

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Impact of industrial action on university students, HC 327

Tuesday 19 March 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Catherine Ansell; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Nick Fletcher; Vicky Ford; Andrew Lewer; and Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 106 to 189

Witnesses

[I](#): Professor Adam Fagan, Vice President (Education & Student Success), King's College London; Professor Karen O'Brien, Vice-Chancellor, University of Durham; and Professor Stuart Elborn, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Queen's University Belfast.

[II](#): Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education; and Patrick Curry, Director of Higher Education Oversight, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Adam Fagan, Professor Karen O'Brien and Professor Stuart Elborn.

Q106 **Chair:** Welcome to today's session, which is on the impact of industrial action on university students. We will be taking oral evidence from two panels this morning. The first panel is Professor Karen O'Brien, Vice-Chancellor of Durham University, Professor Adam Fagan, Vice President of Education and Student Success at King's College London, and Professor Stuart Elborn—joining us online—the Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Queen's University Belfast. You are all very welcome.

Could I ask each of you to provide a brief overview of how your university was affected by last year's marking and assessment boycott, and the action that the university took in response?

Professor O'Brien: Thank you very much. Thank you for inviting me here. It is a pleasure to be here and to talk about an issue that is so important to us and to our students. I think I can honestly say that there was a significant impact on Durham students and an impact on one student is one too many. So we were very concerned and very empathetic with our students as they went through this marking and assessment boycott.

To give you a little bit of context, Durham University has a very back-loaded approach to assessment. In the final year, a lot of the assessments go on in that last period with lots of projects, and lots of exams. A lot of universities have two exam periods a year, one in January, and one in the summer. We only have one, so we knew in advance that the marking and assessment boycott was likely to affect us quite significantly. About 18% of our staff took part. Those staff were very concentrated in particular departments. So proactively we looked very closely at our academic processes and also at the communications and support we could put in place for students, and we took a very active management approach.

On the academic side, we were mindful that we had to maintain quality and standards in our degrees while maximising the certainty we could give students about when they would get their degrees and their marks if they were continuing students. We relied on regulations that we have that allow us to classify students if they have about 75% of their credits, and we were able to offer either full degrees, guaranteed minimum classifications, or guaranteed awards to about 80% of our students in that summer period. That left us with 20% of our students with not enough credits or marks for a guaranteed award or degree.

We had to be very active about trying to persuade and talk to our staff and persuade them to return to marking during the summer. Quite a number did—

Q107 **Chair:** Can I just ask for a point of clarification around that? You



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mentioned about 18% of your staff were on strike.

Professor O'Brien: Yes.

Q108 **Chair:** You then referred to 80% who had the mark. Was it all of your students who went through that process or was it only those students who were affected by staff being on strike and not being able to get marked?

Professor O'Brien: I think it is fair to say that, as in all universities, the marking and assessment boycott had a particular impact on particular departments, so 18% of our overall academic staff, but concentrated in certain departments—that is for sure. For example, our business school was entirely unaffected by the marking and assessment boycott. So it was very differentially distributed in a way that we did not quite know how to predict, but it had differential impacts on different students, and they had different numbers of marks and outcomes as a result.

During the summer, we ran a series of supplementary exam boards as marks came in. By August, we had about 13% of our students with no guaranteed degrees, so we were able to whittle that down but 13% is still very many students, so we made the students a goodwill payment of £500—not a compensation; they were still entitled to ask for and claim compensation. A goodwill payment.

On the student support side, again, we took a very proactive approach to student support. This is the Covid generation of students. We know that they need support in so many ways. We stood up a dedicated comms team. We sent weekly emails explaining to students what they could expect. We had a website. We responded to individual student emails with the team. We enlisted our student union, who were supportive of us and were not supportive of the marking and assessment boycott and they were very effective at communicating with students. As you probably know, Durham is distinctive in having 17 colleges and we very much used our colleges and our college support systems to communicate with and support students.

We also established a taskforce with a named individual at its head who liaised individually with students. We invited all students to contact this person individually if they needed help with liaising with employers, if they were worried about their visas, if they were worried about going on to further study, and through that taskforce we individually helped 500 students, both practically and financially.

Then finally on the mental health side, we had already greatly augmented the counselling and mental health support that we provide to students as part of a big project that has been underway, and we did provide a very significantly increased amount of one to one counselling. We found that students during this period really did want a lot of one-to-one counselling. That increased tenfold during the period, so we were seeing some impacts, and were providing the support that we could.

Q109 **Chair:** Thank you. I think that is useful. We will come back to some of



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the detail of that. Can I just ask, in terms of the 500 who you mentioned was your taskforce, how does that number compare to the 13% of students with no degree by the middle of—

Professor O'Brien: That was £500 to each of those students so it was a—

Chair: No, I think you mentioned that the taskforce was able to help 500 students.

Professor O'Brien: I don't have that Venn diagram in my head. I could get that information for you, but I would think there would be a lot of intersection between those two groups. A lot of those students were international students who were holding master's places at other universities, but they needed to have their degree in order to progress. We liaised individually with universities.

Q110 **Chair:** What is the total number of students in a year at Durham?

Professor O'Brien: A graduating cohort is 5,000 undergraduates.

Chair: Thank you. Professor Fagan?

Professor Fagan: Thank you. Very similar. This was a very, very difficult period for King's College London. I think the stress that students endured was very difficult to watch and observe. We were in a slightly different situation. We were able to classify and graduate all of our students who were eligible to do so, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. We were able to do that because many of our staff took on additional marking and were very keen to become involved in that in order to mitigate the impact on their students.

We also have regulations that allow me and my senior colleagues to hold examination boards where staff involved in the action were reluctant to do so or refused to do so. So we were able to make those decisions, which meant that every single student eligible for a degree received a degree when they should have done.

We worked incredibly closely with our student union and placed a great deal of emphasis on communication because the impact on this generation of students, on their mental health—their almost paralysis of fear in not being able to move on to the next stage of their life—was tangible. It involved, for example, a significant number of emails that I responded to personally, dealing with parents, because of course parents were very concerned as well, and in about 150 cases—perhaps a few more—dealing directly with employers and other universities where students had been offered a place at a postgraduate course and the student was anxious about what would happen.

We deducted salary from striking staff and all of that money, all of that resource was deployed to employ additional mental health counsellors and also, wherever we could, to provide additional support for students: study sessions, advice on careers and employability.



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I have very little to add beyond what Professor O'Brien has said, other than that our situation was similar and I would estimate that about 25% of our students were impacted. Across our nine faculties, there was action in only four, but I think it is important to emphasise that where there was action it was acute, and it was significant. I don't want in any way to give the impression that just because it affected just 25% of our students, it wasn't devastating for those students and very, very difficult.

Q111 **Chair:** Presumably, the media focus on coverage on this created concern for students.

Professor Fagan: Absolutely. Of course they were networked with their fellow students in other universities, so even though we continually reassured them that either they would progress through progressing students, or they would graduate, they were listening to stories elsewhere and so we were mitigating an awful lot of that anxiety as well.

Q112 **Chair:** We will go into some more detail as we go through the brief. Being in London, you probably have a higher proportion of international students than some of the other universities. A number of issues particularly affected that cohort. The fact that you were able to get everyone classified and awarded presumably will have helped with that, but was there anything additional that you did to reassure that cohort and work with them?

Professor Fagan: Absolutely. We had specifically targeted communication because many international students could not quite grasp the broader context. The industrial action had lasted five years. Many of our home students had observed or understood that the sector was in the grip of this long period of action. With students coming in from parts of south-east Asia and elsewhere, perhaps for a one year master's, we were very careful to give them a broader context, but also to reassure them that actually we had a grip on the situation, and that it was something we were managing.

Q113 **Chair:** Thank you. Professor Elborn, can I bring you in from the Queen's University experience?

Professor Elborn: Thank you and thank you for the invitation to join this meeting.

Quite a number of the interventions that have been described by my two colleagues were very similar in Queen's, in terms of really focusing on the student experience, and ensuring we did appropriate student support in those schools affected. That was driven by a central critical incident team that met for a large part of the month of May on a daily basis, ensuring that communication was clear to our students.

In terms of the effect, in one faculty—medicine, health and life sciences—there was no effect, and it was pretty clear from the beginning of the marking and assessment boycott that it would not be impacted. So we focused our attention on the other two faculties and the schools within those where we saw problems coming.



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We worked very hard with students, with staff and also with the unions. We continued a strong dialogue with our UCU colleagues during that time, and I think it is also important to emphasise that we were four to six weeks ahead particularly of the universities in England. Our educational cycle means that we have our graduations in late June, early July, which is ahead of many of our colleague universities.

Despite the stress and difficulty and challenges to the students—and to staff because the marking and assessment boycott was very difficult for staff who were participating and for staff not participating—we were able to get to a position where we were sure that we could get all of our students through graduation, not necessarily with the classification.

During that time, as I think you will know, we had quite intense discussions with UCU and directed by our senate, our governing body, we came to a resolution to the boycott that allowed us to then proceed with graduations in a completely different atmosphere and culture. We were able to get all our students graduated by the end of August because the UCU staff who were participating in the marking assessment board that came off that were able to complete all of the marking in August and get exam boards through. Students were then able to proceed with their careers in September.

Q114 Chair: We will come back to that element in a minute but, in terms of the subject breakdown, would you say that that was similar across the piece in terms of which subjects were affected? I know that only a minority of subjects at each university were affected. Were the arts and humanities, broadly speaking, more affected and sciences less so or is it more complicated than that?

