



HOUSE OF LORDS

Industry and Regulators Committee

Corrected oral evidence: The Office for Students

Tuesday 18 April 2023

11.15 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Taylor of Bolton (The Chair); Lord Agnew of Oulton; Lord Burns; Viscount Chandos; Lord Cromwell; Lord Gilbert of Panteg.

Evidence Session No. 8

Heard in Public

Questions 69 - 78

Witnesses

[I](#): Martha Longdon, former Chair of the OfS Student Panel; Francesco Masala, former member of the OfS Student Panel.

Examination of witnesses

Martha Longdon and Francesco Masala.

Q69 **The Chair:** Good morning. This is the Industry and Regulators Committee. We are conducting an inquiry into the Office for Students. We are joined by two witnesses: Martha Longdon and Francesco Masala. Welcome to you both and thank you very much for coming this morning.

Would you like to tell us how you feel the student panel operates, what it has been like and what your experiences are? Who would like to start?

Martha Longdon: In a very formal sense, the panel is there to provide a student perspective within the OfS, sometimes to the board, sometimes to staff members and staff teams working on policy. The most obvious way that we do that is through student panel meetings. Those are held formally four times throughout the year, and they are structured to contain a variety of discussion items on policy that is in development to get student views early in that process.

Alongside that, frequently, panel members might be called to attend extraordinary meetings or short sessions on particular topics, and to give views informally. Previously in that role, I would occasionally have a phone call with the CEO or the chair, or somebody within the staff teams, to talk about a particular issue that had emerged.

As the chair of that panel, I was also a board member at the OfS. Part of that role was to represent and reflect the views of the student panellists on that platform as well.

Francesco Masala: I want to add that, aside from those four prescribed meetings and extraordinary meetings, there was a pretty continuous, if not regular, engagement from OfS officials via other channels, particularly via email. There were opportunities to engage with wider issues as well as advance press notices of things that were about to happen; very quick consultations also happened via email. The work of the panel extended beyond those formal meetings.

The Chair: To what extent were you able to take the initiative in terms of the issues that were raised, in setting the agenda for the meetings and thinking about what problems were coming from students rather than the issues that were being introduced by the OfS?

Martha Longdon: In my role as chair of that panel, I had the privilege of helping to confirm those agendas and to select the mix of topics that might be on them. We frequently had so many requests from staff teams to be part of it that we would have to prioritise the topics and those that were at the right stage for student panel feedback to really make an impact. I felt that, in that role, I had probably a bigger role in setting the agenda than others on the panel would have.

Those items came from a real mixture of things that had been raised by other panel members and other students in the wider world and through

student engagement at the OfS, as well as from emerging priorities of the OfS in its regulatory work, such as things that might have been picked up through notifications and from government priorities as they trickled down through the board for implementation.

Francesco Masala: I definitely did not envy Martha's role in having to set the agenda for those meetings, because there were so many competing priorities. The meetings were very long. Every meeting was four hours long, but there were only four of them and so many issues to fit into all of those, so there was a lot to squeeze in. I definitely concur with the fact that the members of the panel did not have that agenda-setting power. That did not mean that we did not have the power to raise things. There was always a closed session at the end where we had a free hand to raise any topic of concern that had come to us from students or that we had seen in the media. However, that did not mean that those things necessarily were picked up, but it did mean that we had a forum to share those concerns.

The Chair: Can you give us a couple of examples of where the student panel input into the OfS has actually led to it changing its approach or making a different decision?

Francesco Masala: I can think of one instance in particular that was channelled by the OfS, but ultimately it was a Department for Education decision. That happened at one of the extraordinary meetings that we had with the then Minister of State for Education during the Covid pandemic. I remember raising an issue that I had picked up from my day job as a sabbatical officer at Bath students' union. We were having an issue where students who had applied once to the student hardship fund, which is a mechanism for support for students who are not very well off—especially during the pandemic there were fewer opportunities for work and stuff like that—were often not allowed to apply a second time when their funding ran out, which I did not think was fair in the context of a global pandemic. I raised that with the Minister in that meeting that was chaired by the OfS. That led to a confirmation and a clarification by the Minister to providers that students had to be allowed to apply for funding more times. That is something that actually changed, which I was very pleased with.

Martha Longdon: Can I speak to the wider point of not just the panel that was involved but wider student engagement within the OfS? An example would be the teaching excellence framework—the TEF. Approximately a third of its panellists are student member representatives. I was involved in the TEF pilot before I became a board member in 2018. As part of that, the student feedback led to the implementation of a student deputy chair on the main panel of the exercise for the second iteration of it, and the inclusion of student main panel members, who previously had not been there. We would be only on the subject-level specific committees.

I remember in its early days raising particular issues around the approach to TEF, and in particular the tension between where a provider might

have very good student outcomes data but quite poor NSS data, or vice versa, which spoke to a disparity between experience and outcomes. That is something that I have championed, along with other people, through the process over the past few years.

The new approach being used this year makes that distinction quite clearly. In fact, it actually creates a better weighting so that the provider must do well in both those aspects to get to a good outcome, which I think is a real win for students.

As part of that process too, we advocated for a student submission back in 2018 and all the way through, and the panel had the opportunity to shape what that submission might look like and what guidance and support would be given to students in the sector to help them understand that process and to complete it fully and engage with it.

The NSS also had a huge amount of student engagement. The OfS was asked to conduct a review looking at the future of it, what format it might take, how often it might be conducted and who might be asked questions, along with the question set. In that first logistical portion of it, the strength of feeling from students not just within the panel but in the wider sector helped secure the future of that survey and keep the format to an annual full census rather than something that had been diluted down.

Q70 The Chair: Thank you. Perhaps you could tell us how you ended up on the student panel. Do you think that the panel as it is formatted and the mechanism for getting there means that it is fully representative of the great diversity within higher education?

Francesco Masala: I was already a sabbatical officer at the time, and through being a students' union officer you are part of a lot of networks that share those opportunities. I already had access to a level of knowledge that perhaps many other students would not have. I would still say that, overall, student knowledge of the OfS is relatively low. Many students do not know who their regulator is. For better or worse, I had access to those channels, and that is how I ended up applying to the panel.

As to whether the panel is representative of the student body as a whole, I would not say that it is. I would also say that it is not necessarily designed to be a representative body, because there are a lot of student representative bodies in the sector. There is the National Union of Students. There are so many students' unions across the country that are elected by students and have a bigger claim to representation than the OfS student panel ever did. With a body of 15 people, there is only so much that can be achieved in terms of that direct representation, which is why when I was on the panel I advocated for broadening that engagement from the panel to other bodies to make sure that we could achieve that representation.

