agents of change—is evidence of that working on an anecdotal level.

Q58 Kim Johnson: Thanks for that, Richie. I think Rachel wants to come in.

Dr Fenton: Yes; I have two comments. I could not agree more with what Melanie said. I want to give an example of where bystander is being rolled out at scale, at the University of Exeter—I am not aware of any other university that has invested as much in it. From this academic year onward, Exeter has two full-time members of staff whose sole job is running bystander training. There is a potential roll-out there to every student during their first year of academia. It is an eight-hour programme that also covers violence against women and racism. There are two full-time people, and that is all they will do for the entire year, which is a major investment and a major commitment.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I cannot speak for all universities, but I am not aware of anywhere adopting that model of paying full-time staff to do that work. Most of the time, as Melanie said, it is dependent on the good will of people to do it, and a lot of it is being brought in by providers whose credentials you cannot even find online. There are some companies that provide bystander training, but if you try to work out who is behind them you cannot find out. Quite significant sums of money are being paid for that tick-box training.

I also wanted to address what Richie said, and I could not agree more with him. Any decent bystander programme, at length, will do a lot of work around men and masculinity. On the Exeter programme, for example, we spend a lot of time looking at men; half of masculinity is the socialisation of men. They should be gender-transformative programmes, so getting men engaged is crucial. All the research suggests that men are more influenced by other men's willingness to intervene as bystanders than by anything else, so getting men in the room is really important. One of the problems with the staff we interviewed for the study is when it is done on an ad hoc, volunteer basis, you get women in the room, you get survivors in the room and you get people who do not really need to be in the room. The people who do not come are the people who need to come, and unless it is embedded or made mandatory that is never going to happen. Those students, who will mostly be men doing STEM subjects, for example, will get no exposure to any of these ideas and will have no education on this stuff when they leave university.

Q59 Kim Johnson: Thank you, Rachel. Melanie, you wanted to come in?

Dr McCarry: I wanted to take on that point about making it mandatory; I would even apply that to the university sector as a whole. You have universities with VCs or senior leaders who see this as important and who will do something, but we need to challenge it as a sector. That was the work we did in Scotland. We were funded by the Scottish Government, by Education and Justice, and we developed this toolkit. It had two parts: one part was to gather evidence, and the idea was to roll it out across 19 Scottish HEs. We never got 19; we got four, for various and complex reasons, but the idea is that we roll it out across the sector.

So, (a) we have an evidence base across the sector, and (b) we have actions and institutional change. It has to be throughout the entire institution; you are working in prevention, you are working in intervention, you are working on the curriculum and you are working on knowledge exchange—you are working at all of those levels. We must have sexual violence officers and people who are employed to roll out bystanders, but as an institution we need every member of staff to be aware of this. We have a duty of care to our students and to us as staff, as employers, so it has to be mandated across the sector.

Q60 Kim Johnson: Thank you, Melanie. I know that you teach in Scotland, but what can the UK Government do in our universities to replicate in UK universities what is going on in Scotland?



Dr McCarry: The Scottish Government could take some hints here as well. We have to fund it, it has to be long term and there has to be a serious commitment to it. It is complex—it is not straightforward—which is why we need experts round the table conveying the difference. Our approach is in the toolkit. We were working with local government, unions and experts in the rape crisis sector and so on. Within the university, we were working with security staff and accommodation teams as well as academics and support services staff.

We talk about the vast numbers of students, young people and people who are employed there. The Government should put that commitment in and understand that we will benefit not only the institutions but society, because we are teaching people how to be better citizens to each other. On Richie's point, we need a healthier understanding of masculinity and sexuality, and we need to create safer spaces. The Government have to approach this at a sector level and really commit to funding the work and seeing it as long term.

Q61 **Kim Johnson:** Resources are key, clearly.

Dr McCarry: Always.

Q62 **Kim Johnson:** Richie, you mentioned the importance of early intervention in changing attitudes. Do you think having access to RSE in schools is a way of doing that? Should we look at how teachers are trained to deliver some of this training too?