Professor Elborn: In general, although not entirely consistent. For example, in addition to many of our arts and humanities subjects, our architecture programme was very challenging, as was psychology, and particularly subjects where there was a professional body involved. The degrees had to be accredited. We spent a lot of time with those professional bodies ensuring that the students would have the appropriate credits and accreditation so that they could move on in their careers.

Chair: I see you are nodding Professor O'Brien.

Professor O'Brien: Yes, we had a similar experience and similar constraints with accrediting bodies as well.

Q115 Chair: I will just touch on a little bit more detail. Professor Fagan, you took the approach of reassigning marking to other members of staff. How did you ensure that the work was marked by staff with the appropriate level of subject expertise?

Professor Fagan: That was very challenging, and we were very clear from the outset that that had to be the principle. If you were marking economics, you had to be an economist. We were able to manage that within faculties, within departments, with some of our alumni professors,



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some of our retired professors, who we contacted, but nobody marked work who did not have expertise in that subject area.

For example, I undertook a quite considerable amount of marking—as a political scientist. I marked final-year dissertations. We prioritised final-year marking. But in many circumstances, it was a more senior person who ended up doing the marking than would otherwise have been the case. I can say with absolute certainty that the integrity of degrees was upheld, and that the work was marked according to our rubrics. It was checked, moderated, and second-marked in the way it would normally have been done.

Q116 **Chair:** You mentioned that your constitution, your regulations, allowed you to do that. Is that something that differs from the Durham example?

Professor Fagan: Absolutely.

Chair: So a legislative barrier to you being able to take that approach?

Professor Fagan: It is very interesting to have had the conversation with Professor O'Brien because the system in Durham appears much more regulated, is a different type of system. We operate still according to the old University of London regulations that allow us, for example, look across a student's performance across a degree programme, and if there is evidence of learning objectives having been met, we are able to condone certain marks.

We operated within our existing rules, our normal regulations. There is also no prescription as to who should mark work. There is no prescription constituting emergency exam degree awarding bodies. It is all permissible within our regulations, so 90% of our student graduating cohort was classified according to our normal regulations.

Q117 **Chair:** Thank you. In your case, Professor O'Brien, you took the approach of giving students interim classifications based on marks that were already available.

Professor O'Brien: We did, yes.

Q118 **Chair:** When the full marks did come through, how different were they? How consistent was that approach?

Professor O'Brien: That is a very good question, and a question we asked ourselves prospectively, because we gave interim classifications on a no-detriment basis; clearly, you are not going to tell someone that they have a first and then more marks come in and they have a 2:1. So we ran a statistical model.

We raised the bar a little bit on what it takes to get a first or a 2:1, and then went through a very thorough exercise. We graduated our students on the basis of their having all their marks, so interim with not all marks and then final classifications with all their marks. We ran a statistical exercise that we shared with our senate and our external examiners, and it was accurate to the extent of 99.7%. We were very fortunate in being



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supported by an excellent statistician and we have a lot of confidence that those interim classifications were, in the end, the same as the real ones.

Q119 **Chair:** That only applied to 87% of the students applying for graduation. So there were those who—

Professor O'Brien: That is right, yes. That is right because there were those remaining students for whom we were not able to find reassigned markers and who were undoubtedly in limbo during the course of the summer.

Q120 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Thank you. I want to go into the process at Queen's University. Professor Elborn, you were able to end the marking and assessment boycott early due to reaching a local agreement with the University and College Union. Can you outline the process in more detail and explain why you took this approach?

Professor Elborn: Yes. As I mentioned earlier, we were already in full sail in terms of interacting with our students, our staff and with UCU in early May when this was coming and the stress on students, particularly, but also on staff was gathering. We used a slightly different approach in terms of authenticating and making sure that we were maintaining the quality of degrees, in that we used a number of credits to get to an unclassified degree and a number of our students graduated with that, but then subsequently had their classification identified.

We were meeting regularly. We agreed after a number of very engaged discussions, particularly with our students. They protested on a number of occasions. We actually went out and met them with some of the union representatives and the student voice within this, intensified the need, we felt, for both for the union and on ourselves to find a resolution because of the impact it was having, particularly on the students.

After a number of very difficult negotiations but being pragmatic with our colleagues in UCU, we felt that coming to a determination of an offer that would allow them to move off the marking and assessment boycott but would be realistic and allow us to realign with UCU and UCEA in the future was the best solution that we could find for our students at that point.

So we made the offer of a 2% increase mortgaged against whatever the increase would be in the following year, backdated until April of that year and agreed to repay any money that had been deducted from those union members who had taken part in the marking and assessment boycott if they would go back and ensure that all of the student scripts, projects, exhibitions, and so on, were marked and would allow us to have full classified graduation by the end of August.

Q121 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Okay. I think that led to some disagreement with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association that said it was an extremely serious matter, incompatible with the continued membership of UCEA. What was the implication for the university and for the students



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and how will it affect you if there is any further industrial action?

Professor Elborn: We are currently suspended from UCEA for three years, although we have kept channels open for discussion around other aspects of UCEA's activities. It is not just collective bargaining that UCEA leads. There are issues around pensions, health and safety, and so on. We are keeping those discussion lines open, but we are not allowed to participate in UCEA activities for three years, although it may be that the board of UCEA might reconsider that over the next year or so.

Q122 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** What impact do you see then on the staff? Do you need to have membership of UCEA then?

Professor Elborn: We would prefer to be members of UCEA. The situation, though, is that we are now moving into bargaining locally with UCU in the coming year. We have taken advice particularly from Imperial College, who already has an arrangement with UCU, where it does local bargaining not as part of the collective bargaining and learning from other universities who have other variations.

We will proceed on the basis that we would like, where possible, to keep as aligned as we can to the collective bargaining that is agreed with UCEA and UCU, but this does give us some flexibility over the next period while we are outside of UCEA to come to some local solutions, which is quite important because the education sector in Northern Ireland—as it is in the devolved nations—is not the same as it is in England. There are differences in how the sector is organised and funded.

One of the challenges we felt was that UCEA was essentially being driven by the situation in the English universities. We were ahead of that by, as I said, four to six weeks and we had different pressures and stresses in Northern Ireland with being relatively close to the Government—the Government were not sitting at the time, but with civil servants, with parents. It is a smaller community and the pressure around us on students and staff was quite intense.

Q123 **Chair:** Can I just ask in that context and on that basis, how different was the approach that Queen's took from that of Ulster University—or was Ulster University not engaged in this?

Professor Elborn: Ulster had challenges with the marking and assessment boycott. You will need to ask Ulster about the details but Ulster was managing it in a range of ways with external marking and was also using statistical modelling, as I understand it, although I am not party to the details of its approach. But it had issues with the marking and assessment boycott in Ulster.

Q124 **Chair:** Has it stayed aligned with UCEA in terms of collective bargaining?

Professor Elborn: Yes, it has.

Q125 **Chair:** The point that UCEA made to us in its evidence was that both the unions and the universities are clearly committed to collective bargaining and that that is actually supported by the unions. It was obviously a



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pretty substantial decision that was taken to depart from that the case of Queen's. You set out some of the context for that, but do you want to add anything in terms of why not stick to collective bargaining in these circumstances?

Professor Elborn: We felt that given this time difference, our process being four to six weeks ahead of particularly the English universities, there was some sense that there may be some resolution found over the next six weeks but that was going to come too late for us and for our students. In consultation with our senior executive team and our governing body, we felt we needed to make an offer that would be acceptable to our colleagues in the union to move this forward for the sake of the students.

We took the decision to move forward with this offer, hoping that to some extent that UCEA would understand that position, but as it turned out the board decided that we had sufficiently deviated from collective bargaining with the agreement that we made and that that would have a consequence for us.

Q126 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** I move on then to communications with students; this is to all the panel. Much of the evidence received by the Committee suggests that communications between students and universities was poor, with students dissatisfied with the frequency and detail of the information provided by the university. You have touched on what you did but could you go into a bit more detail? Someone talked about a taskforce to help students. Was that you Professor O'Brien?

Professor O'Brien: It was, yes.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Can we find out a little more about how that actually worked and how the students perceived it?

Professor O'Brien: I am happy to speak to that. Obviously, it is a matter for regret if any students do not feel that they were communicated with in a way that worked for them and that they felt was frequent enough, but I can honestly say that we took a very proactive approach to communications. Weekly emails set the situation both for continuing students, who were another group affected by the marking and assessment boycott and for finalists; we had a regularly updated website.

We had communications through some of our student channels. I had regular meetings with the presidents of the JCRs in the colleges because I think students trust communications from other students, and they themselves are very proactive in the way that they communicate and support students.

We did repeatedly invite students to contact a named individual, our equivalent of Adam, our PVC education, and we set up a taskforce of individuals, including this named individual who would deal with individual queries; in the end, what really matters to students is that they



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understand that we see them as individuals with individual needs, individual stresses and strains. Everybody's predicament is different.

I honestly think we did the absolute best that we could. As always in a large organisation, you get some areas that do not completely join up and you get some individuals—particularly because the finalist students had gone home. They were not on campus. We did try QR codes in the library. We made videos. We tried a range of ways of reaching them, but some of the students were off campus and perhaps that did not always help them feel connected to the university.

Q127 Mrs Flick Drummond: One of the biggest criticisms of Durham was that the results did not come out until September. We have here that, yes—"it later confirmed it was unable to provide a definitive date as to when the students would see its full results, which were later confirmed in September". In an article in the *Telegraph*, students at Durham University criticised the university for "not having a clear plan" and its communications were "missing the point". I know one of our colleagues had a daughter at Durham who—

Professor O'Brien: Yes, I have spoken to your colleague. We certainly have and I spoke to many parents besides that I should say. As Adam said, we also had contact with parents.