However, there was always a tension at the outset on what the panel was set out to do. Our letter of appointment said that we were at the OfS to represent the student interest, but the OfS website says that we are there to challenge and work with the OfS board. We were also told countless times that we were not student representatives, which I would broadly agree with, but there was a big tension in what our overarching aim was.

Martha Longdon: My experience was a little different. I applied through the public appointments system to be a board member first in 2018. Shortly after I was appointed, I was approached to see whether I would be willing to chair the student panel. Previously, that had not been the arrangement. A panel member was the chair, but they were not the board member at that time. I took on that role and I was the chair for the four and a bit years that I was there. I was part of the recruitment panels for student panel members across four cycles of recruitment, so I got a fairly good look at the process and how it was approached.

Frankie is absolutely right that it is not representative, but it is also not there to be representative. That word has a particular meaning within student engagement. I am conscious that I would probably refer to it more as reflective of the diversity of students whom we are there to regulate on behalf of. I would say that it is not fully reflective partly because of the restraint of having only up to 16 members in a year.

There is a good balance of people who are coming into higher education for the first time or applying, and are current students or postgraduates, and those who have left and are now sabbatical officers or in full-time employment, to get that breadth of experience. There is a really good mix of different provider types and student subject areas and things like having mature students represented, online learners and people from conservatoires. Having that experience has been really vital.

The panel is very good at knowing where the limit of its lived experience ends and highlighting where there are voices that are not in the room that need to be consulted. When that has been reflected back to the OfS, that has not always been taken forward as a consultation with those specifically identified groups, and that is one of the areas that has limited the impact slightly of that work.

The Chair: Thanks. We will move on in a minute, but when you say you were approached to be chair, who approached you and how does that mechanism work?

Martha Longdon: It is testing the limits of my memory. I remember the individual who was part of that. I believe they were part of the CEO's office at that time. They were a member of staff within the team, and they approached me on behalf of the CEO. I could be wrong about that, but that is my recollection of it.

The Chair: I just wondered. Thank you.

Q71 Lord Agnew of Oulton: Francesco, just digging a bit more into the level of engagement that the OfS has with students, do you think it is effective? Do you think that the various mechanisms it has—the student panel, the student representative and the National Student Survey—really drive decision-making at the Office for Students? The name surely must be some indication of its purpose. I just want to get a sense that the voice in aggregate of the student is not just listened to but is then impacted on. You gave your very specific example during Covid at a tactical level, but, on a broader level, the direction of higher education and so on, do you think that the OfS is listening?

Francesco Masala: I cannot give a straight answer to that question, which I think is quite telling as someone who was involved in higher education for a number of years and a student panellist for two of those. From the pure panel perspective, we were definitely listened to. People at senior levels of the OfS, including board members, were all part of the meetings, so we were definitely listened to.

As to how the issues that we raised were taken up, that is a completely different question. Even just by looking at some of the minutes of the panel meetings, you can see that some issues are repeated again and again and do not end up in any wider work, which I think is an issue, because it creates a potential lack of confidence from the student panellists themselves and from any wider member of the student population across the country. If they look at the student panel thinking they can effectively raise issues on behalf of students and then look at the actual outputs from the OfS and see nothing, that creates a lack of confidence, broadly speaking.

There is a wider point about the wider student engagement activity that the OfS did that, as a member of the panel, I was not necessarily aware of. A lot of student engagement that was done at the OfS level did not go through the panel at all, or the engagement from the panel was very limited. Again, it is difficult to see the connection between what was raised in any consultation with students to actual changes in OfS policy.

If I may point out a very quick example of that, during the review of the National Student Survey there was a proposal to add a question surrounding freedom of expression, I believe. Research was done that included consultation with students, and the report from that showed that a majority of students who responded said that they did not see that question actually having any value. However, the OfS report says that, because this was raised by stakeholders in a prior iteration of that consultation, it was going to be carried on, without any detail of who those stakeholders were. If you read the fine print of that, “Okay, students said this, but then stakeholders have said something else, and therefore this is carrying on”, it casts a doubt on the weight that the student voice has on the decisions by the OfS.

Martha Longdon: I agree with Frankie that things are not very transparent in how they are done. I am going to refer, if it is okay—please stop me if I am not allowed to—to the OfS written submission,

which I appreciate has not been published but that I have had sight of. I was not part of its drafting. Several activities relating to student engagement are outlined in it, which I feel as chair of the panel and as a board member I never had proper sight of either.

I am aware that the polling of 3,000 students goes ahead annually. I have never seen an example of where that has been used in the organisation. I have never seen that data. That is quite an important resource that we could have used to make impact, but we have not.

I am aware, certainly in the earlier years of my tenure, that the CEO and the chair would meet NUS representatives. Again, I do not know any of the content of those meetings. That was never communicated more widely.

Lord Agnew of Oulton: Have you raised that issue about the 3,000 sample and the quality of data and visibility of it?

Martha Longdon: I will be completely honest and say that I have not, on the basis that I became aware that it had happened only when I read that written submission a couple of days ago. Prior to that, I did not have the opportunity because I did not know it was there.

The Chair: Just following up on that as well, did you ever ask to be in the NUS meetings?

Martha Longdon: I had suggested it once and the response was quite ambiguous. I took it to mean that I was not particularly welcome, so I did not raise it again.

Q72 **Lord Burns:** A number of the regulators have consumer panels, in a sense, attached to them. Do you regard yourselves as the consumer panel for students?

Martha Longdon: To a certain degree. There is a controversy in the sector about the use of "consumer" when we are talking about knowledge, but that is essentially what we are at this point. There are a couple of ways where the panel differs from consumer panels in other regulators. One is its advisory nature. You will see from the written submission that the OfS says that the panel is advisory to the board. That was always the intention and the sentiment. I have not seen that particularly in practice. The panel minutes and the report go to the board, and I would be there to speak to that paperwork. However, to what extent it is actually able to impact anything there has been unclear. In conversations with senior staff, we have talked about the advisory capacity, and they have said that it is not advisory because that would create legal challenges, although it was never explained what those might be.

In other consumer panels, you might see a greater advisory capacity. You might even see a decision-making capacity, which we did not have at the OfS panel, and the capacity to undertake or commission research on particular issues. Broadly speaking, that possibility is there within the

OfS. A piece of research was commissioned—not by the panel—around the time the panel was initially established in 2018 that looked at value for money. That has not been updated since I have been there. There were plans to do some research, but they never came to fruition. That is one area where other regulators do quite well, and it could learn a lot from that activity.