Richie Benson: All of the above. The earlier the intervention, the more powerful it can be, because you are initiating those conversations for the very first time for a lot of young men. When you are working with the universities, you are unpacking existing behaviours and norms rather than challenging them for the first time. We also do a lot of work with teachers and university staff. It is really about how we can change all elements. There is a lot of good work going on in universities around this, and there is also a lot of really good grassroots work going on, but there is still a huge gap in the middle in reaching those who are completely disengaged from these conversations, who never question or challenge gender norms or rape culture myths and never try to unpack them.

Going back to the schools context, having those conversations early, and not just as one-off interventions, is continuous work. It is year after year; it is multi-stage. It is about starting to look at sex and healthy relationships. It is looking at discrimination, bullying and banter. Working towards everyone promoting safer, more inclusive cultures benefits everybody. A very important key in this is the voices it is coming from and how it is received. As we heard earlier, an intersectional approach to this is fundamental because these conversations are not felt in the same way by people with different identities. The way it is delivered has to take that on board, and the way that you understand audiences is fundamentally important.

Kim Johnson: Thanks, Richie. You paint a picture of a fragmented approach to this major issue, in terms of ensuring that students are safe

on university campuses. Thank you for your responses.

- Q63 Chair:** Are there any more questions from Members? We just have a few minutes. Would anyone on the panel like to make any further remarks?

Dr Fenton: On the issue of resources and sustainability, because HEFCE, as it was at the time, put out quite a lot of money to universities to get them started on this journey, we found that only about six out of 60 university staff members said that sustainability would not be an issue going forward. It is like the sector funded some work—I think it was a maximum of about £50,000—and the minute that the funding from HEFCE, or the OFS as it is now, finished, so did the work. By the time they were able to hire people on short-term contracts and negotiate all the bureaucracy to get something done, they were out of post. There was a lack of joined-up thinking. None of that work is sustainable, because it is done on an ad hoc basis. In terms of the funding, that is absolutely crucial. It is a way of finding compliance so that compliance is linked to funding for universities—the Government give the universities an awful lot of money. The OFS have got the powers already with the conditions of registration to make tackling gender-based violence a condition of registration—and tackling it properly. Their statement of expectations is not in any way sufficient.

Of the participants in the national study, we found that most staff working on the ground wanted to see mandatory obligations on universities, and they wanted to see the OFS being accountable to Government. There is no other way that people can find that this work will actually happen in universities without that happening.

- Q64 Chair:** Thank you, Rachel. Melanie, finally, is there anything that we can learn from the Scottish approach?

Dr McCarry: Yes, I think there is. There is a different cultural context in Scotland. We have an understanding that gender-based violence and violence against women is linked to gender inequality. We understand that there are dimensions, and it is important to recognise that and work from that as a foundation. We have had—the Scottish Government—a lot of the expert groups in the sector involved in those conversations about how to approach this. In Scotland, our approach to this has been different from the approach that has been taken in England. In Wales it is slightly different. Funding for this project came from Justice and Education—again, looking across the different areas and seeing interconnections. This is about justice. We were talking about criminal behaviours as well that have been left to institutions to manage as they see fit. There is a mandatory element.

The Scottish Funding Council, which funds the Scottish universities, made it a requirement of all Scottish HEIs to implement the toolkit, but they did not mandate which elements of the toolkit. Some could say we are doing this from a little bit to a lot, and I think we have to solidify that a bit more. And if it is not this toolkit, another toolkit. We have tried to make life easy. We have got tick boxes across all the areas of work that are identified, to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

make it easy. Between us, there is an awful lot of knowledge here. We can make these types of toolkits and roll them out, and then all we have to do is get universities to agree to follow this through and link it to funding.

Richie Benson: On Melanie's work, anecdotally I have noticed so much more of an increasing appetite for our work in Scotland over England because the funding is going in there. There is much more of a proactive approach to tackle lad culture and misogyny and to talk about hook-up culture. That shift in our work is interesting. Increasingly, there is an appetite in Scotland and less so in England.

Chair: Thank you. Let's hope our new Ministers are listening. I thank you all for your time. If there is anything else that you wish to follow up on, please do so in writing.