For many students we had a degree of certainty, interim guaranteed awards and we were able to say to them that the marking and assessment boycott would come to an end. It had a fixed term. It was due to come to an end in September, so we had that certainty about when staff would be obliged to return to marking.

However, for the 13% of students that I mentioned to you, it is true that before the end of that period it was very hard for us to say definitively when we would get their degrees out if it were earlier; but as soon as the marking and assessment boycott ended, which was on 7 September, we wrote to all students and we gave them a definitive date by which they would get their degrees and we stuck to it.

Q128 Mrs Flick Drummond: It sounds like every university did it slightly differently. I think you said King's were able to classify them early because you brought in other people to mark.

Professor Fagan: We classified them on time. We did not do it early.

Mrs Flick Drummond: On time?

Professor Fagan: Yes. With regard to the communication, I think we always have lessons to learn. It was very, very challenging. These were incredibly testing circumstances. One of the difficulties we faced was in striking a balance and not spreading fear and anxiety—you know, 75% of our students were unaffected—so we used local channels, bespoke channels and we worked with our student union. Often, however, we were in a situation where we were second guessing the behaviour of our



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colleagues and the union nationally. We were keeping a very close eye on the negotiations.

We sometimes found ourselves in a situation where we had no updated information to pass on to students, so actually just reiterating the same reassuring messages in different ways and responding to particular anxieties I think probably for some students fell short of what they would have hoped for. But I honestly believe it was probably the best we could do under the circumstances.

I think visibility was the key thing and my senior colleagues and I made ourselves available at every possible opportunity to meet students and to talk to them, and to try to give those messages of reassurance. We were in a fortunate position that we were able to say with quite a high degree of confidence that they would graduate and that we would be able to classify them so that they could attend graduation.

Q129 Mrs Flick Drummond: I think one of the criticisms of King's College—and actually I have heard this from the other panellists too—was the focus on emotional support rather than tangible measures as to when the university put in place the mitigation effects of the boycott and when they were going to get their results. It is great that you put help for mental health in, but they wanted to know dates and wanted some surety of when they were going to get their results so they could move on. You have mentioned that before.

Professor Fagan: The challenge again was that we were balancing difficult industrial relations obviously, but we were very keen not to give false hope. We were pretty confident that we knew the dates and we knew that we could stick to our schedule, particularly for final-year students.

It was different for our continuing students because we were very clear to them that our finalists were our priority, that the continuing students would have their work marked, but that it would be late. We could not guarantee when they would get their marks, but what told them was, "You will be able to progress. You will be able to come back in September and continue your degree, do not worry. But you might not have your marks until the start of the next academic session, because we are prioritising getting all the work marked for final-year students".

We were also in a very difficult relationship with striking colleagues if we were too robust in our assertions; we did not want to deliberately provoke tensions. We were treading a very careful line. Sometimes it was easier to not emphasise dates and specificity while we were doing things in the background.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Just in case you missed them.

Professor Fagan: Exactly, yes. We did not want to inflame the political tensions unduly, because that would have had a devastating impact on students.



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I take your point about mental health. Mental health is perhaps a bit of a broad term for what we were doing. What we were actually doing was supporting their learning and studying and giving them the advice and guidance. I think in extreme cases, in the minority cases where it did accentuate mental health issues for students, obviously we put in additional support, but it was really about welfare and advice.

Q130 Mrs Flick Drummond: Professor Elburn, you said earlier that you ensured that communication was clear. How did that differ from our other panellists?

Professor Elborn: It was quite similar. We had a very clear central position, empowering our heads of school and faculties to have those local conversations with groups and with individuals, so that issues were being dealt with at all levels.

A lot of students were not affected, and we did not want to make their anxiety worse. On the students who were potentially affected, it was the uncertainty of what was going to happen and what those dates were and how they would progress in their careers. That was very challenging.

For me, the key bit was having engagement with our student union, but also with the groups of students affected. We had group discussions with students—for example, the architecture students who were particularly affected because in their programme they move in their Master of Architecture on to an employed part of their training and they were deeply worried about how their careers would progress. Doing a Town Hall with them and then following up with individual discussions was really important.

It was similar for the international students where visa issues were potentially challenging and also parents who were coming from a long way to graduation—the uncertainty of, “Do we tell our parents not to come because we might not be graduating?” Those very difficult situations had to be handled very sensitively by the staff and the teams that knew the students, but with a sense of knowing we had some pathway through this that would bring the reassurance that they needed.

Our UCU colleagues also helped us with communication. So I think bringing the students, the management and UCU into rooms to have those conversations and then support the communication was also really helpful for us.

Chair: I will bring in Caroline on the point of international students.

Q131 Caroline Ansell: Good morning. International students, home students abroad and postgraduate students: three particular groups all deemed to have been particularly affected by the boycott. We have touched on each one in various guises, but I wonder in this moment whether you might focus on those three groups and talk about the sorts of provisions that you put in place that was specific to the challenges that they faced as individual cohorts within that. Professor Elborn, as you just mentioned international students, could you elaborate?



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Professor Elborn: Not dissimilarly to the situation in Durham, we made a fund available for financial support because that was something that we could do, clearly, and a large number of students did put a very short case forward if this had an impact—

Q132 **Caroline Ansell:** That was for international students?

Professor Elborn: That was for all students, but it was particularly helpful for the international students. Many of our home students have access to home so they did not need additional accommodation, whereas that was a much bigger challenge for international students and almost by default for some of our postgraduate students, because that group is enriched by having many more international students.

So, financial support, direct communication with their schools and with their tutors, and ensuring that the student union and the student voice beyond the student union was being engaged with and in the schools where there were particular issues that we were picking those up and dealing with those early.

Q133 **Caroline Ansell:** Those were generally applied provisions rather than specific to these individual groups? I am just interested in this moment if there was specific, bespoke, targeted provision for these three groups of students. Perhaps I will move to Professor O'Brien.

Professor Elborn: It was pretty general, so any student with any problem, regardless of their level or whether they were local or international, could avail of the support. For the international students we did have particular advice available around visas, so we could deal with any visa issues and there were a number of such situations that we were able to deal with.

Q134 **Caroline Ansell:** Smashing. Thank you. Professor O'Brien?

Professor O'Brien: I will start with international students. You are right, they were a distinct group and they were particularly affected and particularly concerned.

At the national level we got very good support from UKVI. It allowed international students who were planning to do post-study work to have an eight-week additional period during which they would have to present their degree results.

The most concerned group of international students were those who wanted to progress to master's programmes. Certainly in Durham's case, a lot of students want to go on to places like King's. Adam and I were battling emails back and forward all summer about these students. Within the taskforce offering individual support that I mentioned, we had visa specialists, and we also had dedicated specialist advice for international students.

We wrote a series of what we called "highly likely" letters to a number of institutions, explaining, "These are the marks the student currently has. This is our assessment based on their prior attainment of their likely



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performance. If you have given them a conditional offer of a 2:1, we are very confident that they will get a 2:1 and, moreover, if they do come and this does not work out we will refund the fees". So we underwrote a variety of things including accommodation fees.

It was very low risk because, in practice, as far as we are aware, all our international students progressed to their master's programmes, but they did need a lot of dedicated support and we did work with UUK, which worked with UKVI to sort out the national visa issues. As a join up, that worked extremely well.

You mentioned other groups. Postgraduate students mainly do not fall within that assessment period. If we had had a marking assessment boycott at different points in the year, you would have seen different universities and different groups of students hit very hard. We mainly do not mark postgraduates during this period other than our master's in social work students. They cannot progress to become social workers without degrees. Interim awards would not do, so we spoke to our sociology department, and it marked their work. Our staff exercised some flexibility and was some bespoke work was done.

I am sorry, you had a third group and I do not recall it.

Q135 **Caroline Ansell:** Those are important insights, though. The other group was home students abroad.

Professor O'Brien: Home students abroad: they would mainly be progressing students, students on modern language placements or in the politics department. They were largely unaffected because they would have been assessed in Germany or wherever they might happen to be studying elsewhere in the world. It was important to stay in contact with them but, like all progressing students, they were reassured that no matter what, they would progress.

Q136 **Caroline Ansell:** I might just come back to you on that in a moment when I have heard from Professor Fagan.

Professor Fagan: Thank you. I think it was very challenging indeed for postgraduate students. Unlike Durham, the assessment for their work did fall within the mad period. They are with us for only a year. They have paid high fees, whether they are home or international, and the big focus was on the next stage of their lives, employers.

We prepared a letter that could be adapted very easily that they could supply to employers or for internships. I think I have said already that in a number of cases we worked directly with employers in order to make clear what the university's position was and what we predicted would happen.

If I may, I will focus on the undergraduates. There was one particular group that I was concerned about throughout. We have a very large percentage of students from what we call broadly "widening participation backgrounds"—the first in their family to come to university. My concern



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and my colleagues' concern throughout was about disengagement. That their first experience of university was this disruption, missed learning, work not being marked and not getting feedback.

For us, that was a big challenge, particularly in London where students live quite far from campus and if they were not coming on to campus how we would make sure that they are simply not lost in this process. We have a very large postgraduate population, 40% of our students are postgraduate, but then we also have this large number of undergraduates from particular backgrounds.