Lord Burns: Are the minutes of your meetings published?

Martha Longdon: That is a slightly complicated question, because on a technical basis, yes, they are and they should be. There are a couple of things that go into that. Historically, the process was that they would go to the board for approval and be published alongside the board pack. Because of the timing of the meetings, that was a bit too cumbersome to process. It meant that they were not published for a very long time. We sped up the process and now they are published independently.

If you were to look at the student panel page of the OfS website, you would see that for 2020 and 2021 there were four sets of minutes. I am sure Frankie will agree we met several more times than that. It is unclear to me where those minutes have been stalled in that process. I think they were approved by the panel and did not go any further.

There have been conversations within the organisation about what that process looks like, partly where staff have asked us to change comments in the minutes where we do not necessarily feel that was appropriate—they were not in the meeting, and we can speak to that more fully—and partly around what the process should be for that agreement. There were suggestions at one point that it would be signed off by executive staff. They were neither part of the meeting nor part of the hierarchy, so it has become a bit too complicated, and it has led to some minutes not seeing the light of day.

Lord Burns: Do you publish an annual report as a panel?

Martha Longdon: No. As an organisation, the OfS publishes an annual report. It speaks very briefly to student engagement within that, but not very fully. Both a fuller account within the OfS main report and an annual report by the student panel would be very welcome in terms of transparency and communication with the sector.

Lord Burns: What about your communication with the student unions and the students around the country? Do you invite comments from them? Do you have a process whereby you seek to engage with them to get feedback as to the issues that you should be raising?

Francesco Masala: I suggested that when I was on the panel, because there is a big limit on the representative capacity of the student panel. There were so many students whom we were unable to represent. I suggested a broader engagement with students' unions in the first instance, and that was not taken up.

Lord Burns: Why can the panel not decide to have some broader

engagement with students?

Francesco Masala: We did not have the independence to carry out independent work on behalf of the OfS as student panellists. As far as I remember, that was the end of the conversation. We were not an independent body. We were attached to the board in a sense, and therefore that independence was just not granted to us. I really wish that we had the possibility to do engagement like that because it would have led to very good outcomes, but we were not given the possibility to do that outside the central control of the OfS.

Martha Longdon: There is also a resourcing capacity issue. Those interactions with students' unions would require some administrative support from central staff. That has always been quite limited. I think I am correct in saying that at the moment there is no student engagement manager within the OfS. That recruitment has not completed. There was an officer who was previously in that team too. I do not believe that role has been filled, which means that it is very difficult for the panel to engage in that activity because it just does not have the staff support to facilitate it.

When I first joined, Shakira Martin, who was at that time NUS president, was a member of the student panel. However, they were not there in their NUS capacity; they were there as an independent member and happened to be NUS president. That has not been the case since that appointment.

There is engagement with student unions, partly through the panel, because several of us currently are, or previously were, student union sabbatical officers. There is engagement through student workshops. There is one currently around harassment and misconduct that students have been invited to participate in. That will involve a lot of student union representatives, but not solely. They have been part of that activity. I also feel that the SU engagement written about in the written submission from the OfS is quite one-directional. There is very little getting feedback from SUs into the OfS. It is very much about informing them of what they do.

Lord Burns: Do you think four meetings a year is the right frequency? It seems to be quite a problem that there are not quite enough to be able to keep up with the events that are going on. What was your feeling?

Martha Longdon: In February 2020, the OfS launched its student engagement strategy and, as part of that, undertook a review of the panel's effectiveness and how it was working at that time. At that time I spoke to every single panel member bar one, who was not available, to get a sense of various different issues, partly around why they went for the role and partly around the logistics of how it was working. At the time they felt that the balance was broadly correct given that they had to take time away from their student responsibilities or their work to do that.

That said, in practice since then, because we went through the pandemic and became more competent at remote working, there are more frequent meetings than that. The standard meetings of the panel are only four times a year. We could stand to meet more often, but I am also conscious that there is a need to not overburden quite a small group of students. To do more engagement, you might need more panel members.

Lord Burns: Finally, what are the issues about which you had the biggest frustration that you have not been able to influence the OfS on?

Francesco Masala: If the question is about our biggest frustration in our time as panellists, for me, it was the feeling that often our voice and our input were valued and actively taken into consideration so long as we did not rock the boat and so long as what we were saying and were trying to achieve fitted very neatly into a pre-established course.

The biggest frustration within that was an instance where I really thought that our voice was being actively suppressed, because we were trying to say something that was countering an aim that felt quite political and quite removed from the interests of students, and what we were talking about was something that would have benefited students. The biggest feeling of frustration was that we felt quite often that we were there potentially more as a tick-box exercise rather than genuinely providing active challenge and for that challenge to be taken into consideration and worked on.

Martha Longdon: I fully support Frankie's point on that. I do not disagree in the slightest. I have seen small examples of hostility towards panel members, such as the comments that have been made, as a result of trying to raise difficult issues.

The reason why I wanted to join the OfS was particularly to ensure that postgraduate students' voices were represented in that space. Five years on, I still feel very much that the OfS is not the Office for Students but rather the "office for undergraduate home fee-paying students", and that there is very little in its work to reflect the needs of postgraduate-taught and postgraduate-research students, who are quite distinct from their undergraduate counterparts. It partly reflects the HERA legislation, and particularly around access and participation there is quite a clear steer from that that it is undergraduate-focused.

There are particular issues relating to things such as consumer protection where providers might charge application fees for a master's course that could impact access and participation within those providers, and the transparency of things around bench fees for postgraduate research students where there is very little publicly available information until you have an offer and there is no opportunity to compare between providers which represents the best value for money.

Specifically in the harassment and misconduct consultation work, quite specific parts of that may affect postgraduate research students in a very

different way, because they often wear both a staff and a student hat. It is not isolated to students. Undergraduates and master's students too will find themselves in that boat, but PGRs in particular are often in that circumstance, and I do not think that there has been enough consultation with those particular students to understand the nuance of that situation to get to good regulation that will work for all.

- Q73 **Viscount Chandos:** This is really following on a strong theme from the last couple of questions. Regarding the feeling you have of it being a tick-box exercise and designed so that student input is seen as cosmetic, how much do you think it was the OfS and the other members of the board and staff, whose student days are almost as long ago as applies to most of us, just feeling that they knew best? How much was it that they were having to, or felt they had to, march to a political tune?

Francesco Masala: I want to preface my answer by saying that the panel is really built up with a group of amazing, hard-working students and former students, and even within the hard constraints that we were put under we were able to achieve a fair bit of really good work. I stand by my feelings and what I said earlier, but even within that we were able to do some really good work.

Moving on to your question, I felt this is something that existed when I was at the OfS in the same way that I felt when I was a sabbatical officer at my students' union at the University of Bath. Sometimes, even though you are literally a student or literally a representative of students, there will still be someone in a boardroom who is going to tell you what you really think and what you really want. There was definitely a feeling of that. You can see that reflected in the break-up between things that the panel raised and the things that made it to policy development or any change in policy, if that makes sense.

I want to think about what I want to say next, so I will pass on to Martha.

Martha Longdon: First, I endorse the comments that Frankie has made about the students on the panel. I have worked with about 35 of them over the past four and a bit years, and I have never met a group of more engaged, passionate, articulate and intelligent students. The panel itself as a mechanism produces really great outputs. I learn something new every time I go to one of those meetings, as do senior staff, from whom I have heard comments such as, "I didn't know that before, and it has changed a little bit the way I think".

That panel has also been put in front of reps from the DfE, including the then Universities Minister during the pandemic. They kept coming back for more of those meetings, which is obviously a good sign. It seemed to me to shift the willingness of the DfE to engage with students, which says that they are doing something right and they are adding value in some way.

When it comes to people in the boardroom and staff members reflecting on their own experiences rather than those of current students, the

pandemic was a real shock to the system for those people because none of us had experienced that before and that was all very new, and that has given a slightly different perspective.

My colleagues do think about their student days, as do I. My undergraduate time was quite a long time ago now. I am a postgraduate now, and I fully admit to that. They also often speak to the experiences of supporting their grown-up children to apply for university or having seen that process come to fruition, but they are very good at distinguishing when they are speaking from that experience and when they are speaking more broadly, as I hope I was in that role too of when I was speaking personally and from a broader student perspective. I would say that is very separate, because those colleagues were always willing to listen to other views and to hear different perspectives. Certainly, in that boardroom, everybody was very keen to hear student perspectives and to probe more when they felt they did not know enough, which was a really good thing.

That is quite different from the political pressures, and sometimes that nuance and understanding got a little bit lost where policy emerged from the DfE. As a board, we did not do enough to challenge where that came from, what was driving that and what the evidence for those issues was. To solve a problem you have to understand it, and if we do not fully define what the problem is, how will we know if the solution is the correct one and how will we monitor how effective it has been? I do not think we were very good at separating that out.

Francesco Masala: I did not sit on the board. I sat on the student panel, so I do not have experience or knowledge of the decision-making at the board level. That sentiment is reflected at the panel level as well. In the formal meetings, there was often a structure where we received well in advance, I have to say, almost a consultation pack that set out what was going to be discussed in a specific session, how we were going to go about it and what we were being asked to seek input on. As a method of consulting a group of people within a meeting, that was really spot on. That is a really good way to make a four-hour meeting productive when you are trying to cover so many issues.

However, something I did not do but, thinking back, perhaps I should have done was to look at that list of items and say, "Why are we focusing on this, when there are so many other things that also merit attention? What does this say about the priority setting of the OfS? Who ultimately decides what goes to consultation to the panel and what just goes ahead? Then we get a press release in our mailbox saying that something has happened". That sentiment echoes at the panel level as well.

Viscount Chandos: Is it fair to say that a large number of different stakeholders feel that the OfS is not really working as it should do and as it was designed to, on the one hand? On the other hand, you have described—I can absolutely understand it—the quality of people involved in the panels and the commitment and time they give. Somehow, that quality is not having the impact that it should have on helping resolve the

issues that the OfS appears to have in the eyes of so many stakeholders. Is that a fair summary?

Martha Longdon: I think so, yes. There are two parts to that. One is the conflicting perspectives of stakeholders. Broadly, they are aligned but things are not going quite as they should. That is always going to be the case. In terms of which stakeholders may be slightly less happy than others in those conversations, the risk tolerance for students to be unhappy is unreasonably high when you compare that to how the OfS feels about upsetting government or providers.

The other part of that—it is really important to say this—is that I am not sure to what extent the lack of impact is a genuine lack of impact or just very poor articulation of an impact. There are examples where I have sat in student panel meetings and I have heard a student say something, and I have seen it eventually come through in a board paper somewhere; it is a very small element of it, but it is tangible and it is there. I do not think that any of my board colleagues would have been able to identify that had I not been able to point it out, and there often was not time to do that. That is the same for other stakeholders too. It is very unclear how employers' interests are represented in the final policy-making and decision-making. There is partly a lack of transparency about how that happens and partly a lack of activity.

Francesco Masala: I was a student when the OfS was being set up, and I knew very little about higher education policy in general. I have been out of the sector for about two years, so I can really speak only about that middle part of it when the OfS was an incredibly new regulator—and it is still a very new regulator. Clearly, issues have been identified from most stakeholders that have to deal with the OfS, but, because this is a very new regulator, it is not too late to change things in its tracks. It is not an established regulator and so nothing can change, but it would take very active listening by all stakeholders involved, including students, because it is the Office for Students, and often, as Martha said, it feels as though the interests of students are not represented enough. It is not all gloomy, but it does need that reckoning that things are not going as they were set out to.

Q74 **Lord Burns:** The OfS and the legislation underpinning it place a lot of focus on the issue of value for money for higher education. I understand that a lot of students do not like the concept of value for money as they do not like it to be seen as any kind of market. Do you have any thoughts about how the OfS is going about handling that part of the remit about testing whether or not we are getting value for money? Do you think that that work provides anything of value to students?

Martha Longdon: At the start of the OfS in 2018, a piece of research was commissioned around how students perceived value for money. The first thing to say is that that has not been updated in the time that I have been there, to my knowledge.

Lord Burns: Sorry, when was that?

Martha Longdon: Early in 2018. Certainly, through the pandemic, we can all say that our priorities may have changed slightly. We have experienced different things and place value in different places now. That is particularly true for students, who have seen their ways of engaging with providers move online and move back, and it has not always been the smoothest of experiences.