Q137 Caroline Ansell: On that, in terms of the widening participation cohort—not wanting to pigeonhole everybody—I want to road test what was said by the chief exec of UCEA, who said that international students postgraduate and final-year students had “received a disproportionate profile in terms of the visibility of the issues affecting them”. Does that suggest that the impact was felt quite profoundly by other groups, such as those coming from widening participation? Bear in mind I asked exactly that question, so clearly felt international students were important in the mix, but has that rather clouded other groups who could be as impacted?

Professor Elborn: Not in our case. We were very clear that all our students were affected. Differences in the extent of the impact had to be anticipated and we responded to that but I hope my comments suggest that we were not just focusing on international students. Yes, of course, they are paying higher fees. They are facing different challenges studying in London and are unfamiliar perhaps with the sector, but there were also home students, whether from a WP background or not—these are 18 or 19 year-olds who are barely adults.

Q138 Caroline Ansell: Is it the same visibility, the same profile, in terms of understanding the impact of the boycott?

Professor Fagan: I think that yes, there were very, very similar difficulties and I think the messaging had to be nuanced and that was one of the big challenges we faced. We do not have a remotely homogenous community and therefore any messaging has to be nuanced and we have to do everything we can to try to make sure that we are reaching different audiences.

Q139 Anna Firth: We have heard a lot of evidence as part of this inquiry about the effect on students' mental health of this very difficult period, which I do not think you disagree with. Some of the evidence has been that the help and support were more focused on trying to get the students their degrees or help them with the next stage than on the anxiety that it was causing them at the time, which I can also understand.

What specific mental health support did you offer? More importantly, what feedback did you receive? More importantly than that, what have you learned during this period to avoid students having such a terrible experience should this happen again? What can you do better?



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Professor O'Brien: I would say very strongly that mental health support was front and centre in our thinking about our students. We are going through a process of mental health charter accreditation as a sector, and we are thinking a great deal more about that. We had already made a very significant investment in mental health support at Durham, and we take it very seriously.

The most important thing that we had to say to our finalists—remember that a lot of them had left campus—was that even though you may have been to your graduation, or in some cases celebration ceremony, and you are no longer with us, you still have full right of access to all of our support services. In our case that includes very bespoke support from our colleges. We use our 17 colleges who know our students individually very well as key planks in our support architecture, including widening the participation of students in the way that Adam mentioned.

We have tracked the numbers and we have looked at the numbers of students accessing general student welfare support last year—the wellbeing and welfare support compared with previous years—and it did not go up significantly. Nevertheless, those were Covid years as well. We have a general situation in which students are accessing support services more than they used to. We also significantly increased the number of counselling 1-to-1 sessions available.

As I mentioned, during the last academic year we saw a tenfold increase in the uptake of those sessions. We cannot be sure that those were entirely around the marking and assessment boycott because clearly, we cannot ask, but going for a tenfold increase suggests to me some kind of cause or correlation between these two things.

Again, it is very difficult to elicit feedback because we want to know that students access those services. We have a national student survey running at the moment. We will get some feedback from that, particularly in the qualitative comments that students make about how they felt about the support that they got if they are continuing students. We are clearly talking extensively to our student union and our student reps and colleges about the support that we provide. I think the message is that it is good, that it is very well received, but we can never entirely meet the scale of the demand and that is the reality of contemporary higher education. We continue to invest in that area.

Q140 **Anna Firth:** I understand, of course, that you cannot get feedback on the actual support because that would probably reveal confidential issues, but you can certainly get feedback from students on the support they were offered and whether it was helpful. How much feedback have you got and what does it tell you?

Professor O'Brien: We have got a certain amount of feedback in student support services. It is uniformly very positive. We gathered that as part of our mental health charter submission and we recently had our accreditation visits. It will be interesting to hear what the visit comes out with, because that is an independent assessment of the support that we



provide. We generally get positive feedback from our students about the support that we provide.

Q141 Anna Firth: What are the lessons learned for the future? As we know, for some students it meant that they could not take up the job that they were hoping to take up because they had to make applications, that required them to put their degree down. The civil service was one such example. In case this should happen again, have you made contact with organisations like that to try to ensure that if this were to happen again, they would accept your recommendation of what the degree might be?

Professor O'Brien: We were in contact with a lot of big employers. We all were, across the sector, and mostly we found that particularly the big international employers and the UK employers were very understanding. My understanding was that for the civil service exam, there was a willingness to defer the requirement to present a degree transcript. Most employers who understand the UK, or who work internationally within the UK, were very flexible and very understanding.

It was a little bit more challenging when we were writing to employers in other countries who had little understanding of what the UK was like. If students have lost job opportunities for reasons like that, we were very clear with students, as we must be, that they have a right to complain. We told them in every communication how they could complain, and, in some cases, we have compensated students financially. That does not entirely compensate for the distress and inconvenience, but financial compensation for potential loss of earnings is what we have offered students.

Professor Fagan: We invested somewhere in the region of £1.5 million in additional support for mental health and welfare during that period. The evidence is difficult to disentangle because when we looked at the qualitative data on when students were presenting to mental health services, there were very few cases where they mentioned the marking assessment boycott or industrial action. However, whether they had mentioned it or not, our approach was that we needed to put this additional resource in place.

As I have said throughout, it is different because we were able to say with some confidence that they were going to graduate, and they were not going to miss the opportunity of employment. Nevertheless, they did not always hear that. We kept having to reinforce it.

We understood this already, but what it has made us realise, what it has augmented, is that this was feedback not being given. The feedback moment is the point of contact in a large multidisciplinary university. If you take away that interaction, it is that disengagement and it is the lack of contact. It is the tutor, it is the academic, who gives feedback and notices a student is clearly not well or perhaps has not turned up. Taking that out of the equation was problematic.



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What we did within departments was make sure that where there were staff who were not involved in the action, and even in the most affected departments, there were always staff who had made it very clear that they were not participating. Heads of department did everything where they could to make sure additional resources were available. For example, there were general feedback sessions where we engaged some of our teaching assistants to offer additional sessions, so students at least had opportunities to check in and make sure. I think it goes back to that differentiation between what is mental health and what is just making sure that the support network is in place.

Chair: I am going to have to ask for shorter answers, I am afraid because we are going to run out of time for this panel.

Q142 **Anna Firth:** Professor Elborn, anything to add?

Professor Elborn: I have a couple of points. One, this cohort of students had been impacted by the pandemic and I think that has to be recognised not just in how we take them through this process; it may have longer-term implications for them.

A lot of this comes down to having to deal with individuals. While it is great having principles, often the solution, the help or support required was dealing with the person at an individual level. That was from a combination of staff from their course and the support of our student and wellbeing services across universities, which I think we have all invested considerably in to deal with the broader issues that young people are facing. There was also the impact of Covid for those students who were affected by, for example, the marking and assessment boycott—ensuring that they are in the best place possible to move on with their careers, whether continuing in education or moving on to employers.

We had a very good experience working with employers—PwC, for example, which has a big presence in Northern Ireland. It helped and led with us a way of ensuring that no person who had been in the application process or been offered by PwC and the other larger firms in that sector would be negatively impacted by not having their degree classification.

Chair: I have to move the session on because we are going to run out of time.

Q143 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you all for attending today. It is really interesting to hear what you have got to say. You offered a £500 goodwill payment to final-year students affected by the boycott. How did you communicate that with the students? Was it successful?

Professor O'Brien: We wrote to all the affected students and that was a successful communication, you will not be surprised to hear, and it was appreciated. We do understand that £500 was a goodwill gesture. Some of those students also did get formal compensation if they had losses as well. We did not think that would be the end of it, but it was well received, and it was our way of saying that we were sorry that this was continuing and that we had empathy for students and we recognised that



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there are costs associated with waiting for their degrees throughout the summer.

Q144 **Nick Fletcher:** Was that also offered to postgraduate students and international students?

Professor O'Brien: As I said earlier, our postgraduate students were not affected other than some postgraduate research students, who we have not mentioned, who may or may not have had their visas. We have some international undergraduates, mainly home undergraduates, at Durham, and clearly that was offered to all of them on an equal basis.

Q145 **Nick Fletcher:** Yes. And did they all accept it?

Professor O'Brien: Yes, they did. Yes. Quite reasonably.

Q146 **Nick Fletcher:** Professor Fagan, I do not believe you did offer that. Was the reason why you did not offer that because you thought you managed to get all the exams marked?

Professor Fagan: Yes. We certainly discussed it internally. If we had been in a situation where we would not have been able to graduate students, we would have done something very similar to what Durham was doing, but we did not need to in the end.

Q147 **Nick Fletcher:** I want to go back to something that you said earlier—that the business school was completely unaffected. Why was that?

Professor O'Brien: I think it is probably true in almost all universities, that there are subject profiles—different levels of union membership and activity in different subject areas. I think in common with nearly all universities, business schools tend not to be highly active in these spaces. Our business school undergraduates were unaffected by the marking and assessment boycott.

Q148 **Andrew Lewer:** I would ask all three of you what communications you had with the Office for Students during the boycott, how you would assess OfS's response and what you feel OfS could usefully contribute, if anything—which is a valid answer—on future impacts to students?

Professor Fagan: I felt that the communication from OfS was very helpful indeed. The clarity with which the office pointed out and reminded the sector that we needed to graduate our students, classify our students, and needed to maintain the integrity of degrees—

Q149 **Andrew Lewer:** Why did you need reminding of that?

Professor Fagan: It was not that we needed reminding, because that was absolutely what was guiding our principles. I think that some of our staff involved in the action needed reminding. We were reminding them regularly, but to have the backing of the Office for Students was very important. It also helped us in reminding some of our students, who perhaps were more sympathetic to the action and not as understanding of the situation. I think it was really good for the sector as a whole, and



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for us as a university, to have those two principles regularly reinforced and we were very grateful for that.