Value for money is incredibly hard to measure, partly because it will differ from student to student. Everyone has different reasons for going into higher education and different aspirations at the end of it. It is also quite different between different groups of students. What an undergraduate going in at 18 just wanting to have a social life and be part of that experience will want is sometimes very different from a postgrad pursuing an MBA because they have very clear career aspirations and it is tied to their salary in the future. I do not think that the OfS approach is sufficiently understanding of those different nuances. Also, I do not think there has been sufficient work to delve deeper into that understanding either, particularly given the time that has passed since that was done.

In terms of measuring it, you are never going to get a great proxy metric for value for money because it is so subjective. There is quite a clear political steer that value for money should be about whether you get a job, whether it pays very well and whether you have power and status. There are many students in different areas who will think it is about having a fulfilling life, it is about feeling that you can have agency and impact your surroundings and other people, and it is about feeling that you can contribute and live a full and happy life.

Partly, it is about meeting people. I met my, I hope, future spouse at university. Those relationships will be with you for ever, and they are really important too. It is not just about a degree at the end of it and a piece of paper. How you put that into a metric for regulation, goodness knows. There has not been enough effort to try because it does not align with the Government's steer.

Lord Agnew of Oulton: I understand that people go to university for different motivations, but should the university system not be an engine for economic growth given the much bigger problems we face as a country with sclerotic growth, increasing public indebtedness and falling standards of living? Surely, this should be one of the main engines to solve that very complicated problem.

Martha Longdon: To an extent, certainly. As a first-generation student, the first in the family from a working-class background, the opportunities for social mobility that have come from my time at university both as an undergraduate and as a postgraduate have been phenomenal and they have changed my life, and that is really important. They have increased my earnings potential, for which I am very grateful, and that is also a big driver. Given that a large proportion of the system is funded by taxpayers at the point of entry into university and paid back, not necessarily in full, by students during their working lives, that is an important part of it, but

I also think that there are lots of other skills and ways to contribute that are meaningful.

During the pandemic we had brilliant scientists who were not necessarily earning as much as they might wish to, generating lots of knowledge about something we did not know about before and building vaccines and that sort of thing, but we also needed people who were great communicators, who could do graphic design and who could create branding that would pull people in to communicate those messages and to relay them. People who go through some of the more creative courses often get a bad time of it in that their employment outcomes are not seen as favourable, but we need them. The first thing everyone did when we went through the pandemic was to sit down and watch Netflix for several weeks, which would not have been possible without those creative people. We have seen the boom in film and TV production in Northern Ireland that has come from "Game of Thrones" and those sorts of things. Those also generate quite a lot of economic revenue, but they are not necessarily given the same credit.

Francesco Masala: My perspective here comes from being a sabbatical officer during the pandemic. I was president in 2020-2021, but I was the activities officer in 2019-2020. I worked mainly with student societies. A lot of my job was trying to tell the university board governors and the university academics that, aside from the immense contribution that people who sit on committees or student societies give to their fellow students, and the sheer beauty of contributing to something such as a student group, growing it, going out and really doing something incredible with it, there is also the employability element. More often than ever before, students come out with really good degrees from really good universities, and, often, the difference comes from the extracurricular roles that they have taken on. The contribution of student life outside the lecture hall and the seminar room is incredible, not just in enriching that community but in employability, which translates into what I assume to mean economic growth in the long run.

Q75 **Lord Cromwell:** It is absolutely fascinating listening to you both, so I am really glad you could come. Thank you. On the value-for-money question, you have stressed the value of the outcomes, both of the student experience and of particular qualifications that you go on to deploy in life-changing opportunities, which I totally get.

When students take on a significant amount of debt, do they receive value for money in the sense that, "I thought I would get a lot more contact time with experts or my tutors, or whatever? Is the level of actual delivery of the course while I am there worth the debt I have taken on? Have I got what I expected, is it a bit short of that or is it better?" It is a general question but I would be interested in your impressions.

Francesco Masala: I come to this first from my time as a student. I am originally from Italy and I started university in 2016, so I was lucky enough to be able to use the Student Loans Company for my tuition fees. However, as an EU citizen, I did not have access to a maintenance loan. I

am not particularly well off. This meant I had to work part-time throughout the whole of my degree to sustain myself and by using the student hardship fund that I talked about earlier.

Value for money for me as a student meant a lot more than the number of contact hours I was getting. Value for money as a student in a higher education institution, going through a tough time and trying to make financial ends meet, meant, "Do I have a faculty that listens to me when I say that I cannot make this lecture or I cannot make this meeting? Are there academic staff who will say, 'I will grant you an extension to this assignment because I understand that you will not be able to perform at the same level because of these circumstances'?"

To me, value for money is a lot about the human element of university. If I had a degree where I had incredible lecturers, the number of contact hours that I deemed appropriate, but I left the classroom and went home and studied because there were no sports clubs—not that I did any sports—no societies, no media groups, and no volunteering, it would not have been worth while for me to be there. This comes down to such a subjective calculation within an individual to establish, "Is this value for money for me?", that it is virtually impossible to find one metric, such as the number of contact hours, and whether that is good value for money or it is not. That is my view.

Lord Cromwell: Martha, I would love to hear your view, and from the postgrads, who sometimes have a different perspective, particularly if they are paying for themselves.

Martha Longdon: One hundred per cent. There are lots of students who value that contact time and who see that as the only thing that they are paying for. You see examples where there are strikes and they miss out on teaching, where they calculate, "I should have had X amount of lectures. Each one is worth X amount or a proportion of my £9,250". I know there are universities that have tried to articulate this with varying degrees of success, but it is not clear to what extent those fees are also paying for the broader infrastructure, such as having the really great labs that you get to go and do your lab work in, or having access to lots of different ebooks in the library that make that more enriching.

The thing I really valued in my undergraduate degree was the volunteering side of it. I love having my certificate on my wall and my degree was excellent. I got a good degree outcome and gained lots of knowledge to take forward in my career. But I love volunteering and it gave me chances to meet students I would not normally have crossed paths with. It gave me my first reference for a job. It gave me a sense of, I guess, civic duty and civic pride in wanting to be more engaged in my community.

When I came back to do a master's degree, I really wanted to do the subject but I also wanted to be involved in things and meet new people. If I had not done that, I would not be in this Room. It is my passion for board games and that society that got me into student politics and got

me into this trajectory. At the same time, I would have been upset if I had missed out on huge chunks of learning and did not have access to things that actually work. So it is a real balance between the two.

It is increasingly difficult for international and postgraduate-taught students, because their fees do not have a cap. You could pay £10,000 for an MBA in one institution and £40,000 in another. Who knows? Maybe that is the actual value of it; maybe that is what it is worth to those students; it is all about perception. Realistically, because those undergraduate fees have not risen, we are seeing overrecruitment of postgraduate-taught students, with no regulation of what they are charged. To be completely honest, I do not think the quality of those courses has kept pace with the increase in fees.