Professor O'Brien: Adam is alluding to a letter we received from the OfS reminding us to maintain quality and standards while doing our best to mitigate the impacts of the strike and graduate our students as soon as possible. Of course, we did not need reminding, but it was quite helpful with our governors.

We all have trustee bodies. They are accountable, as a vice-chancellor, to the OfS, so it was not unhelpful. They also provided some quite helpful guidance to students. We made regular reports to the OfS. We all did throughout the period. They professed themselves satisfied with Durham's approach. Nevertheless, I would say that I would have welcomed a more proactive response from the OfS. I think there is more that they could do to help, at least share information and provide guidance.

Under circumstances like these, it is about being able to say to students, but also to staff, that you have a legitimate right to take industrial action, we sympathise with what you feel about the pay-off you have been made, but nevertheless we have clear obligations under the Higher Education Research Act to protect the student interest and this is why we are doing what we are doing. A more active approach from the OfS would have been welcome. I think in future they could look at the emergency regulations.

You are hearing quite a diversity of responses based on quite a diversity of regulations and assessment patterns. I think there could be a role for the OfS in looking more prospectively at what we do in emergencies because clearly industrial action is one kind of emergency, but we all know that there are other kinds of emergencies that come along. I would be quite happy for them to play that role, and that is a legitimate role for the OfS.

Professor Elborn: We do not have a direct relationship with the Office for Students. It is indirectly through our Department of Economy which is our reporting body. I think we find the communication in general helpful.

To pick up on the issue of integrity and quality, it was our students who reminded us how important that was to them and that they did not want compromise in marking because the confidence and the quality of the degree that they were being awarded was paramount. That was a very useful part of our negotiating that we could feed back to our colleagues on staff and in the unions, that this was important for our students.

Q150 **Chair:** In the Northern Irish context, do you think there was a difference in the support and approach you got because of the absence of Ministers, or was the relationship with the Department of the Economy strong enough that you did not really need Ministers there to have those conversations?



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Professor Elborn: I think it would have been helped by having Ministers. We did not have a lot of intervention from the Department of Economy. We kept them in close communication, and they supported the actions that we were proposing, but there was not much directive intervention which might have been different if we had had a Minister in place.

Q151 **Mohammad Yasin:** Some evidence submitted to this inquiry criticised the Minister approach, saying that ministerial intervention was late, there was baseless rhetoric and it was inadequate, and that the absence of a co-ordinated and proactive approach has left students feeling neglected. How satisfied are you with the Government's response to the industrial action?

Professor Fagan: It is a difficult question because we also had a local dispute that focused very specifically on particular aspects of our package to staff. Quite a great deal of our focus was on that. We have put in place a number of measures to do with parental leave and a variety of other things that have satisfied the demands of our local branch of the union. That was one of our foci.

As for the national negotiations, the national dispute, and the way that the dispute was resolved, we recognised throughout as a leadership of the university that this was very difficult in the current economic climate. I think there was also significant recognition that industrial action was taking place in the health sector and amongst schoolteachers and therefore what was happening in those sectors was an important context in terms of the dispute. Beyond that, I really do not feel in a position to comment because much of our focus was on students and managing this situation. We were just very relieved that the action came to an end after such a long time.

Professor O'Brien: The Department for Education in their written evidence submission is very clear, as is the case, that universities are autonomous institutions. It is our responsibility, as regulated by the OfS, which again is at arm's length from the Department for Education, to do the best we can and do what we know we need to do.

Nevertheless, the DfE did take a legitimate interest in something so consequential for students. I think the wider context that I particularly welcome has been the focus of the DfE in recent years on mental health more broadly for students because that is part of the ongoing work that we do with them with their champion for student welfare and mental health, a fellow vice-chancellor. We do that work together. Whether it would have helped to have been asked to come and meet or to talk, I cannot say, but I am not sure that there were any specific interventions which would have led us to do things differently. I think we did the very best that we could in frankly very difficult circumstances.

Professor Elborn: We are devolved in terms of that education responsibility to the Department of Economy, which did not have a Minister. We dealt primarily with senior civil servants around keeping



them informed and made that autonomous decision about the resolution that we agreed with UCU and with our governing body.

Q152 Vicky Ford: There have been stories in the press recently about the applications to UK universities from overseas students plummeting to the extent that some UK universities may even face bankruptcy. I realise there can be lots of causes and some of that might be the economy in some of other countries. But is it fair to say that the chaos of last year's industrial action will have caused reputational damage in some countries, and may be a reason for why some students might be thinking twice about applying to UK universities now?

Professor O'Brien: Yes. That is a very interesting question. Our international student applications are holding up extremely well this year. Durham is a very popular university with international students. We do not get many students from Nigeria, for example; the economic woes of Nigeria are clearly having a very big impact on the number of Nigerian students applying to come to the UK at the moment. We are not seeing any of those effects.

Nevertheless, I was concerned about our international reputation. What would people say in countries where these kinds of industrial actions are quite unusual or quite hard to explain or you have different educational systems? We were very in close touch with our offices in India and our offices in China trying to gauge public opinion. We did not see any very dramatic effects, but I think it is inevitable that some families, when considering where to send their children, will wonder about the UK versus Canada versus Australia. Nothing dramatic, but I think it is important that we collectively husband the reputation of UKHE and continue to convey that message about the quality and standards of what we do, and the quality of the education we provide because we believe it is excellent. Undoubtedly that is something we have been thinking about.

Professor Fagan: Our numbers of international applications are also strong. I was in India two weeks ago and the question that came up from prospective applicants and their families interestingly was not about industrial action. It was about whether the UK is a hospitable place for international students, and I reassured them that it was because I genuinely believe that.

Certainly, the prospective applicants are very cognisant of the pressures of living in London, the huge demonstrations taking place in the city, and so concerns about security and the financial costs of a UK education are paramount. Of course, the industrial action was not good news for the sector. It did not help, but I have not heard anybody mention that at any point.

Professor Elborn: Yes, I would reflect similar responses. I think our experience has been that for the students and their families, it is the quality and the integrity of the degree that they come to the UK sector to get; that is very important.



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I think one of the things that we did quite well across the sector was to protect the quality of the education that we were delivering and the assessment for the award of a final degree. I am a bit concerned about a number of things that accumulate in the UK in terms of attracting international students here, and I think we as a nation need to be careful that we look after the important HE sector that we have and its impact across those international boundaries.

Q153 Vicky Ford: That is something we may come back to. I do not think you are just important; I think you are a jewel in the crown. Okay.

The majority of students are young people and they will have worked hard for a number of years. They have paid a significant amount of money, they have taken on considerable debt, and their degree is often vital for them to move on to the next stage in their lives.

Many young people I have spoken to have said that at a minimum they would expect to have their degrees marked and their work marked, and they would like to see minimum service standards. When we met the unions, perhaps not unsurprisingly, they did not want to have minimum service standards. What are your views?

Professor Fagan: I think you pose a very interesting question. I am concerned about minimum standards because I do not know what minimum standard would be standard. I agree with you about marking. We were fortunate that we were able to mark all of the work. The vast majority of work was marked, and all students graduated.

I pick up on Karen's point about what more the OfS can do to help us ensure that our regulations are structured in such a way across the sector that allows us to respond. If we set a minimum standard, I think the risk is with what we are taking out if the minimum standard is just the marking of work. It is the feedback, the additional learning environments that over the five years of industrial action during the—

Q154 Vicky Ford: Minimum to get the degree that allows them to get the job and move on in a timely way to the next stage of their lives.

Professor Fagan: Absolutely. I am not denying that that is essential. We were in a position to deliver that. We were successful in doing that. What I am saying is that I think we need to be very careful about where we set that bar, because if it is about lost learning—we do not accept partial performance by staff. A degree is more than simply the hours spent in a lecture hall or the assessment that you deliver.

Professor Elborn: Yes, I think we must do what is needed to ensure we maintain the quality and integrity of the degrees that we are awarding and the education that surrounds that. For me, the best way to do that is through consensus and we must have unions who will engage with us. I think we have got to find a consensus conclusion to this so that students do not ever have to go through this process again.

Q155 Vicky Ford: In your words, would you agree that many students last year felt the quality and integrity of what they were being offered was not



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achieved?

Professor Elborn: I think for the majority of students, because the sector worked so hard to fix this, we maintained that quality, and I think my colleagues would agree.

Q156 **Vicky Ford:** Not for all.

Professor O'Brien: To follow on from what Stuart said, I think one has to distinguish between the quality of the experience. We know that over the last few years, students—I include my own two children—had varied experiences of higher education due to days of strikes, but the quality of the degree standards is very, very important because that is the piece of paper that you take away with you for life. I think you have heard from us and from others that we were very focused on maintaining that aspect of quality.

In terms of minimum service levels, I think we would need to see what that would look like. For us as a sector, and we are seeing this with some very high-profile legal cases at the moment, there is a lack of clarity about consumer protection law for students. I do hope that that clarifies.

I mentioned the OfS earlier. As an alternative, a clearer role for the OfS in this particular regulatory space would not be unwelcome. It is a legitimate expectation that a student embarks on a degree expecting that they will have their work marked and assessed within a reasonable period, and that period is not specified in regulations across the sector. There are various ways of doing it, but my preference would be to work well with the regulator of the sector.