Lord Cromwell: That is very interesting. Thank you very much, both of you.

Francesco Masala: I do not think anyone here would want to say that the perceived quality of your degree does not make up what a student thinks value for money is. The course is hugely important for the primary reason that that is what students are there for. However, to tie it to our work as a panel, we raised multiple times that we believed that whatever value for money ended up meaning should involve an element of broader student life outside the classroom. As Martha said, it is a balance.

Martha Longdon: We talk about student contracts occasionally. There are clear expectations on both sides of what students will do and what providers will do. I think that is really important, and clear communication about what to expect is vital, but I would hate to see a situation where that information is so prescriptive that providers cannot make positive changes for the benefits of students based on feedback because they have committed themselves in that module handbook, for example.

Lord Burns: My question relates to the point you have just made. How would you like to see the OfS take forward this issue of value for money? It has a remit for it. Is there another way of defining the experience or the value of the experience and the value of what people will be going through? What we are looking for is a way of trying to put some flesh on the bones of this notion of the remit part about getting value for money from higher education. That seems to require some method of measurement, and possibly a different form of measurement from the one that might be used for other markets or for other things. Do you have any views about how to take this forward?

Martha Longdon: There are a couple of aspects to that. One is that the promises we have around completion of courses, future earnings and employment are important to many students and we should not scrap those, but I think we should supplement them with other metrics. It is very hard to measure, but there is a lot of expertise within the OfS. It could certainly look at how to develop the sort of metric that captures a

little more of that broader social impact and that broader sense of belonging in your community as you go through life.

One area where the OfS could do better is encouraging and giving almost a template to providers to articulate what those fees cover. Part of it is around students not necessarily understanding what that fee is allocated to. I think that, alongside visible and well-narrated data for students to make informed choices about whether that provider or that course provides value for money for them, is really important. We cannot create something that will work for every student, but, as a sector, we can articulate it in a way whereby students can make informed choices and have a better shot at getting what they want.

The other aspect that I think the OfS needs to be really acute on is value for money for students who do not complete their courses. Those students will have spent from their loan book. They cannot necessarily go elsewhere and complete a whole qualification, depending on the circumstances of them leaving. The OfS needs to understand what is driving that and how to protect those students.

Francesco Masala: I agree. If the OfS is relying on 2018 research on value for money, it is definitely time to get new data out there, especially after the pandemic. There is often still an element of virtual delivery or there are still parts that are delivered virtually. Everything has changed since the pandemic. There is definitely a need to look again at the concept of value for money to see what it means to students. As we have said, the likely outcome is that it means something completely different to completely different people. Although I do not know what the solution to that would be—it would take people who are a lot smarter to come up with a solution—to an extent I wonder whether that is possible. I think there is a time and a place for the idea of value for money having an impact again. Students are paying for their education; they are making an investment in themselves and in their institution. They want to see a return on that. There is definitely a space and time for that, but I wonder whether that should be a central aspect of the OfS work, as it is currently, purely because it is such a difficult metric to find the number for.

Q76 Lord Gilbert of Panteg: I want to pick up on that because you started to address the questions that I wanted to ask. I want to stick with value for money and I am afraid I want to stick with undergraduates, Martha, if that is okay.

Notwithstanding philosophical objections to the concept of students as consumers, I think we all agree that young people entering higher education are making a massive decision that will affect their future lives and will have significant economic consequences. Regarding transparency and addressing the question you posed there, are students provided up front with information about what they can expect from their courses? That would include contact hours. It could also include whether their course is cross-subsidising another more expensive course at the institution. It could include some of the other measures of value for

money that you think could be taken into account. Is that clearly and transparently provided to students at the time they are making that decision to take on a £50,000 debt, which is probably one of the most important economic decisions of their lives?

Francesco Masala: From my recollection, and I am happy to stand corrected if I am wrong, that is highly at the discretion of the provider. I remember doing work at my university in 2021 on providing transparent information about the student basket. That went beyond tuition fees. It was based on a piece of research done by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales some time before on how much you can expect to spend weekly on average as a student. That was going to be broken down by different students—postgraduate, international, home students—and provided to applicants. This conforms to a view of students just as home fee, undergraduate students. However, it is much more likely that someone will drop out from their degree because they cannot cope with the cost of living at university as their maintenance loan is not enough than the actual cost of the tuition fees, which are covered by a loan.

In a way, I would potentially rephrase that question away from the course to what the actual cost of living is at university, how much weekly food shopping costs and so on, rather than focusing strictly on the course. I realise I have gone away from the question that you asked. So, to answer, there is a discretion of the provider. So far as I know, from the institutions that I have dealt with, there is definitely no information on whether your course may be cross-subsidising another course. I have never come across that in my time at higher education. I studied a humanities course in a highly scientific university, so you can assume there is cross-subsidising there. Regarding the course contact hours, I also have not come across a set amount of hours that I knew I would get in a week or month.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: Would it be reasonable to require higher education institutions to give a certain amount of basic information at the outset of a course, which should include the number of contact hours, whether or not your course is cross-subsidising another course, and indeed the true cost of three years at university as an undergraduate? Would it be unreasonable to require that to be provided in a clear, transparent form?

Francesco Masala: No one can argue against transparency, to an extent. I would not want you to fall into the idea that if a student, for some reason, gets nine contact hours instead of 10, they can ask, "Why has this happened?" There could be completely good reasons for why that contact hour has not happened. It ties in with the point that Martha was making before. We do not want this to seem so restrictive that universities cannot make positive changes on behalf of students because they go against this very clear, set expectation.

Do I believe that students should have more transparency over what to expect in general when they come to university? Absolutely. Should it go into that granular detail of how many contact hours you are going to be

offered? Maybe a ballpark but definitely not a precise amount of hours, because that is so fallible that it could go wrong in so many ways. But the true cost of living at university? Absolutely.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: A ballpark number of contact hours, an indication as to whether or not your course is cross-subsidising another course, and a true indication of the real cost of three years at university would be a perfectly reasonable requirement, in your mind.

Francesco Masala: I do not know about details on cross-subsidising courses, at least at a granular level, because I do not know what good that would achieve. As a humanities student, if you said, "The actual cost of my degree", if such a thing as that is calculable, "is two grand, but I pay nine grand every year. Where does the other seven grand go? Oh, the medicine course", I do not know what good could come out of that, so I would not throw my weight behind it.