As Stuart says, we need to work well in terms of our industrial relations. I think we would all accept there is a lot more we need to do as a sector in terms of our industrial relations, understanding the world we are in, the financial constraints we are under, and the aspirations of our staff. There is a bigger piece around this, but I would be interested to see what the proposals look like.

Chair: I am going to close the session there because we have the Minister waiting but thank you all for your evidence this morning.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Robert Halfon and Patrick Curry.

Q157 **Chair:** For our second session we have the right honourable Robert Halfon, who needs no introduction to this Committee and is the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education at the Department for Education, and Patrick Curry, the Director of Higher Education Oversight at the Department for Education. Thank you for joining us.

Minister, can I ask you to briefly—"in a nutshell" is the phrase that comes



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to mind—highlight the Department’s response to the marking and assessment boycott and the impact that it had? What steps did you take to ensure that interventions did not undermine the autonomy of the higher education sector, which, as we have heard, is highly prized?

Robert Halfon: Thank you. First of all, good afternoon. It is a pleasure to be back at the Select Committee.

First, you were right to say that universities are autonomous. I am sure this would never happen, but if the Clerks decided to go on strike and not provide the Committee with any briefings, the Leader of the House might make her opinion known, as might the Speaker, but as far as I understand it they would not have any direct powers of intervention to change the situation. Our relationship with universities is the same. We do not have direct powers to say, “You must mark students’ papers”, “You must not have industrial action”, or whatever it may be.

Having said that, we did everything that was possible with the levers or instruments that we had available. That involved me having a number of meetings with the university bodies in June, particularly UUK, the Russell Group and other university mission groups, and discussions in July. I was very grateful to have regular discussions with UUK and Vivienne Stern, who kept me updated on very regularly. We met with the universities to find out what they were doing and what mitigation factors they were applying, and to apply moral pressure as much as we possibly could.

Secondly, where we could intervene, we did. For example, we negotiated with the Home Office, as you are aware, to ensure that international students were given appropriate exemptions—those who wanted to progress to a graduate work visa. We worked with the teacher training bodies to make sure that no students were disadvantaged. We made sure that we did all we could for students who were not able to access the Civil Service Fast Stream.

I wrote letters to the universities making it clear what we felt their responsibilities were, both in June and in August. We also wrote to the Office for Students. I had some individual discussions with some vice-chancellors. I as a Minister along with the officials did everything possible that we as a Department could do to try to intervene and ensure that not too many students were negatively affected by the marking and assessment boycott.

Q158 Chair: Minister, we hear a lot from universities that they are sometimes concerned about the role of the Office for Students in this as a new regulator. It was interesting, listening to the last panel, to hear there was agreement from those who were regulated by the Office for Students that there could be a role for the Office for Students here in clarifying the importance of getting the regulations right so that they can respond to a situation like this. Is that a conversation you have had with the Office for Students, what can be learned from recent events and how it can ensure that it is playing that role with universities?



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Robert Halfon: We have regular conversations with the OfS. It is important to note that the OfS did issue guidance at the time to students. It also wrote to students. We wrote to the Office for Students as well at that time. It is important to note the OfS can make a number of interventions. First, it can intervene if it feels that universities are not meeting their registration conditions. Also, given that the Competition and Markets Authority has issued guidance about consumer law in terms of universities—

Chair: Which, as we have just heard, is rather unclear.

Robert Halfon: If, for example, Trading Standards say that universities are not meeting their obligations, the Office for Students can also ask Trading Standards to investigate.

Q159 **Chair:** Has it ever done that?

Robert Halfon: Not as far as I am aware. However, as I say, this was quite a new development and my hope is that lessons will be learned. I do not control what the CMA does. I do not control the investigatory bodies or the regulatory bodies, but my hope is that if this happens again people will perhaps respond in slightly different ways.

Q160 **Chair:** When you were intervening and having those conversations you mentioned with the UCU, you presumably engaged with UCEA as well.

Robert Halfon: We engaged with UCEA, yes.

Q161 **Chair:** How satisfied were you with UCEA's responses to that engagement?

Robert Halfon: Well, it is an independent body. It was there to negotiate on behalf of those universities that were part of its membership. It carried out surveys that were helpful, and which I am sure you have had detail of. I have some details here. It was helpful to us to find out exactly what was going on. Not every university replied but I think about 120 did. UCEA suggested that around 6% of final year students were affected by the marking and assessment boycott. I think UCEA has an important role.

Q162 **Chair:** Do you believe that all universities took appropriate action to mitigate the impact on students? We have heard about some of the mitigations that the specific universities who are giving us evidence today took. What in your view was the best approach to mitigations, and are there any examples where you think more could and should have been done sooner?

Robert Halfon: The problem with that question is that there is not a 'one size fits all'. There are different courses and universities responded in very different ways. Some universities had alternate markers, some universities slightly weakened the regulations such as having fewer people on exam panels, some gave pre-assessed grades or preliminary grades, and some just gave grades based on their past performance.



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Q163 Chair: Is it not quite striking, though? We have been hearing about the importance of supporting the widening participation cohorts. It is quite striking that some of the highest-profile universities in the country seem to have had some of the biggest problems here, when it comes to people not receiving their degrees on time. Is that because they set more rigorous standards or is it because perhaps they had older regulations that were less adaptable to this situation?

Robert Halfon: Well, there is a suggestion that some universities—and I think you have heard that evidence—had regulations that made it difficult to adapt. Some of it will have depended on the courses because, for example, some universities may have been better able to get external markers. There were some courses for which it was much harder to find external markers.

It is worth mentioning that in many universities where this was going on, there were a number of staff who did not take industrial action and who were marking the papers, taking on an extra burden. I pay tribute to those staff and thank them for doing so because they took on an enormous burden at a very difficult time. It may have been the case that some universities were not able to use that resource. Also, some universities have higher union representation than others.

Q164 Chair: Different subjects as well.

Robert Halfon: And subjects. I mentioned that for some subjects you can find alternate markers and for some you cannot. I think that is why you had such a disparate response.

Having said that, given what has gone on, if this happens in the future—I am very hopeful that it will not happen this year—I hope that the universities affected the most will have learned from this and have serious contingency planning in place to make sure it does not happen again.

Chair: I will bring in Flick on that point.

Q165 Mrs Flick Drummond: Thank you. The Government put a number of mitigations in place to support students, including flexibility on visa requirements, entry requirements and the Civil Service Fast Stream—although of course one of our colleagues' daughters missed that one; you have probably heard about that—and international teacher training applications. Do you have any figures on how many students benefited from these changes and what impact it had?

Robert Halfon: The impact on teacher training was very low. I do not have the exact figure but we know it was very low. In terms of the Fast Stream, we have asked the Cabinet Office for that information. We have not yet been given it but as soon as we get it, we will contact the Committee with that information.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Thank you.



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Robert Halfon: The Home Office did not assess the numbers in terms of international students. Therefore, we do not have that information from the Home Office. Of course, it was a discretionary arrangement with the international students, not necessarily concessionary. If I were able to give you those figures I would, of course, supply them.

Q166 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Okay. We heard earlier on from the panellists that there were mitigations, particularly for visas, and they were talking to the Home Office to arrange those. There must be some figures.

Robert Halfon: We have been advised that the Home Office did not collate these figures, but it may be that the Committee wants to contact the Home Office directly. We are very happy to continue that work.

Q167 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Brilliant. How were these mitigation measures communicated to the students and are you aware of any students who were unable to make use of these measures due to lack of awareness? Was there any discussion about financial compensation as well?

Robert Halfon: I mentioned that the OfS communicated with students but there is also the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which is a very important body. Again, it is independent. Because it is independent we are not given information by the OIA about individual cases, but it sets out guidance for students on the complaints procedure.

The way it works is that the student first has to complain to the university—a bit like going to an ombudsman, as every MP will know—and then work through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. You had the OfS and you had the OIA, which set out clear guidance to students about what their rights were. The Competition and Markets Authority also set out the consumer guidelines for universities at the time. Possibly some universities might have been better at communicating than others, but again I do not want to point fingers at individual universities.

The crucial point—and this is the purpose of this Committee inquiry—is that I hope what you are doing and what went on will ensure that those universities who were worst affected are better prepared for such an event in the future.

Q168 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Have the Government ever considered talking about financial compensation from the universities, not, obviously, from—

Robert Halfon: We cannot because universities are autonomous, just as I could not get the Committee to get financial compensation if, God forbid, the Clerks decided to take industrial action. I am not saying this would ever happen, I am just giving a metaphorical example.

That is reason why the Office of the Independent Adjudicator was set up. It decides about compensation, fines and so on.

Q169 **Chair:** What visibility does the Office for Students have over those issues? We heard earlier from Durham about the £500 acknowledgement payments, which are not compensation, but also that there were a



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number of cases where compensation was paid. Does the OfS or the Department have proper oversight of how the universities spend their money in that regard, or is that fully at the discretion of the universities?

Robert Halfon: Patrick might correct me if I am wrong, but universities are autonomous. It is at the discretion of the universities to decide how to spend their money. Obviously, they have to make sure that they fulfil their registration conditions and that is what the OfS is there for them to do.

Patrick Curry: Indeed. Just to support Minister on that, we do have oversight over the activity of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. For example, in 2022 it heard 28,000 complaints and made recommendations for about £1 million worth of compensation. We do not get involved with the individual casework, as you would expect.

It is similar with the Office for Students. The Office for Students, as you know, operates a risk-based approach. Where it has concerns about a provider, it has the ability to investigate that provider and whether or not it is meeting its conditions of registration, which include, as the Minister said, compliance with consumer law.

Robert Halfon: The Office for Students cannot get involved with individual complaints. However, it is perfectly right for students to make the case to the OfS that the university as a whole is not meeting certain registration conditions, and it is up to the OfS whether to look into it or not. However, it cannot get involved in individual cases. That is the job for the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

Q170 **Anna Firth:** I understand exactly what you are saying about universities being autonomous, but we have heard quite a gap between the rhetoric from the universities and the reality for some students. The universities have told us about differing methods of communication and all sorts of ways in which they tried to communicate with students about the marking problems: email, QR codes, the lot. Of course it is difficult going from the individual to the general, but we have heard from students about a lack of communication.

As the Government Minister for Higher Education, I would be interested to know if that inconsistent picture is something that you have heard about as well. As the Minister, is that something that concerns you and, going forward, would you like to see more consistency around communication? Have you considered perhaps convening a roundtable or something of that nature?

Robert Halfon: That is a very fair point. I do have lots of roundtables with university organisations and the trade bodies. I meet with vice-chancellors directly. I go to visit universities regularly. We did have roundtables at the time, as I have mentioned, with the university bodies and university mission groups.

I absolutely want consistency, not just in communication but also in terms of good completion, progression and outcomes. That lies behind



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some of our higher education reforms. Absolutely, universities should have consistency of good communication to their students. There will absolutely be variation and these are things that the regulatory bodies need to look at. I as the Higher Education Minister can bring moral pressure to bear and I will continue to do so to make sure that that is the case and also to make sure that if we see this again, universities will be much better prepared.

Q171 **Anna Firth:** Exactly. It is particularly around making sure we learn the lessons, isn't it?

Robert Halfon: Absolutely. Of course, hopefully the recommendations of this inquiry will make a huge difference in terms of advising universities on what should be done.

Q172 **Anna Firth:** Thank you. Looking at the minimum service level consultation in education that the Department carried out and has now closed, it sets out detailed proposals for schools and colleges but only asks initial questions on the impact of strikes in higher education. You have covered this already to some extent but there might be things you want to add about why you took that approach to higher education. Do you propose to set out any more detailed proposals in future?

Robert Halfon: It is very important that when comparing MSL in universities to MSL in schools, we are literally comparing apples with pears. The autonomous nature and independence of universities is a very different kettle of fish.

As for what we were trying to do with the minimum service levels in higher education, we had key things as part of our consultation. What is the impact? Should you be focusing MSLs on students in key exam years or in final years? Should you be focusing on students doing critical subjects that are absolutely essential for our nation's skills needs, like nursing for example? Should you be focusing on students with the correct amount of contact hours? There are different parts of the consultation.

The consultation finished at the end of January and we are considering the response. The whole purpose of the consultation was to try to understand in more detail what exactly had gone on, how the students were affected and where we should focus in MSL, if we do. It may be that we need to further consult on it but because it is being considered at the moment, we are not in a position to give you any further details, even though I would love to be able to do so. We have to get it right. This is a very complex area, we have to make sure that we get it right and the consultation only just finished not so long ago, a few weeks ago.

Q173 **Anna Firth:** Thank you. I will not push you further on that then. Obviously, as consumers, university students have rights under contract law. If a degree has not been marked and that leads them to lose a job opportunity, it could easily be argued that is a fundamental breach of performance of that contract and compensation in accordance with the law should follow. Do you think that students have enough knowledge about their rights as a consumer and the remedies that might be



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available to them through the law?

Robert Halfon: I mentioned that if that is the case—we know from surveys that roughly 6% of final-year students were affected one way or the other; many of them would have received their grades but we know they were affected by the marking and assessment boycott—they must complain to the university and then go through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. That will decide whether or not the university has breached their conditions in terms of providing a proper service to students, whether it is consumer law or anything else. It is very important that things are decided by the Independent Adjudicator.

I have some sympathy for what you say. There is also a need for greater transparency about, for example, online learning. I love the Open University; I have described it as one of the greatest education reforms of the last century. I watched it on TV as a child. It is incredible and they help the most disadvantaged climb up the ladder of opportunity—but you know what you are getting. If you are going to a university for a face-to-face experience, you should be able to make sure that you are getting that experience, or at least know before you apply how much is going to be online and how much is—

Q174 **Anna Firth:** Of course, the Open University is a lot cheaper.

Robert Halfon: A lot cheaper, incredible value for money and genuinely an amazing institution. I have to say it is possibly one of my favourite universities.

There does need to be more transparency. When students apply to university, they need to know exactly how much online learning there will be and how much face-to-face learning. Again, this is up to universities but I can, as a Minister, apply some moral pressure to make sure that students know what their rights are. What are they expecting from their education? There was a role for the OfS in that and the regulatory bodies and there is also a role for universities. It is the responsibility of universities on their websites. When people apply and go through UCAS, they should know exactly what they are signing up to.

Q175 **Mohammad Yasin:** An NUS survey revealed that over three-quarters of students supported strike action. This Committee heard from witnesses on 6 February and they had great concerns that the minimum service levels would not work and would not address the fundamental issues behind the industrial action. The dispute around pay and working hours has not been resolved. What is your response to this?

Robert Halfon: Look, there will be different views from different students. It has been clear from the newspapers that some students have been very unhappy, understandably, about not having their exams marked and the marking and assessment boycott. Inevitably there will be different views among students.

That is why we have consulted on the minimum service level. I believe that education is a public service. It is essential. I think that students do



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not forget they are investing a huge amount of money, £9,250, in terms of a loan.

It goes back to the question of Anna Firth. If they are going to be investing that money every year in a loan, they should be getting the service that they expect. I think we are absolutely right to consult on minimum service levels, to find out what the issues are and how you can mitigate some industrial action if possible. As I say, we have not made any final decisions yet on this. We are still consulting on it.

Q176 Mohammad Yasin: Do you not think that if you push this further, more staff could leave the profession?

Robert Halfon: It will be interesting to see the evidence for that. I hope that is not the case. As I say, we are consulting on the minimum service levels. I believe education is a public service. I believe that students, who invest thousands of pounds by taking out a student loan that they have to pay back throughout their working lives, should get the service that they have signed up to. I do not think that is unreasonable. This is not like going to buy a pizza. This is about their education, their whole livelihood and their future job security. I do not think it is unreasonable to have a consultation on minimum service levels.

Q177 Andrew Lewer: Robert, you have talked about the OfS already. I wanted to ask if you have anything to add about to your assessment of OfS's performance and whether there is anything it could have done better. Back in May 2023 you told a House of Lords Committee that you had not sent any guidance letters to OfS at that stage. I wondered why that was and, as part of a general assessment of OfS's added value, whether it could have done anything different or better, or whether you do not think this is their specific focus.

Robert Halfon: First of all, I did not issue guidance because the OfS issued guidance. The OfS also sent a letter to students. I wrote to the Office for Students and I wrote to the universities twice as Universities Minister to try to push things along as much as I could.

The OfS has a difficult role. It is a risk regulator. There is a review going on about the role of the OfS, and I am guessing that the Select Committee might have Sir David Behan to the Committee at a future date because it is a very important review as to the effectiveness of the OfS.

Whether or not the OfS could be more agile when issues come up is a debate that might well be worth having, absolutely, but we did a lot with the OfS and with the universities. I did not feel the need to issue a separate guidance letter. I also think these letters work because they are not frequent, particularly guidance types of letters. We did everything we could to try to push things along.

Q178 Caroline Ansell: Evidence heard by the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee suggested that the OfS could or should do more to clarify students' rights during industrial action. Do you agree with that? Do you recognise that as a very legitimate challenge?



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Robert Halfon: That is a debate to be had. I go back to the question of Anna Firth. I think it should be the responsibility of the universities and then the OfS should look at whether or not universities are breaching their registration conditions. Universities should be as transparent as possible, being very clear what students' rights are, what they expect from their education, how much online learning they would have and what would happen in the event of industrial action. Transparency is absolutely the key because if students know these things before they apply to each individual university, they will be much more informed before they go and end up being let down.

Q179 **Caroline Ansell:** Minister, is this perhaps part of the review that you cited into the OfS and what the expectations are of its role? Quite recently David, the deputy director, said that it did not feel the OfS should be the one-stop shop for everything. Is its role understood by students or the wider community?

Robert Halfon: The OfS was created in 2017 under the Act. There is a debate to be had and this is why we have done the review. This review by Sir David Behan is looking at the role of the OfS and looking at its effectiveness. I cannot answer today what the outcome of that review will be, but I think there is a debate to be had.

The OfS does some things well. It is difficult for a risk regulator. There are issues. For example, anti-Semitism has come up recently at universities. Is the OfS able to respond immediately when there are incidents of anti-Semitism and if it believes that universities are not dealing with it properly, for example? This is a debate. You are absolutely right; this issue has touched on that debate on the role of the Office for Students.

On the whole, I think the Office of Students is doing the right thing. It is a risk regulator. We put a lot of things on the OfS over recent years, for example freedom of speech and the mental health charter that we are asking universities to sign up to. People will continue to have that debate on whether or not the OfS is fit for purpose. I think, on the whole, it is.

Q180 **Chair:** Minister, can you give us any guidance on the timing of that review and when you expect that to report back?

Robert Halfon: I had a meeting with Sir David Behan about some of the things that he was looking at only a week or so ago. I do not know, Patrick, if you want to give a time.

Patrick Curry: It will report in May. That is our expectation. It started just before Christmas and it will report in May.