Martha Longdon: Theoretically, I do not disagree. However, there is a balance between the burden of what it would take for providers to do that every single year for every single course, because it will vary quite a lot between them. There is also a point of diminishing return for student information, where students get completely overwhelmed by the sheer array of metrics and things available to them, that they struggle to make a choice and get a kind of inertia. Perhaps the OfS, and other bodies as well, should be choice architects in that process a little more consistently.

I have lost my train of thought. I am really sorry. I had another point to make on that. It might come back.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: I guess the broad point is that, if young people are making this huge economic decision, in general is it reasonable to have a framework where institutions are expected to provide them with a minimum level of transparency along those sorts of lines? Could the OfS have a role in describing that to make it consistent and easy to comply with?

Martha Longdon: In theory, I agree with both the provision of the information and the OfS having a role in it. There is a point where the amount of resource it would take to enforce that would be unrealistic. I would suggest that we think about student information being through IAG websites and information on the providers' own websites. In reality, students get information about that provision from a whole range of sources: from friends who were there, from student ambassadors on open days, and from lecturers. In my experience, it is not entirely consistent. It is very difficult to regulate whether they have been given the correct information or not.

A better use of the sector's energy possibly would be looking at what happens not when they get nine rather than 10 hours but when they consistently get four hours. What happens for those students and is that process, first, robust enough to protect students, and, secondly, timely enough? If you have a very long complaints process, they may well have

finished their course by the time they can meaningfully intervene. I would suggest that one of the things that we do not do well as a sector and that the lifelong learning entitlement may catalyse is the opportunity for students to vote with their feet. At the moment, because of the financial structures around higher education, things such as interim qualifications and it not being necessarily consistent across different universities, there is very little opportunity for students who are very dissatisfied to say, "You know what, I am going to take my £9,250 and I am going to go somewhere else, because there is a better provision there". That has been talked about for a while but has never materialised. That would be a more sensible use of some of our efforts.

Q77 Lord Cromwell: On that last point, what you are saying is really interesting. As a student, the idea that you would complain that your professor is not giving you enough contact time while you are in the middle of your degree would be quite a bold, whistleblowing type of thing to do. There would have to be a really good complaints process to deal with that.

Can I move away from the interaction between students and the OfS to the direct interaction between students and the higher education bodies themselves? How does the OfS, if it does, instruct—I think that is the word—higher education bodies to interact with students, or does it leave it to their discretion how they choose to do it?

Martha Longdon: Through the regulatory conditions, there is an aspect that providers should engage with students through developing policy and that sort of thing. In practice, it is not very prescriptive, largely because the regulator wants to be principles-based. Student engagement will look very different in a large, 30,000-student provider from how it would in a small conservatoire, for example. To an extent, that is absolutely fine. Separately, there is mandating having a student representative body through the Education Act in higher education providers. There are other things that come into play with that as well. The OfS is not necessarily as up on enforcing that and making sure that happens in practice in providers. That is not to say that lots of providers do not engage with their students very well already. Within the sector, we are pushing at an open door in many cases because the providers do want to hear what students say. They are their key consumers and it is important that their voice is a part of that process.

What needs to happen is a more principles-based approach. It is something the OfS probably has in its mind somewhere but has never really articulated. I also think it is not just about regulation; it is about leading by example. In order to encourage or mandate that providers engage students in a particular way, the OfS needs to talk the talk.

Lord Cromwell: Without naming names, among the student bodies or the students that you speak to, are there certain providers known for being very good at consulting their students, and others who say, "Oh yes, we never get consulted"?

Martha Longdon: I would say so, yes. There are a couple of providers particularly where that has trickled through into the mainstream media as well.

Francesco Masala: Regarding the potential role of the OfS, I agree with not mandating because providers are so different. A unified regulatory approach to student engagement is not desirable, in my opinion. However, I believe that the OfS could be taking a more active role in making sure that effective student engagement is happening, even by applying its own student engagement principles from the student engagement strategy, which, on paper, are good and make a lot of sense.

I remember when the Office for Students launched a student submission into access and participation plans—broadly speaking, plans by universities to increase the uptake of university positions by students from less represented backgrounds. Again, I was a sabbatical officer at Bath at the time. Bath had one of the highest disparities between the most privileged students and the least privileged ones. So, APPs were really important for us in improving access for less well-off students to university. Before, universities were just able to self-assess their progress, which of course is problematic. That was in 2020-21 and it was for the 2019-20 cycle. Students were invited to put in a submission to the OfS on the university's progress on access and participation, which, again, on paper is incredible.

I led my submission at the University of Bath. We produced a really long, thorough document that engaged academics and professional staff at the university as well as students. Then we sent it to the OfS. When I went to the panel meeting, in my role as a panellist, I raised the point that there was a need to close the feedback loop, for the students to have time to put in that submission, and that the OfS ought to look at the providers that had not put in a student submission. Anecdotally, we had heard from universities where senior managers in the university had actively discouraged student representatives from putting in a submission. Through the panel, it meant that the OfS knew about it. It really defeats the point that the OfS does not take any action when it sees that student engagement is not being taken up.

On the flipside of that—and this speaks to the OfS's role in student engagement as well—so far as I am aware, nothing came out of those student submissions for the access and participation plans. There is a dual step-up role that I believe the OfS can and should do in terms of upping student engagement.

Lord Cromwell: Would you like to add something, Martha?

Martha Longdon: There is a similar TEF submission for students that was advocated for in 2018 as a separate submission, rather than within the TEF main submission. It is the first time it has been done. About 208 out of 228 providers filled that in. The comments that were given by some of the students I have spoken to, who have been part of that

process, were very encouraging that this has catalysed conversations within their providers, which I think is entirely the point. Also, I wonder whether those submissions will ever be published alongside other parts of the TEF submission. There is a slight sensitivity within the OfS that if students say things that the provider might not agree with, it might result in legal challenge. We need to be a bit braver in owning that student voice.

Lord Cromwell: You have both said this in different ways. Clearly, there is a variable quality between different providers as to how seriously they take this. Is it a tick-box exercise? Is it, “We’ve made a decision. We have to go through the motions of telling you what our decision is and asking you to endorse it”? You have that great phrase about risk tolerance for student dissatisfaction, which I wrote down. I thought that was great. How could this be done better? Clearly, there is variability, which seems to depend on the higher education body itself taking it seriously. How could that be made more uniform across the piece?