Robert Halfon: I would not dare suggest to you who you ask for evidence, but if you have time in your sessions—

Chair: We have plenty in our programme but it is certainly something we want to come back to after he has reported.



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Robert Halfon: I think he will have some very interesting things to say.

Q181 **Mohammad Yasin:** Given that the reasons for industrial action—especially the dispute around pay and working conditions—have not been resolved, how likely is it, in your view, that industrial action can happen again?

Robert Halfon: There was a ballot at the end of September or October, I think, and it did not reach the 50% threshold. I am hopeful that industrial action will not be occurring across our universities this summer and I am hopeful that we will not have a marking and assessment boycott this summer.

Q182 **Mohammad Yasin:** You are hopeful. Are you confident?

Robert Halfon: Well, the ballot did not reach the 50% threshold to partake, the union ballot, and therefore I am not expecting industrial action.

Q183 **Mohammad Yasin:** If it happens again, what action can the Department take to minimise the impact on students as much as possible?

Robert Halfon: First of all, as I mentioned to some of the previous questions, I hope that universities will have done a lot more contingency planning because they now know the effect on students. One student not getting their marks is wrong, is terrible, but you also need to put this into perspective that it was 6% of students in final years. Now, that is absolutely still terrible for those 6%, but you do need to put it into perspective.

Nevertheless, I am hoping that universities are doing the right contingency planning and are putting the mitigation factors they need in place. I will be writing to universities, especially those particularly affected, to ask what that contingency planning is. I will continue to have discussions with the university sector. I know that the regulators, of course, are looking at these issues as well.

Q184 **Chair:** Minister, you have also written to universities on some other issues recently. I know anti-Semitism on campus has been a particular concern of yours—you mentioned that in terms of the discussion of the OfS—and some issues have been drawn to my attention on that front that are deeply concerning. Can you update the Committee on what steps you have been taking to engage with the sector on that?

Robert Halfon: Yes, it is. If I could set the context, it has been pretty horrific. By the way, anti-Semitism was going up across our universities well before 7 October. This is not just a result of the tragedy in the Middle East and the massacre of Jews and internationals on 7 October, but since 7 October it has gone up by well over 200%.

I and the Secretary of State have been around the country, meeting with student groups and meeting with the Union of Jewish Students. I travelled to Leeds because of horrific incidents going on in Leeds, intimidation of the Leeds University chaplain, the Jewish chaplain. I have



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held regular discussions with all the Jewish bodies connected with the university, whether it is Community Security Trust, the Jewish chaplaincy service for universities, which I have high regard for, or UJS.

We are doing a number of things to try to deal with this. The first is that, as I mentioned, we are having regular consultation with Jewish groups. The Prime Minister announced a £7 million fund for schools and universities. I think just over £3 million—£3.2 million, if I am not mistaken—is going to the universities to help Jewish groups deal with anti-Semitism. We are also developing a quality seal for universities.

I was talking about transparency earlier in terms of online learning and other things. Jewish students would be able to see whether a university has a quality seal in terms of how it deals with anti-Semitism, how it deals with complaints and what it is doing to protect Jewish students. We are looking at the idea of an expert advisor on this issue.

I will continue to do everything I can, but I think it is a major problem across our universities. I fear that there is ghettoisation going on across universities with Jewish students unable to do what they should be doing, having the best time of their lives at university and getting the knowledge—

Q185 Chair: That fear of ghettoisation is obviously something that we would not want to see in any community. Clearly, it is not right. Does the Department monitor the figures in terms of the number of people from different religions and different groups who are applying to universities in the UK or the number who might be choosing to go elsewhere?

I have heard concerning evidence in some cases of people choosing to pursue an education in Israel because they feel that they would not be comfortable doing so in the UK. Now, that is anecdotal; I do not have evidence of the numbers. Is that something that the Department can look into in order to ensure that we understand the inflows and outflows of students with different characteristics?

Robert Halfon: If you do not mind, I will ask Patrick to give you the granular detail. I am a half glass full rather half glass empty person and I am reminded of a quote from Golda Meir, former Israeli Prime Minister, which is, "Pessimism is a luxury that no Jew should allow himself".

I still believe that this is a great country, I still believe that our universities are great places to go across England—or across the United Kingdom, in fact—and I hope very much that Jewish students will not feel that they cannot go to our universities. As a Government, we are going to do everything possible to stamp out the cancer of anti-Semitism wherever we see it and we are not prepared to tolerate it. I will ask Patrick about the figures.

Patrick Curry: The short answer is that we do obviously monitor the characteristics of those who apply to university and the trends in those over time. I do not know the answer to the specific question but we can take that away and come back.



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Q186 Chair: If you could write to us with a breakdown, perhaps, of different communities and the numbers, both in terms of applicants and people who sustain their degrees, that would be very interesting for the Committee to see in terms of our wider work. As I say, that could inform future work.

The other area where we have heard that this has an impact, of course, is on international students. You will be very familiar with some of the debates around international students, Minister, but we did hear in the last panel concerns around the scale of protests in London and concerns around security being of importance to international students.

You have mentioned some of the funding that the Government is putting in, in that respect. Is there anything else that we should be doing in these circumstances to reassure international students that the UK remains a safe and welcoming place for them to pursue their studies from wherever they are coming in the world?

Robert Halfon: I think we had a target of 600,000 national students, and the previous figures that we have are 679,000 international students. International students are a good thing. They bring soft power but they also, without a doubt, add an important source of income to universities. I think we have to acknowledge that, given that we have decided as a Government not to raise tuition fees. We know that international students are worth about £58 million per constituency and well over £30 billion in terms of our educational exports.

Having said that, we have to stamp out abuse where it occurs. That is why we got rid of the dependency group for postgraduate students accepted for PhDs and that is why we have the review from the Migration Advisory Committee in terms of the graduate route.

We also have an investigation going on in the Department, which has been highlighted in *The Sunday Times*, of where there has been abuse by agencies in how they bring in international students and whether or not they are somehow getting an easier escalator into British universities. We have an investigation of that going on because it has to be an absolutely fair, level playing field.

I am absolutely clear that as Higher Education Minister I am proud of our international students. They bring benefits to our country. They are examples of soft power. We will crack down on abuse where it occurs. That is the message I have given out since I have been in post.

Q187 Chair: Very briefly, you have mentioned, obviously, the important financial benefits that they bring to universities. There is no doubt about that.

Robert Halfon: And to the country.

Q188 Chair: To both. One thing struck me, looking at the Department's supplementary estimates. You were making a very important announcement yesterday about apprenticeships that I think this Committee would broadly welcome. It was in line with one of the



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recommendations in our post-16 qualifications announcement. Correct me if I am wrong, but I think it was in the order of £20 million.

Robert Halfon: It was £60 million. That comes on top of £50 million announced in the autumn statement.

Q189 **Chair:** Ah, £60 million—even better. In the debate we had last Thursday about the Department's estimates and spending on SEND we were welcoming investment in new specialist schools, hugely important and much needed across the country. That was £115 million.

The supplementary estimate for the Department had an increase of around £20 billion for the student loan book, taking total departmental spending from around £80 billion to around £100 billion. A number of colleagues have commented to me that there is no direct benefit from the enormous amount of money being put in there, in the way that you would see from those much smaller amounts being put into expanding apprenticeships. It is a financial calculation that very few people beyond the Treasury will understand that is driving that.

Are you comfortable that this system of funding our universities, which can see such a big a swing in in-year investment, is that high a proportion of the Department for Education's budget?

Robert Halfon: This is a very complex issue. We are constantly looking at the student finance system but we have to be fair to students and fair to the taxpayer. You have talked about the loan. If you look at the overall income of universities—the research budget, international students and their own private income that they get for one reason or another—it is about £40.8 billion.

In the current circumstances, with the challenges that the country and the economy face, that is no mean whack of money. Of course there are financial challenges for universities, I am under no illusions, although I am glad that over 70% of our universities have surpluses. Nevertheless, there are some universities facing financial challenges, absolutely. I think it is a fair system.

There are major challenges facing our universities in years to come. What kind of university do we expect to have in 2030 or 2040? There are five big things coming down the track.

One is our own HE reforms in terms of completion, continuation and progression. The second is, of course, the Lifelong Learning Entitlement. You are talking about the loan book but once that comes through from 2025, 2026 and 2027, it will mean a lot of people will not necessarily stay at university for three years. They will do short courses or modules of courses and move from institution to institution, FE to HE to HE to HE to HE to FE and back again, potentially, but will not necessarily stay at a place for three years as they do now. Some will, but it will be very different.

You have the degree apprenticeship model, over 200,000 since 2014. Again, major changes coming through. More and more people will do



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them. We have put £40 million into that. Then, of course, you have the disruptor universities, and what I mean by that are the Dyson universities where you have universities on campus. Of course, you have the new tertiary Institutes of Technology. We have 21 so far and they are collaborations with FE, HE and business. A lot of people will go there and do level 4, level 5, degree apprenticeships and higher apprenticeships.

The university that we have today is not that much different from when I was at university, apart from the fact that I had most of mine paid for whereas nowadays people have to take out loans. But the university system in 10 years' time will be very different, I think.

It is beholden on the education committees, the university sector and others to work out what kind of university system we expect for the next 20, 30, 40 or 50 years and how it is going to change. It is going to be big—I missed out AI, of course, the fourth industrial revolution, which will have a massive impact—and then we will have to work out how it is going to be paid for.

Chair: A very long and very interesting answer. I could quibble about whether it has directly addressed the question of the financing costs of the loan book but I think we will leave it there, Minister. I am very grateful for all you have done for the Committee and for your evidence today.