Martha Longdon: There are more tools that can be provided for people who might wish to engage with students as part of their role but who have not had the experience of doing it before. I attended a conference relatively recently, probably about a year ago now, of marketers to students as part of the admissions process. I asked them how often they engaged with students face to face. It was quite surprising how few did within at least a term, if not in a year. It is not everyone’s experience or their cup of tea, but I think they need to be encouraged to do it and they need to be given the tools proactively to engage in that.

There are broadly three brackets of student engagement. There is student voice, which is surveys and one-way directional information from student to OfS. There is consultation, where they are given a draft of something and they are able to shape it to an extent. There is also co-creation and partnership, where students are involved from day one in helping to collaboratively problem-solve within the sector, which is what we should all be striving for.

Providers need to be quite aware of where they are in that activity and some things are better suited to one purpose than another. It is difficult because, ideally, we would love to see lots of student co-creation with lots of different providers all the time. I would argue that sometimes student partnership done very badly is worse than student voice done pretty well. Providers need to learn to be aware of how they are doing that, what they are aiming towards and how to improve that quality sequentially.

Francesco Masala: That also goes into the primary mechanisms for student engagement in universities—at least our student unions, guilds and student associations, which are often massively underresourced. The level of funding that the students’ union gets from its university is generally a level of proxy to the level of attention that is going to be given to the student voice as a whole. I am lucky to say that I have experienced that positively at my institution.

Often, student engagement in providers is done twice. There is so much duplication going on in student engagement. That is because, often, the university tries to take up part of the student engagement. Then the SU does the same thing. What if their results conflict? Often, there is no common thread between what the university is doing to engage students and what the students' union is doing to engage students. Part of that is because they are two legally separate bodies and they have their own strategies. Often, there is no communication between these two strategies.

The second thing is that there is also a lot of academic research into effective student engagement. I believe this is something that the regulator could take up, not as a mandate, not as something that a university has to do, but spending some time and some resource to give universities and student unions tools to better engage students. It is a collaborative approach rather than the OfS saying, "This is what you're going to do".

Lord Cromwell: Thank you both.

Francesco Masala: You are welcome.

Lord Cromwell: Were you going to add something?

Martha Longdon: Briefly, student engagement is increasingly difficult now for providers after the pandemic. It is quite variable. The OfS has historically done catalyst funding. That is one way of encouraging providers to highlight some really innovative practice that they can share among different providers too.

Q78 The Chair: You have mentioned this in passing. To what extent is the OfS truly independent of government or has government leaned too much on the OfS? Are there too many messages coming from government that influence how the OfS works?

Francesco Masala: There is an element of collaboration between government via the Department for Education with the OfS because of the nature of the OfS. That connection between government and the OfS to an extent is inevitable. However, I do not think—and this is my personal view—that the OfS is sufficiently independent of government.

An example of that, which I mentioned earlier, is the question on freedom of expression in the National Student Survey. I also want to relate this back to my earlier example when I was talking about the panel being prevented from saying something due to what I perceived as a political aim. I think that political considerations, rather than the true interests of students, often come first. This leads me to question sometimes the independence of the regulator as a whole. Again, I am giving another personal opinion. I believe that the perception of independence of a body such as the regulator is put in jeopardy when the most senior member of that body is a political operative. Even if it is just at the level of perception, that makes many people—and it has in the sector—question the independence of the body.

Martha Longdon: I agree that the OfS is not sufficiently independent from government. There are examples of issues where the OfS has stood its ground. One example would be in the NSS review. The DfE tasked the OfS with looking at whether the NSS was driving grade inflation. That is what it believed to be the case. The OfS looked at the evidence to try to see the argument from both sides and came back with the balanced view that, on the evidence it had looked at, it did not believe that was the case. That is a good example of the OfS really standing its ground with something that realistically the department cannot evidence. However, when we get to issues such as freedom of expression, that is a slightly different case.

As part of preparing for today, I watched the testimony that was given by Sir Michael Barber and Nicola Dandridge. Michael clearly outlined the desire in the early days to set a course of independent activity that would withstand the turbulence of government. That was very much the case in the early days that I was there, but increasingly less so towards the end of my tenure. You will see that as well from the flurry of guidance letters that have come from Ministers. It is quite a huge volume in the scheme of things.

There are particular issues where there are policies that the OfS will have to implement and enforce, freedom of speech being one of those, where the interest of students seems so polarised from the desires of government and about which of those should win out or, more importantly, what role the OfS has in bringing those stakeholders together and coming to a negotiation that works for all involved.

We have ended up with legislation that potentially will uphold the opportunities of students to bear witness to other people's free speech rather than securing their own, particularly through things like wanting to conduct research on topics that may be controversial or of writing a balanced and well-evidenced essay but their conclusion just differs from their lecturer's. In those cases, yes, there are opportunities to complain and ask for reconsideration, but, realistically, the OIA would consider that as academic judgment and there is no recourse for those students. I do not see that happening through that legislation either.

Also, in terms of the complaints process and how that will work for students, I do not think the students have been sufficiently well consulted on how that might happen either. Increasingly, there is a tension there. I have seen that tension play out not only in less productive relationships between student panel members, including me, and members of staff and members of the board, but in the reluctance of student panel members to freely speak their mind. I believe in those panel meetings that is the one place where they should be able to say whatever they feel is important to them and other students.

One example of that was where an issue was raised that was quite controversial in the sector. It was around inclusive curricula and broadening of perspectives in curricula. That view was raised. After that, I noticed a significant lack or lessening of engagement with me and other

students in the organisation. Also, unfortunately, a senior member of staff came to a panel meeting and provided some quite critical feedback to students about that with, I believe—and I have spoken to other panel members about this as well—a sort of veiled implication that if students were to continue to say things that were not aligned to their particular views, the position and the future of the panel may be reassessed.

Francesco Masala: It was not that veiled, I want to add.

Martha Longdon: I noticed from that also, with the greatest respect to my brilliant panel colleagues, a dip in engagement, where suddenly they were not as enthusiastic or passionate. Suddenly, they were asking me, “Do you think this is okay to raise in the meeting?” I absolutely feel that that is what those meetings are there for. We have structured discussions, but we also have AOB; we also have a closed session for that very reason. That did really knock on to the impact that they would have in the final 12 to 18 months of their time.

The Chair: This has been really interesting. It is clear that the experience you have had has given you a very clear insight into what has been happening. That helps the committee quite significantly. Thank you both very much for your evidence this morning.

Francesco Masala: Thank you for your invitation.

The Chair: Thank you.